

# **The Outlaw Blaine Anderson**

**by**

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**Klaine || AU || NC-17**

*Kurt Hummel, lonely shop-keep filled with dreams of escape, meets a stranger in the midst of the Wild West.*

*And then gets taken on an adventure - whether he likes it or not.*

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## Chapter One

"I'm just saying, I think he'd rather take *you* up those stairs," Santana tossed out, a nail scratching under her garter as she arched a shapely leg upon a chair. "Because he sure as hell doesn't know what to do when he has *me* in my cot."

"Santana!" Kurt hissed, watching the barkeep warily. "Keep your voice down."

Santana rolled her shoulders. "I'm not scared of Mad Bear. I don't see why you should be."

"Because the last thing I need is to be getting dragged out into the street and shot in the head by the sheriff, thank you very much." Kurt sipped at the last of his milk as he made to get back up. "Anyway, I have to get back to the shop. I left Finn in charge."

Santana winced. "Do me a favour, don't give him his pay early again. Brittany had to draw me so many baths last time. The stench was in my skin for weeks."

"Thank you for that horrific image. And I wouldn't worry about that." Kurt smiled. "He's been stepping out with Miss Fabray for the past few weeks. He even escorted her to church just this last Sunday. Pa says they'll be ringing in the new year as man and wife."

"Ain't that sweet," Santana sneered, knocking back her whiskey sour. "Well, I got work to do as well." She nodded towards the doorway as Sheriff Dave Karofsky entered. "Here's Mad Bear, himself."

"Good luck," Kurt whispered as her face morphed into a *come-hither* grin, and she slipped neatly from the stool. One hand upon the stair's handrail, she waited for Karofsky with the other upon her hip.

Kurt tried to slip past the sheriff without making eye contact, but the larger man eased quickly into place, stopping him in his tracks.

"Hummel. You here for Brittany again?" he asked jovially, and Kurt felt his neck flush red as the few patrons of *Cheerios* began to laugh heartily.

"No, Sheriff. I was just stopping by for a drink, now if you excuse me—"

"Land sake, sometimes I expect you to gather up your petticoats and hit me with your parasol, Hummel." He looked over Kurt, an indecipherable look in his eyes. "You sure is a queer little thing."

Kurt stared back, his mouth in a straight line. "*Excuse me*, Sheriff.

"Oh, yes, ma'am!" Karofsky took a step back, removing his hat and making a show of bowing as Kurt moved past. Again the others in the bar laughed as Kurt left them behind, the heat of humiliation and anger coiling in his gut.

As he stalked across the street to Hummel's, his hand pressed tightly into his pocket, curling round a familiar and loved piece of parchment. He didn't need to see it in his palm to know every line, every shape, every color. He'd been carrying it around for almost a year now, ever since that girl from the theater troupe, Harmony, had given it to him. *New York*, she had said, *was where dreams came true*.

One day, he told himself, it would be his dream.

All he had to do was get out of this place first.

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Kurt traced the whorls in the counter and sighed. It was a slow day. They were *all* slow days. He glanced out the window and sighed at the familiar sight. He could predict his day down to the very last second. At just gone ten, the school-teacher, Ms Pillsbury, would come in for a stock up on chalk and a frankly worrying amount of starch and soap. She would soon be followed by the peculiar Mr. Ryerson. Finn would often have to serve him, as he always seemed to require items from the highest shelves- only to change his mind the moment Finn had located it. Noon would bring in the sheriff and his dull headed friends, they would smile and jar with his pa, but the moment it was just them, they would josh Kurt until he was red in the face and grinding his teeth into a fine powder. By one-thirty, the shop would be--

The bell rang to signal a new customer, breaking Kurt's thoughts. Kurt immediately straightened, excitement lacing his spine. *An out-of-towner*. Burt's father disapproved of how visibly different Kurt was

with visitors to the McKinley, but he couldn't help it. These breaks in routine were the only things that kept him sane most days.

The hat hung low over the customer's face, hiding him from view and Kurt arched a brow, waiting for the man to reveal himself.

"Howdy," the stranger announced.

"Good afternoon," replied Kurt, placing his hands flat upon the counter. "Can I help you?"

"Mayhap." He shrugged and touched at his jaw, the sound of his fingers scraping against the stubble it found there. "I'm looking for a place to rest my head and my horse for the night."

Kurt nodded. "Just passing through?"

"Unless something catches my eye." On this, he tipped at his hat and smiled. Kurt felt like all the air in him had whooshed out in a single moment. The man was beautiful. Simply and utterly beautiful.

No, he told himself. He couldn't afford to think like that, not here. Not again.

"Yes, uh, well Shannon Beiste should have a room. Tell her that I sent you." Kurt took a nearby napkin and began drawing a hasty map. The man moved closer and Kurt dug his heels into the ground to stop himself darting away.

"And you are?" he asked, his voice low.

"Uh, Kurt?" Kurt winced. "Kurt, my name is Kurt."

"So good they named you thrice?"

Kurt gave a hesitant laugh and held the napkin out to him. "I—no, I—"

"Did I hear something about a horse?" Burt's voice sounded out into the tiny shop. "Can I help you, stranger?"

"Well, your boy here was kind enough to point me towards an inn. But I need a place to saddle up my mare." He winked at Kurt. "And someone to take a look at his shoe, got it done in the last town and it may as well have been done with a lick and a promise."

"I get you. Shysters calling themselves experts all over these days." Burt nodded. "Name's Hummel." He held out a hand and grasped at the other man's tightly. "What's your handle?"

A shadow seemed to pass over his face for a moment, and then was chased away by another one of his wide grins. "Warbler. Brian Warbler."

"Meetcha." Burt nodded. "I can take a look at your horse for you. Cost you, though."

Brian removed a coin purse from his holster and dropped a couple of gold pieces onto the counter. "I think that should cover it."

Burt grinned down at the coins. "Ayuh, that should cover it just fine."

"I guess I like this town already," said Brian, his eyes never leaving Kurt's.

## **Chapter Two**

"Morning, Hummel."

"Morning, Sheriff," Kurt answered, sighing as Karofsky fell into step along by him.

"Beautiful day, isn't it?" Karofsky said, his hand resting on the small of Kurt's back.

Kurt looked up at the dull, overcast sky and raised his eyebrow. "Yes, I guess it is."

"I didn't see you at church this weekend."

"Hmm. Probably because I didn't go."

"That's the third Sunday in a row now, Hummel." Karofsky's hand moved slightly further down his back and Kurt sped up, trying to lose the contact. "You're becoming quite the gossip fodder."

Of all the men in McKinley, Karofsky puzzled him the most. He was rude, overbearing, incompetent as an official and was a downright mean drunk. He had been a stain on Kurt's life since the two had been in short pants. Every prank, every cruel word and every harsh shove had all began with him. But recently he seemed to be doing his best to ingratiate himself into Kurt's life, whenever they were alone anyway. In public, he was the same mean spirited bully as usual.

"Well, I'm sure they'll find something new to talk about soon enough."

"Like a hanging?"

Kurt stopped abruptly at the words, Karofsky's palm smacking him hard in the back. "Wha—what?"

"A hanging, boy. We caught those train robbers from way back Dalton. Two of them at least. Folks from miles around will be coming out to see this." Karofsky grinned and tapped at the badge on his chest. "We haven't had one around here for years. Should be a good show."

"Show?" Kurt spat. "You think that watching a man die is entertainment?"

Karofsky rolled his eyes and, finally, removed his hand. "I should have known you'd be a woman about it."

"Yes, well forgive me for not wanting to see cowards string people up and act like that makes them men. You can include me out." Kurt rose his chin and moved to carry on, but a grip at his elbow dragged him back roughly.

"What did you just call me?" Karofsky demanded, shaking him slightly as he spoke.

"No, that—that wasn't what I meant."

"You think I'm going to take that from the likes of you? Hell, you are barely between hay and grass and you're talking down to me?"

"Let go, you oaf, you're hurting me—"

"Problem here, Sheriff?" A voice spoke from behind them,

Karofsky turned them both, holding Kurt's wrist almost absently. "Take a walk, pal. None of your business can be found over here."

"Seem to be holding onto that boy a mite too tight." Brian drew back his jacket, his Colt gleaming in the dull day's light. "Just wanted to make sure everything was okay."

Quickly, the grip loosened and Kurt was released. "Nothing to concern yourself with, stranger. Just a little disagreement. That's all."

"All the same." Brian took a step closer. "I'd be mighty obliged if you could let me borrow young Mr. Hummel here."

Karofsky narrowed his eyes. "You're the stranger staying over at Beiste's, ain't ya? Warbler."

"Guilty."

"How'd you get around the blockade? Ain't no feet meant to be stepping into this town until after the hanging."

"I didn't see none." Brian shrugged. "Guess I got lucky."

"Guess you did." Kurt watched the two, a sense of hysteria building in his throat. He had seen enough gunplay in this town, usually over Quinn Fabray, the last thing he wanted was to see some because of his big mouth.

Karofsky glanced sideways at Kurt, his fingers dancing over his holster.

"Well, I'll leave you two to have a jar." He took a step back and Kurt heaved a sigh of relief.

"You have a nice stay here, Warbler." He curled his lip. "Keep it nice and short."

"Seems the friendly type," Brian said as Karofsky walked, *hurried*, away. "I oughta bend his elbow sometime."

"I don't need your help." Kurt rounded on him, holding his head high. "You didn't need to do that."

Brian laughed, placing his hands on hips. "That's an odd way to show your gratitude."

"There isn't any to show." Kurt's mouth felt dry, and his heart was beating a little faster in his chest. He knew, deep down, it wasn't just from the altercation with Karofsky. Brian was too close, too there and Kurt didn't know what the hell it was doing to him. "I can handle myself just fine."

"I'm sure you can." Brian licked at his lips, and Kurt dug his nails tight into the material of his trousers. "How about I buy you that drink instead?"

"I—I'm taking over my brother's shift."

"I'm sure he can spare you for just a short while," Brian brushed at his shoulder with his own, that teasing smile on his face. "Just a little drink. What can it hurt?"

Kurt glanced back to his father's shop and then back to Brian's face. "Oh, okay. Sure, sure." He patted at his hair, feeling self conscious under Brian's appraisal. "Just one drink."

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"And then your pa married the school mistress?"

Kurt nodded. "Yes, and that's when Finn became my brother." Kurt felt a blush high on his cheekbones at the memory. "I was a *little* over zealous in my matchmaking. Every social we had they'd find themselves partnered up and me nowhere in sight."

"You little sneak! I could tell the moment I saw you!" Brian laughed, his smile bright and wide. "And what about you? Who did *you* partner up with?"

Kurt's eyes wandered over to Brittany who was chatting with a regular. "I-, er-."

"Oh! I see," Brian grinned slyly. "I never thought you'd be the type."

"The type." Kurt's voice came out as a squeak. "What do you mean?"

"To, how do I put this? To pay for a woman's wares."

"No, it's not like that!" Kurt held up his hands, and damned the heat that spread high across his cheeks. "Well, maybe. Once. My seventeenth. It was, well, you know."

"A gift." Brian nodded. "But not one you wanted?"

"No," Kurt said, surprised at how easily the words slipped out. But something about Brian was doing that to him. One drink had quickly become three, and that little while had become an entire morning. The man seemed to set him at ease, which was something Kurt hadn't felt in a long time. It was hard to maintain his usual defensive mask in the face of Brian's genuine interest and enthusiasm. Many in McKinley found him to be a cold fish, but Brian seemed to be sincerely enjoying his company.

And, Kurt couldn't help but notice, not once had his eyes strayed over to the sweet curve of Santana's bosom as she strolled back and forth with the pitcher.

"You're more of a romantic, I guess?"

"Yes, I think I am. I know that's probably silly but-"

"That's not silly," said Brian quietly. "It's not silly at all."

For a moment, silence fell upon them both, their eyes meeting across the table, and a little spark ignited in Kurt's stomach. For his own sanity, he gave a weak smile and looked away.

"So," said Brian. "Your pa was the sheriff? Before that big lug out there?"

Kurt nodded, taking a sip of his drink. "My father became ill last fall and had to step down. They had an election and Karofsky was voted in."

"Really? I wonder at that. He can't have that many summers behind him."

"As many as me, it's true. He's popular around here. To some that's all that counts."

"I take it he's not filling your father's shoes to the hilt?"

Kurt laughed softly. "Something like that, I guess. He misses it but, well, I'm glad that he's out of it and back in the shop." He shrugged. "Less stress, you know?"

"Ah, yes." Brian smirked. "Got yourself a pair of celebrities just over yonder, I hear."

"Oh, I wouldn't know. The first I heard was from Karofsky this morning." Something must have shown in his face, because the next Kurt knew, Brian's fingers were touching at his wrist gently.

"It bothers you?"

Kurt bit at his lip. He knew that his reasoning and opinions were often found to be peculiar and he didn't want this stranger to look at him the same way. "No, it—" He sighed heavily. "Yes, it *does* bother me. Karofsky seemed mighty excited about roping them and we haven't even had the trial yet. It's barbaric."

Brian shrugged. "Some would call it justice."

"I wouldn't be one of them, Mr. Warbler," said Kurt severely. "They build it right outside the calaboose, did you know that? So that all they hear all day is the construction of the very thing that will kill them. Don't you think that's just dreadful?"

Brian's thumb worked at the rim of his glass, his expression faraway. "I guess."

Kurt felt a flash of guilt at the morbid turn the conversation had taken. He liked this Brian. He hadn't had this much fun with someone since Harmony had passed through the town. The last thing he wanted to do was frighten him off with a whole load of belly achin'.

"What about you, Mr. Warbler?" Kurt said, a shade too brightly. "What brings you here?" There was a tone that Kurt hadn't meant to be there, and he winced slightly, convinced that Brian must think that he was nothing but a croaker.

"I told you! Call me Bl—Brian." He sat back in his chair, stretching his arms up and joining his hands behind his head. The action caused his shirt to pull loose from his waistband and reveal just the smallest flash of skin.

The rush was almost overpowering. Kurt felt it in the base of his spine and the nail beds of his thumbs. He almost gasped from the ferocity of his feelings. *Don't*, Kurt snapped at himself. *You're making a friend. Don't do this again.*

"—back east originally," Brian was saying as Kurt blinked back into reality. "I studied law for a little while but it wasn't for me." Brian gestured around himself. "I saddled up my horse and headed out and, well, here I am. It's not an extravagant life but I get by doing a day's work on farms I pass through. Things like that, but it suits me fine."

"I thought I heard an accent! You're from the east!" Kurt gasped. "And you *left*?"

"You make it sound like I jumped out of heaven! Yes, I left. I went looking for a dream, you could say. "

"And did you?" Kurt wouldn't have paid mind to a tornado tearing through the bar. He leaned forward and lowered his voice to a hush. "Did you find it?"

Brian shook his head. "But I have my eyes open."

"Does it not get lonely?" Kurt asked, resting his chin on his palm. "Travelling by yourself."

"Yes." The answer was simple and pure and weighed with more than a whole litany of words could convey. "Sometimes it's unbearable."

"I get lonely," Kurt said softly. "All the time."

Brian opened his mouth to reply, but his answer was cut short by the batwing doors loudly clanging against the walls.

"—looks like the scaffolding will be up by the end of the week," the sheriff's deputy, Strando, announced as he entered the saloon. "Haven't had us a hanging in years."

Kurt sighed heavily with distaste and glanced over at Brian, surprised to see that he was sitting straighter than before. His jaw was tight and Kurt noticed that he seemed to be all one live nerve, tense and coiled.

"They really that Carmel gang that turned over the train?" Will Schuester spoke up.

"That's our preacher," Kurt whispered to Brian, who was paying him no mind, his head tilted slightly back as he listened to the men talk.

"Two short but two enough, for sure," Strando answered. "Won't be no coming or going until the trial's over and we got us two loose necks. Except for the hangman of course. He'll be here by morrow."

"Little premature, isn't it?" Will asked, a frown on his face. "Shouldn't we wait until they've been tried?"

Strando tutted and his cronies joined in merrily. "And pay their keep and their meals? Do we look like charity, preacher? The trial will be over and done with tomorrow, for sure. And those two will be dancing on the widow. It will be all done all according to Hoyle, so don't worry none about that."

"Mr. Strando!" Will gasped. "You can't have an execution on the Sabbath."

"Lands sake, *Monday*, then." Strando rolled his eyes.

"You think that the other members of the gang may ride through here? Get through the blockade?"

"Nah, ain't no iron or loyalty to that sort. They'll be happy to have less to split I should imagine." He sat up onto the stool, shooting Brittany a wink and dropping his coin purse down onto the table. "Usual, my sweet."

"Is it true one's a gal? That's what I saws on the wanted posters. Three guys and a miss."

Kurt gasped at that and for the first time since he came in, Strando turned to look at him. Seeing whom he had for an audience, he sneered and turned back to the others.

"Ayuh, it's true. World be coming to something when the dames have more balls than the men." The last part was loud, and obviously for Kurt's benefit. "Hate to waste a good woman like that. A fine looking gal, make no mistake," Strando chuckled. "I mean, no Miss Fabray, but for a downright criminal? A fine looking gal. I dare say Karofsky will be tending to her cell this very evening."

Brian's hands clenched tightly round his glass, knuckles whitening.

"Lucky son of a bitch," another member grumbled. "You think you'll get to plow that?"

"Gentlemen, please," Will beseeched. "That's hardl—"

"Why not?" Strando laughed heartily. "Someone has to cover Karofsky's shift sometime!"

"I'd mind your tongue, friend," Brian spoke up, his voice even and cool. "Or someone will mind it for you."

Kurt's head snapped back round to face Brian, as the bar fell into a shocked silence. Karofsky may have got to his position based on his popularity, but Strando got chosen for his brute strength alone.

"Pardon, pal?" Strando said, standing up from his stool and approaching the table in slow measured steps. "Could have sworn you just put your nose where it don't belong? Noses come into bad times doing things like that."

"He—he was thinking of the ladies present, that's all." Kurt said hurriedly, indicating to Brittany and Santana at the counter. "The conversation was a mite uncouth."

"Ladies?" Strando turned to the women and back again. "I see only whores. Unless we're including *you* in that, darling?"

The crash of an overturning chair rang out and all eyes were on Brian as he rose to his feet.

"I'm going to ask you again. Mind that tongue." Like he had with Karofsky earlier, he drew back his jacket and revealed the butt of his gun. "I'm asking you as a gentleman to change the subject."

"We got us a gent! Well, ain't we blessed! And me, without my Sunday best." Strando eyed the gun with a cold grin. "You'd be wise to not throw that around here, dude."

"Don't give me reason to, and we'll get along just fine." Brian raised his chin, his fingers twitching as Kurt pressed himself back into his chair.

"Boys," Santana drawled. "You're both pretty. Now how about you both stop with the shop talk and someone buy this lady a drink." She eased over, encircling Strando's arm and pressing it flush against her bosom. "A girl could die of thirst waiting for a little attention around here." She shot Kurt a wink and he returned it with a grateful smile.

"Okay, since it's you, darling." Strando pulled her tighter, and Santana gave a little grimace of pain that tore at Kurt's heart. "But maybe the dude and his little wasp should clear out. This is a man's joint. This ain't no sewing circle."

Brian made as if to say something else, but Kurt was already up and around the table. "Come on," he muttered. "Let's just go."

Never taking his eyes off Strando, Brian allowed himself to be led outside, not exhaling until they reached the noon air.

"This is a sweet little town, isn't it?" he said blandly.

"That's one word for it, yes," said Kurt, causing Brian to smile and let some of the tension clear from his shoulders. "But I have many others that you may have at your disposal." Kurt pushed his tongue into his cheek, and turned slightly, facing the other man. "Mr. Warbler—"

"Brian."

"Brian," Kurt said almost reverentially, savouring it on his tongue. "Do you believe that you'll stay long? In town, I mean."

Brian observed him, his expression cool. "Why?"

"I was—It's just—" A voice in Kurt's head was screaming at him to stop, but his tongue had grabbed the words and was running amok. "I wondered if you would perhaps like some company. When you leave?"

Kurt licked at his lips. "Me, I mean. Perhaps I could come. With you." Kurt winced as his fingers unconsciously gesticulated walking. "Out of town." *Ouch*. It was truly amazing that he had managed to restrain himself from grabbing a stick and drawing a picture in the dirt to further explain.

"You'd want to come with me?" Brian said, his eyebrows tracing his hairline.

"If that would be satisfactory with you, Mr—Brian..." Kurt rushed on. "I could be a great help! And I can tend to a horse's shoe better than anyone, why I tended to yours and isn't she fine? I can read and write. I've had all my schooling. And I can mend clothes just as well as any woman. I wouldn't be a bother, I promise you."

"And your father? He would be just dandy that you'd throw your hat in with me? A man you met only yesterday and have spoken to on *three* occasions."

"He would—" Kurt faltered. "He would understand. I have expressed my wish to leave here many a time. And it's not like I can never come back is it?"

"I wonder at that." Brian's voice was low, almost a whisper. "I do wonder at that."

"And it wouldn't be forever. I've been saving up, you see, to go east? And I figure I could do what you do! Odd jobs on farms and the like. You must make more than I do at the shop." Kurt frowned. "Father has an annoying habit of setting up tabs for everyone."

"He's some fellow your pa." Brian laughed, and Kurt smiled dopily back. If he was laughing, maybe he liked the idea. Maybe he wouldn't mind travelling with Kurt, showing him the ropes. It would be nice to have a friend for once. A real friend.

Just a friend. That's all.

"So, what do you say. Will you at least give it your consideration?"

"Kurt, I—" Brian's grin grew cold and muted, his eyes fixed over Kurt's shoulder. "I guess your deputy was right. They sure made short work of it."

Turning, Kurt saw that scaffolding of the gallows was already underway. Men made their way back and forth with planks and nails, most likely bought at Hummel's, and the sound of sawing started up.

"He's not my anything," Kurt muttered. "And I guess the excitement made them work faster."

"Yeah, I guess."

"You don't like it either, do you?" Kurt asked, stepping a tad closer, his knuckles gently nudging against Brian's.

"Have you seen one before?" Brian's eyes darted downwards at their contacted flesh. Kurt waited for him to pull away and was pleased when he didn't.

"A hanging? Once. Just once when I was a boy. I hated it."

Brian smiled softly. "And the trial will be tomorrow and Sunday—"

"Everyone will be at the church service."

"Including you?"

"Oh, I'm not really a church goer." Kurt laughed. "I'll probably be in the sh—"

"You should go." Brian moved away, his skin leaving Kurt's abruptly. "You should go to church, Kurt."

It felt like lead to his stomach. Stepping back, he searched Brian's face for the friend that he had made in the bar, for the fun lively man that he had spent the morning with. He was gone. All Kurt found was an unreadable dark gaze that appraised him coldly. He knows. He knows and he hates it. He's disgusted.

"And my proposal?" he said stiffly, hating the pitch that was higher than usual.

"That wouldn't be good idea, Kurt." Brian's voice was bland and not a tiny trace of friendliness lay there anymore. For the first time since they had spoken, Kurt felt a shiver of unease work its way down his spine.

"I see," replied Kurt, coldly. "Well, I must get going. Good day to you, Mr. Warbler." Kurt raised his nose high, and spun deftly on his heel.

Quickly, ignoring the burn of humiliation clutching at his skin, he went to make his way to work.

"Kurt," Brian called, stopping him. Kurt turned back, telling his heart to cease its ridiculous, foolish rush of hope. "I mean it. Go to church this Sunday."

Clenching his hands into fists, Kurt gave him no reply, simply returning to his journey.

The sooner he left this folly behind, the better.

## Chapter Three

"I will, of course, pray for their souls today at church," Quinn announced to the table. "Such a terrible thing that a woman would be amongst them. I would think it quite against our genteel nature." Ignoring Kurt's snort, she raised her pretty nose primly. "According to Lauren, they say she was actually wearing a pair of men's breeches! How- how *vulgar*. Can you imagine?"

"It's true," Finn nodded, shoving a slice of the loaf into his mouth. "Puck and I were at the trial. She was kind of fair, too." Seeing Quinn's narrowed gaze, he shook his head fiercely. "I mean-for what she is and all."

Quinn pursed her lips. "Hmm."

"I, uh- I don't reckon much of that stranger," Finn said, changing the subject and reaching for the jug of water. "Seems a bit of a four-flusher, if you ask me."

"Oh? Brian?" said Kurt, his heart picking up pace. "You've met him."

"No, no. That wasn't his name." Finn answered with a frown. "It was something like Jim. Yeah, Jim. He's the one they brought in for the hangings."

"Not decent." Carole shook her head. "Why, they barely waited for the dust to settle on the gavel hitting the wood."

"Whole lot of talking not a whole lot of eating going on," Burt grunted.

"But I did see that Warbler fellow outside the the jailhouse," Finn continued. "Don't reckon much of him either. All those big grins and flashy spurs. Total blowhard if you ask me."

Burt laughed. "You're hard man to impress, Finn. No wonder I had such a time of it courting your mother."

"I thought him very handsome," Carole said with a wink. "All the ladies have been following him around since he hit town. Seems right gentlemanly, too."

Quinn turned to Kurt, her face filled with insincere interest. "Isn't he a good friend of yours, Kurt?" She smiled. "I heard that the two of you were drinking the day away just the other morn."

"We talked, yes," Kurt admitted, keeping his eyes on his plate, appetite fleeing. "But I hardly would say a lifelong friendship was formed."

At least, this was what Kurt was telling himself. He had gone over and over his conversation with Brian Warbler, trying to find that dire moment when he had revealed too much; the moment that had turned Brian so sour on him so soon. He had barely had a separate thought since their morning together, and it didn't help that this town was so small it was impossible to turn without falling over the man. Each time that they would pass each other in the street, Brian would turn quickly away from him, and for Kurt the rejection began afresh. And to think, he'd actually been ready to run away with the man.

"Will you be joining us this evening, Kurt?" Quinn turned to him, her smile sickly sweet.

"No, Quinn." Kurt answered wearily. "I won't be joining you."

"I see," she sipped at her water. "I would think that you would want to visit the church more. Considering your mother's part in its creation."

"Well, there is a lot of work to be done in the shop."

She raised her eyebrows. "Almost never-ending, it would seem."

"Quite." Kurt grinned tightly. "I see that your hired man, Mr. Puckerman is still working on that leaky roof of yours, Quinn." Her gaze turned to frost. "That must have been some damage. Why, pa, if he was in full health, could have had that job done weeks ag-" Kurt hissed as a foot made harsh contact with his shin.

"The storm damaged it more than we realised," she said, as Kurt tried to discreetly rub where her blow had landed. "As you well know."

"Let it alone, you two," Burt warned shooting a glance to an oblivious Finn. "Polish off, anyway. The service will be starting soon."

They finished their meals in relative silence, Quinn shooting Kurt cold looks in between adoring (and annoyed) glances at Finn. He returned them in kind.

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"You're sure you won't come?" Burt stood in the doorway, the others carrying on ahead. "Preacher be mighty pleased to see you back, I know he misses your voice in the choir."

"I'm sure, pa. I just-" He shook his head. "You know how I feel about it."

"Yes," Burt grinned. "You've been quite vocal from time to time, for sure, and that's none too wise in a place like this. I wish that you'd drop in, though. At least to look upon your mother."

Kurt stiffened. "I remember her face. I don't need oil paint and imitation gold frames to bring her back to life." He blanched at his own tone. "I just don't want to sit in that room when I don't believe. It seems wrong."

"All the same, that place meant a lot to her," said Burt gently. "It's nice that we have such a wonderful honour to her."

"Yes, pa." Kurt smiled wearily. "And I know, my prickliness often causes you trouble with the townsfolk and I'm sorry. I'll try harder, I promise."

"Hush now, don't you dare. This town needs someone to shake them up." Burt patted Kurt on his shoulder fondly. "Maybe I should miss this service? How about we do something together? I can help you take stock."

"No, no," Kurt pushed at his father with a laugh. "You go on ahead. Someone needs to make sure Finn doesn't fall asleep and drool on Quinn. *Again*."

"Aye, at that." Burt donned his hat, and flicked at the brim. "You're a good kid, Kurt."

"And remember to take off your hat when you enter this time, or Mr. Figgins will go spare." Kurt shooed his father from the step, waving as he caught up with the rest of his family.

Kurt watched them as they left, grinning as he saw Quinn slap at Finn's arm. No doubt he'd thrown his heel into it again. As much as he looked forward to the day he headed east, he knew that he would miss

them all terribly. Especially his father. But he also knew that he had never belonged to this place, not really. He knew in his heart he was meant for something more.

After all, it was in his blood.

He turned to re-enter the house, but paused as something caught his eye in the distance. Outside the courthouse, two shadowed figures stood close, their forms moving animatedly as if in full conversation. Kurt squinted against the dying light but he didn't recognise them from this distance. A chill curled around his frame and he hugged himself tightly, glancing further along the street. The gallows stood out starkly against the sky and Kurt shivered again.

A strong urge took hold of him, to run after his father. Why, he didn't know. He held himself tighter while a sense of foreboding settled deep within his bones.

\*

Kurt gazed upon his mother's face, feeling a strange sort of serenity that he had never received from the preacher's words. He hadn't lied to his father, her face was etched into his mind, always there when he needed her. He even carried her handkerchief on his person, just to keep her close. Yet, when he was still trying to fit into the awkward regime of church going, this had been his favourite part. Standing in the foyer of the church, as his mother watched over him. It was the only time that he had ever felt at peace in this building.

The church itself was a gift to the town from his estranged grandparents. They had been Easterners, passing through the West and spreading the word of the Lord. The word had stuck. Almost immediately, in the quaint little town, a church was being thrown up in a frenzy of religious servitude. Unfortunately, the youngest member of the flock had found her own slice of heaven in the arms of one Burt Hummel. When the church was complete, the family turned up their noses and had moved on, leaving Elizabeth behind to marry her common beau. They'd never heard from them again.

Like his father, Kurt's mother had been adored in the town; for her kindness, her intelligence, her gentle nature and sweet beauty. It had been a dark day for them all when consumption had taken her from them during Kurt's eighth winter. A local artist had gifted Kurt's father with the portrait and he in turn had

asked for it to be hung within the church so that the whole town could remember the young woman they had all truly loved.

Kurt sighed. He didn't know why his feet had taken him here. Not when he had so vehemently spoken against entering. All he knew was he had been seized by an almighty need to see her, to be with her. He reached out his fingers and stopped a breath away from the frame. This is absurd, he thought. I have work to be doing.

Stepping back, he smiled at his mother's image and shook his head at his silliness. He was getting as bad as Miss Pillsbury with her fussiness and worrying.

The voices inside began to rise in song, and Kurt decided it was time to get going. Walking back out, he placed his hands in his pockets and whistled the merry hymn emanating from behind him. He could feel, rather than see, the gallows to his side, daring him to look, but he refused its allure. As much as he felt for those inside the jailhouse, there was nothing to be done. They had made their own luck.

Reaching Hummel's, he crossed the threshold, closing the door neatly behind him. As he removed his jacket and hung it up on the rack, he thought of what he could be getting on with to while the day away. Most likely need to write an order for more nails. Deliberately, he refused to dwell on why the supply would be running low. *Perhaps, I could-*

A loud creak from behind him stopped his thoughts mid-sentence. Puzzled, he turned towards the sound. A gleam on the counter caught his eye and he approached it curiously.

Six gold pieces, lined up neatly in a row. Before Kurt could utter his gasp of a shock, several items crashed to the floor in the back room, followed by a curse of frustration.

Kurt was frozen. Completely and utterly frozen. His eyes glued to the doorway. He willed himself to turn and run towards the church. It could be pa, it could! He tried to reason with himself. But he knew that wasn't so. And rather than a sign of Karofsky's competence as the law, no one would enter this shop without Burt Hummel's say so, such was his status within the community.

Which meant someone had entered without it.

"Careful, don't break anything we ain't taking," a voice urged. "Just grab what we need."

"What do we care about these peasants? They were ready to string us up." The tone was full of disdain. "I say we burn it to the ground."

Kurt's hands covered his mouth to silence his moan of horror. *The prisoners!* They'd escaped.

"Mayhaps, but not the folks in this shop. They're decent people."

"Right so, Blaine. Mighty decent indeed. Mighty decent of them to give us those horses, too."

A mild scuffle broke out and something was put down with force.

"Horses, yes. Their whiskey, no. Let it alone."

"How many horses are there?" A woman's voice. "Is there a selection of colour? If so, my preference is white."

"There's just three, Rachel, including Pavarotti. You'll have to ride with Jesse. Take the grey mare."

Finn's horse, Kurt thought, his fingers squeezing painfully around his face as his fear threw a tremble over him. And pa's, too.

"I shan't! I won't ride anywhere with that oaf."

"That's a fine attitude! A fine attitude, indeed, considering I just busted your non-existent hide out of the Big House."

Finally, feeling returned to Kurt's feet and slowly, quietly, he began to ease himself backwards, praying that they would not realise they had been disturbed.

"Will you two save it for the trail. We have to get moving before that service is over and someone comes to check on Strando."

"Was he dead?"

"He wasn't dancing, darling," the one Kurt assumed to be Jesse answered in a smug voice. "We need to head to the north blockade. I took out the man they had at that point, and word hasn't traveled back yet. We have time on our side."

He had to go. He had to get out and get help. Strando may still be alive, it was perhaps too late for the man they'd stationed on the north blockade but-

"Where's Smythe?"

Oh, Lord. Kurt knew. Kurt knew before he even turned round that he was done for. Slowly, shaking, he pivoted and faced the man behind him. *Smythe*.

With a manic grin, the man raised the butt of his gun high and introduced Kurt to solid black.

## Chapter Four

Kurt moaned as the pained lethargy receded, finally taking stock of his surroundings as the fog in his mind cleared.

The first thing that registered within him was the dull painful ache that spread across his head, spine and chest. Then came the steady thrum of another's heartbeat against his own, the deep panting of an animal and the crash of hooves upon dirt. He made to move his hands and realised quickly that they were bound tight behind his back, and that his legs were also tied. The memories hit him fast and he bit back a gasp of panic. *They'd taken him.* Oh, Lord. The Carmel Gang had him.

"-the whiskey was a no go, but Blaine had to go and take himself the most *darling* souvenir."

"Why, Jesse, it's just his size!" Another male voice, nearer this time, replied with a laugh. "Almost."

"Wipe your chin, the both of you," muttered the man whose horse he was flung across. "This was the last thing I wanted."

Beneath the panic, the fear, Kurt recognised something. He knew that voice. He *knew* it.

"Best thing all round," the one named Jesse said. "They are going to come after us no matter what, but at least with the kid along they'll be more gun-shy. Got ourselves a decent bargaining chip. At least until we clear the border."

"And then what?" the woman asked. "What do we do with him, then?"

"You know what, Rachel."

"Hmm, I suppose." Kurt could barely hear her over the horses galloping and the roar in his head. "But we need him alive until the border at least."

*They were going to kill him.* He squeezed his eyes tighter and tried not to see his father's face in his mind. Tried not to fill it with images of the *how* and the *when*. But they came anyway.

The horse whinnied as the man riding it pulled on the reins. "No."

"Really? What do you suppose?" Kurt guessed him to be Smythe. "We set him loose here? Now?"

He'll lose his scalp before his feet touch the ground."

"Careful, Smythe," said Rachel severely.

"I'm saying that I'm still the head of this gang. And that we ain't killing him because you can't control that trigger finger of yours."

"And it was my plan that got the gang back together. Or did you forget that, fearless leader?"

"This is all truly fascinating," said Jesse. "But it appears Blaine's boy is awake."

Kurt didn't think, he simply reacted. Kicking his feet at the horse's chest, feeling a stab of regret at that, he threw himself backwards, bracing himself for the fall. He grunted in pain as he landed backwards and then was pitched to his side, unable to steady himself as his hands were tied together. The rope cut into his wrists and his hands hurt terribly as he struggled to right himself.

"Are you an idiot, boy?" Smythe drawled. "You're hogtied."

"Kurt!" At the sound of his name from that familiar voice, Kurt squinted up against the harsh light and...

*Oh.*

"Br-Brian?"

Brian stared down at him, his face sorrowful. He was all decked out in a big hat with its brim turned up, a red and navy neckerchief the size of a bib, and a bandolier chock full of cartridges hung across his chest from one shoulder. Around his waist, he wore a belt with holsters on each side and his dusty shirt was dark with sweat. He was a far cry from the dapper man that he had met in the town.

"It's Blaine," he said slowly. "Blaine Anderson."

"You-you lied to me?" Kurt said in a weak little voice that he loathed. He stared up at them all, feeling smaller and more frightened than he ever had in his life. "I thought you were my friend!"

"*I thought you were my friend!*" mimicked one of the gang. "The more he whines the closer that posse gets." He glared at Kurt and he recognised him to be the one that had dropped him in the shop. "If this is going to drag out, may I plug him now?"

"No," Brian - no - *Blaine* said. "I told you no. You mind me now." He looked back at Kurt. "This here is Smythe."

"Yes." Kurt gritted his teeth. "We've met."

"Rachel," the woman said, circling her horse around him. "And riding behind me here is Jesse St. James."

Still reeling from everything else that had happened this new revelation caused Kurt's jaw to drop. "*The* Jesse James?"

"Goddamnit!"

"Oh, now you've done it," Smythe muttered. "That's our subject picked for the rest of the trail."

"St! She said St! Are you deaf?"

"Calm down!"

"No, Smythe! Shut your big bazoo! I had this name first. Me! Back when that bumpkin Woodson was just a gleam in his inbred daddy's lazy eye!"

"Jesse, you're riling up the horses," murmured Rachel. "It's an easy mistake."

"I'm quicker on the draw than him, I can ride better and don't even get me started on the amateur, lacklustre quality of that Clay County ban-"

A single shot silenced him mid-rant and they all turned to the source. Blaine stared out impassively, six-gun raised into the air. "Settle down, Jesse."

Slowly, Blaine climbed down from his horse, dusting himself down as he walked towards a cowering Kurt. "I'm not going to hurt you."

Kurt couldn't resist a snort of derision at that, but it turned into a moan when Blaine removed a slim knife from his belt.

"Don't," he whispered as Blaine crouched next to him. "I won't tell. I won't."

"Shh, don't go wakin' snakes," he said in a soothing voice. "I'm just getting rid of these ties, that's all."

The blade cut through the rope easily. Blaine grasped Kurt's wrist tightly.

"What exactly is your plan here, Blaine?" Smythe asked as Blaine cut through the binds around Kurt's feet.

"His voice is giving me hives."

"Let it go, Smythe," warned Rachel. "Can't you see the poor boy is shaking out of his skin?"

Smythe smiled crookedly. "Jesse, quiet your squaw."

"You can get away with that once, Smythe." Rachel's hand hovered over her holster, fingers twitching.

"And only once."

"Rachel was raised by the Commanche," explained Blaine, his own smile waning at Kurt's angry glare.

"Come on." He pulled on Kurt's arm raising him to his feet. Kurt's legs were shaky from the long period he had spent on the horse, and a wave of dizziness felled him. Blaine's hands reached out, gripping him by the waist and Kurt hung on tight to his shoulders until it had passed. Blaine's breath fanned out against his cheek, and their eyes met. Kurt searched them for a trace of the desperado that would rob, kidnap and kill. He saw only regret and something else he couldn't decipher.

Stepping away, Blaine mounted up, then reached down a hand for Kurt. He stared at the hand with wide eyes, his fists clutching into the material of his shirt.

"We forgot to pick up the sidesaddle, lovely."

"Damnit, Smythe. Quiet your tongue," snapped Blaine. "Come on, Kurt."

Kurt grabbed hold, and Blaine hauled him up behind him. He hung on tight as the horse moved into a trot. He had saddlebags under him. They were leather, and hot from the sun, he could feel their heat burning through the thinness of his trousers.

He didn't mind the discomfort; he could bear it. Kurt gave some thought to going for Blaine's guns. They were in easy reach . If he was quick enough, he might be able to disarm him. Make him climb down and take his horse full speed back to pa.

But no, they were wary of him now. They were expecting him to flee. He needed to gain their trust, make them drop their guard.

Arms tight around Blaine, he gritted his teeth as they moved into a gallop. As the gang bantered back and forth, Kurt was planning how and when he would make his move.

Starting with killing that no-good four-flusher, Blaine Anderson.

## Chapter Five

"Step right up! Step right up! Behold a miracle this very day!" Jesse clasped his hands tight and settled his features into one of beseeching. "A wondrous miracle!" He held up a tiny vial, the sun casting a gleam over the glass. "This, ladies and gentlemen is no mere concoction for tedious aches and pains. No." His voice dropped into a reverent whisper. "It can vanquish the greatest foe of them all. *Death*."

Blaine raised his hand. "Laying it on mighty thick, aren't you?"

For a moment, his eyes narrowed and lips twitched. As soon as it appeared, it was chased away by a bright, alarming, grin. "I can prove it, my friend. See the inside of my wagon. See what lies yonder." He made a motion to the empty air beside him. "See this young maiden that passed into the heavenly pastures this very afternoon." With several flamboyant sweeps and twirls, he dropped down beside the girl lying on the floor. Her face in perfect peace. "Watch, gentlemen. Watch." Pressing the vial to the woman's lips, he tipped the bottle up and emptied the vial into her mouth.

Nothing.

Jesse coughed.

Still she slept.

With a quick glance at them, he poked her roughly in the cheek.

Gasping, she flung herself into a sitting position, narrowly avoiding butting him. Raising her hand to her hairline, she pressed the other to her bosom. "I'm-I'm alive. *I'm alive!*"

Kurt couldn't help it. Everyone has a breaking point. Covering his face, he collapsed into peals of laughter. "That- that really- Surely you jest-Oh, Lord!"

"Yes," Blaine smiled at him. "They really did this. This is, in fact, how we met."

Rachel sniffed and took Jesse's hand as she helped him up. "Actually we were quite successful. Until you tried to shoot me."

Blaine shrugged. "I wanted to see if it would work twice."

Kurt wiped at his eye, his ribs actually hurting from the first real laugh he had had in an age. "So you were bunko artists selling this-"

"*Doctor Jesse's Magical Death Fixer*," he supplied smugly. "Most of the time it went slick as grease. As you have already witnessed, I was magnificent. But there were perhaps some things that needed to be tweaked." He tossed back his head. "Namely Rachel's delivery."

"My delivery?" She arched a brow. "I moved grown men to tears, Jesse. Tears."

"Of mirth," muttered Jesse.

"I see, I see. Well, I find your performance quite overreaching, if I'm honest." Rachel patted at her hair. "If one cannot find truth in the role, some infinitesimal thing which speaks to their very heart, then how can they relate?"

"I fooled Hummel's town easy enough, didn't I?" Jesse protested. "They all bought me as a hangman like it was gravy."

"You put on a big black hat and I said '*oh, I'm the hangman*', that's hardly a legendary performance. Plus-"

Blaine leaned closer to Kurt as the two continued to squabble, his shoulder bumping against Kurt's. "Actually, they used to resort to robbing their customers," he explained. "I was rather impressed with their imagination, so of course I stayed with them. Well, that and I couldn't shake them."

Grasping his arms around his knees, Kurt nodded mutely. There it was again. That feeling. A hot white twist of want in his gut that swam through his body and tingled pleasantly through his veins. He could not explain it. How could it continue to thrive after what Blaine had done to him? They had taken him. Lord knew what effect this was having on his father's health! But still it persisted. He found himself fascinated with the man. He was so many different shades that Kurt's eyes simply could not adjust.

He hated that he was in thrall to Blaine and his emotions: one moment he would be kind. He would be pally with him and try to make Kurt laugh, smile or simply chase away the misery that must cover his features daily. Yet, on other occasions, he would be quiet, distant, and snappish. Just this morning he had

roughly asked Kurt to loosen his hold around his waist as they rode. Kurt could not figure him out. What he did know was that the kind moments almost made everything else irrelevant. Almost.

It was of no matter, though. Despite the confusion of his feelings, Kurt could not afford to lose sight of his goal. Slowly, he shifted and lengthened the distance between them, catching Blaine's puzzled frown as he did so.

"You love us and you know it," Rachel was saying, tying her holster back round her waist. Kurt had kept his eye on them throughout their performance. But now was not the time.

It was getting closer, though. He figured it had been at least two weeks, maybe more. And Kurt could just tell that he was gaining their trust as time went on. They had apparently decided that he was of little or no threat and now he was allowed to help with small chores such as cooking and making pots of coffee. Sebastian tolerated him, Jesse was amused by him and Rachel in particular seemed to enjoy his company. On occasion, he could actually feel himself starting to enjoy the trail, but then he would recall what fate awaited him at the border and he would push that feeling away. He didn't belong. He wasn't one of them.

"It's Sebastian," said Rachel, looking over their heads. "He's back."

"You get anything?" Jesse looked hopeful. "Something big? Something tasty? Something-"

Shifting his gun, Sebastian threw down the offering and grimaced. "Answer your question?"

"Varmints? Bosh. If I never eat another gopher as long as I live it'll be too soon."

"That so? Well, maybe you can come hunting with me next time instead of babysitting the wet blanket."

Jesse sneered and snatched up a mangled bird, bringing his blade to its back. "It'll do."

Sebastian considered. "You're right, though. We need supplies." He arched his back and stretched, eyes darting between Kurt and Blaine. His lips twisted as if he had tasted something foul. "I saw a town from the hill. Too hot for you two to go in, but I figure be fine for Blaine and me. We can get some potatoes, corn, carrots and beans and the like. Stock up on the ammunition, too. What you say? We go now, and then mayhap we can be back before night fall."

Blaine shook his head. "No, you stay. I'll take Kurt."

"What?" Sebastian gave a shocked laugh. "You pulling my tail? You want to wander in there with our damn prisoner? Why don't you scrawl your name on your wanted picture and stick it on your horse's hide?"

"That's the thing," Blaine was already rising and moving to fill his saddlebag for the journey. "Kurt here has no poster of his own. I'd rather not draw more attention to us than needed. Hiding in clear sight, isn't that my specialty? And look at him. He look like a cutthroat desperado to you?"

The gang all turned to him, and he blushed under their stare.

Jesse tapped at his lip. "Maybe if he squinted a little?"

"I'm saying that word won't have spread here yet. If there's a posse on our tail after him we've probably thrown them off several times over by now with your tracking, Smythe. It's safer one of us being unknown."

Sebastian pursed his lips and looked Kurt over slowly.

Kurt, himself, was practically shaking in anticipation and fear. This was it! This was his chance. He'd be alone with Blaine. Just one person - one person who seemed to trust him, instead of a bunch of desperate outlaws. He could do it on the trail, he could kill Blaine.

Couldn't he?

*God, not this again. It's not like hitting Abel over the head with an ax, or whatever it was and why didn't I pay more attention in Sunday school as a child? All I remember is: murder's not very nice. I don't want to be Not Nice.*

Every night he had tossed and turned in the cool air, thinking on it. The method, the time and feeling. In his mind, he had stabbed Blaine, he had shot him, he had strangled him. The only acceptable fantasy death for Blaine was one where he and Kurt somehow ended up dangling over the Grand Canyon together, with Kurt trying to help him back up (his father would commend his magnanimous nature later), only for Blaine to tragically lose his grip and fall down the ravine. Of course, there would be a big party later and everyone would congratulate him for being so heroic and sending the infamous Blaine shuffling right off this mortal coil. He'd know the truth and he'd be okay with that, because his conscience was clear.

Unfortunately, there weren't many canyons around here, grand or otherwise. And so he thought on the realities of what could happen, trying to steel himself for it. Would Blaine fix his eyes on him? Would there be blood? Could he bear to stand over him if he was gasping his last breath, but what kind of animal would leave another man to die alone? How to bear it! He always awoke with his cheeks wet and his body shivering. Could he honestly kill Blaine in cold blood?

But maybe this was an easy way out. The town, he thought. There'll be law. Maybe he could do this without hurting anyone? Perhaps Blaine could even be given time to get away.

Kurt chose not to focus on how much he really hoped for the latter.

\*

[OBJ]

"Mighty quiet back there," said Blaine, as they trotted back to camp.

"Nothing to say," he muttered. His hands rested behind him, tight on the saddle. When they rode like this Kurt liked to keep his hands away, but once they picked up speed he had no choice but to enclose his arms around Blaine's waist. He hated how a dark part of him prayed for uneven ground.

"We should have left earlier." He nodded up at the sky. "Be night by the time we'll reach the others."

"Okay."

"Warm, though. May even see us some stars."

"Hmm," Kurt chewed at his lip. Eying the guns in Blaine's holster. "Maybe."

*Do it. Take one. You won't stand a chance back at the camp. You've messed up so many times already. Do it.*

And Kurt had messed up. He had completely and utterly let chance after chance slip through his fingers. The town hadn't suspected a thing. Blaine had simply led, charm personified and Kurt had hung limply at his side. If any strange looks were cast their way, it was to wonder why such a charming man would befriend such a sullen, unpleasant boy.

Kurt had wanted to say something, God, he had wanted to. Had wanted to shout to every stranger that he passed whom and what Blaine was. Yet every time the chance arose, his jaw would wire itself completely and utterly shut.

Why?

What debt did he owe a man who had knocked him out cold and kidnapped him? A man that planned to kill him once his usefulness had passed?

Kurt wanted to kid himself that he was protecting the townsfolk, that the ground was too hot. But he knew that wasn't why. Simply, deep down, he didn't want to see Blaine executed.

Which was going to make it *particularly* difficult to kill him.

"-after the last debacle. Jesse nearly had me at ten paces."

Kurt frowned. "Sorry? Ten paces?"

"The last time we made ourselves some moonshine. Rachel took a liking and, well," Blaine laughed. "I guess I took myself quite the liking, too. We ended up half seas over and we got a mite too fond of each other."

"You mean you and Rachel? You-you were-"

"Oh, no, no. Jesse had his Colt out before any of us made a fool of ourselves." He paused. "I mean, even bigger fools of ourselves. I'm lucky to not have a hole between my eyes."

Kurt ignored that little bite of jealousy at the thought of Blaine and Rachel. Instead, he bit the bullet. "Why?" Kurt whispered. "Why did you take me?"

For a long moment, Blaine was silent and Kurt opened his mouth to repeat the question but he at last spoke up. "I didn't. I didn't want to take you." Then, lower. "Not like that."

"Then why?"

"We-We heard the thud. And when we rushed through you were on the floor and Sebastian was standing over you. When I realised who you were- I told him to back down. To back away. Then I checked to make sure you were still breathing. That you were okay." He turned slightly so Kurt could see his profile in the dimming light. "I rounded them up and we were ready to go. And that was when Jesse spoke up." He swallowed thickly. "I tried to talk them out of it. Into just tying you up and leaving you in the backroom."

"My *hero*."

"But-" He shook his head. "Look, what does it matter now? You're here and that's all there is to it. We two may not like it but ain't no cause to continue fretting over lost dust."

"No?" The horse sped up and Kurt braced himself and grabbed at Blaine's hip. "And when you reach the border and I become that lost bit of dust? What about then?"

Blaine sighed and pulled on the reins, bringing the horse to a canter and then gradually to a standstill. "Kurt, you seem a nice kid-"

"A nice kid? That's all you have to say?" He scrambled away from Blaine's back and climbed down from the saddle, slipping as he avoided Blaine's hand. "You're going to kill me, Blaine."

"Kurt, damnit!" Blaine followed quickly, grunting as feet hit dirt. "Listen to me."

"Oh, my God. Oh, my, God! You are, aren't you?" Kurt sprang back from Blaine's reaching hands, and felt the words building up in his throat and tearing from his mouth. "I mean-I knew that you were, initially, but I hoped-I was so stupid and I hoped- My father, he loves me! I'm his world! Why would you do that to someone like him? I don't know what this will do to him!"

Dimly, beneath the roar in mind, Kurt could hear his name being called. Could see Blaine reaching out for him once more. But it was all here. Everything that he had been bottling up within these past two weeks. All the fear, worry, confusion and anger. So much anger. "Who do you think you are?" Kurt seethed, stepping towards him. Blaine, seemingly forgetting about the six-guns strapped to his belt, took a step back. His face breaking into surprise. "All I wanted was to be your friend! To go east! Why are you doing this to me?"

"Don't take on so! Calm down. If you would just-" Kurt's fingers clenched and were flying for Blaine's face before the thought even landed in his head. He hadn't thrown a punch since he was in short pants and

even then it was just to appease his father that he would remain safe in the school yard. Blaine, however, was just as quick. Grabbing Kurt's wrist before it made contact, he yanked him towards him. "Kurt. *Kurt.*"

"Let go of me!" Kurt's breath was hitched and painful as he stared down into Blaine's face, fingers tight against the tender bones in hand. They were so close and the heat and rage and fire was swirling in Kurt's chest. He was pure adrenaline and couldn't bring himself down, no matter how much he willed it away. So close, so close.

"I promise you," Blaine said quietly. "No harm will come to you. Not when you're with me."

Kurt couldn't stand it anymore. He closed the distance between them and pressed his own lips to Blaine's. Despite his emotions, it wasn't hard and brutal. It was chaste. Soft. And everything that Kurt had ever hoped for.

Except for one thing. Blaine wasn't responding.

Kurt shoved himself away, stumbling in his haste. What had he done? What had he done? Covering his mouth in horror, he turned his back on Blaine and took faltering steps forward before falling to his knees. He was a dead man for sure now. There was no conceivable way that Blaine would let him walk away from this. Hell, he probably wouldn't even live to the border now.

Kurt stiffened as he heard the scuff of Blaine's footsteps. *This was it.* Blaine was going to shoot him in the back and leave him for the buzzards. Kurt had blown too many chances. Now he had to finally act.

Digging his nails so hard into the ground he drew blood, he clutched at palmful of dirt. Rising, he pivoted quickly and let it fly at Blaine's face. He barely heard the gasp of pain and shock, already turning away and breaking into a run. He wasn't going to wait for Blaine to clear his vision and reach for his guns.

Running as if the very devil himself was at his heels, Kurt headed for the hills.

## Chapter Six

The soles of Kurt's feet ached and his lungs burned as he took shallow, shuddering breaths. His awareness faded from him as he ran, Blaine's voice soon becoming distant. He'd hidden behind a scattering of large rocks, his knees aching from the hard, dusty ground. Having crouched there until night had completely fallen, his bones ached with the night's chill; his stomach rumbled, and his hands trembled with nerves. He took little comfort in picturing his father's face in his mind because he couldn't remember a time in his life when he wanted to see it more.

He had always been meticulously careful. He had learned his lesson two summers ago when Finn had moved to town, misreading his kindness for something more. Kurt had to hide his ways; it was too dangerous not to. The world was too cruel, and so were the people in it. And now? He'd gone and shared his secret with a cutthroat who had his own wanted poster. Wiping at his face, he shook his head. He couldn't sit and wallow. What was done was done, and he had to get moving.

Kurt made his way down the hill, tentatively placing one foot in front of the other lest he trip in the dark. Dark, he thought, a flash of Blaine's eyes appearing in his mind. No. He couldn't be careless enough to think about the softness of Blaine's lips, or the feel of his chest, strong against his, or the scent that had surrounded him as he had pressed himself close. Of course, there was no point. Hopefully, he would never see Blaine again.

Squinting, he peered ahead, frowning to himself as he tried to make out the lay of the land. Then he smiled, feeling a flutter of excitement in his chest. He ignored the burn in his heels, and ran. There was a wagon trail! The road had to lead to somewhere, or at the very least, some travellers.

He rubbed his palms together as he wandered, the chill touching him all over. Again, he thought of his family, the looks he imagined on their faces spurring him on. Carole would no doubt cry and insist on feeding him his favourite meal and - he winced; this was not the time to think about food. Kurt imaged Finn, unable to hide his happiness. He would smile at him dopily, pressing him into a tight hug and his father -

Well. His father would never let him out of his sight. "Welcome home," he'd say; never a man of many words, but the comfort of a warm palm on Kurt's shoulder and the relief in his father's kind eyes would say it all. Home. Kurt had to cling to his memories of home. He had to ignore how his body ached. Push past the chill night air, and keep moving.

Easier said than done. As night settled in more cruelly, fatigue and cold overtook him. He fancied the chill started in his bones, made them feel leaden. He forced himself onward, singing one of his father's favourites under his breath.

*He was just a lonely cowboy*

*With a heart so brave and true*

*And he learned to love a maiden*

*With eyes of Heaven's own blue*

*They learned to love each other*

*As they named their wedding day*

*When a quarrel came between them*

*And Jack, he rode away*

*He joined a band of cowboys*

*And tried to forget her name*

*And out on the lonely prairie*

*She waits for him the---*

*Wait!* Kurt gasped as he came to a halt. There were shapes in the distance. Travellers, perhaps. Two, at least, on horseback. He was saved!

*Don't be foolish*, he thought to himself. *It could be them.* He squinted, making out two figures which were much bulkier than anyone in the gang. Pushing aside his paranoia, he walked briskly towards them, waving his hands over his head. He fixed his expression into a casual smile, but his heart hammered in his chest. He wanted to scream at the top of his lungs; he could break into song at the very sight. But, he

reflected as he exhaled deeply, he had to be careful. He looked again, scrutinising; they appeared friendly, and Kurt could hear a light rumble as they laughed to each other.

He felt vaguely ridiculous for a fleeting moment. He hoped he didn't look too desperate, or too scared. They laughed again, softly, and he held his head up high. He'd just escaped from a dangerous outlaw! Why be afraid?

"Howdy," said the nearest as Kurt approached. The voice was surprisingly warm, the man appearing not much older than Kurt himself. "You get thrown from your horse?"

"Hello, sir," Kurt answered, deciding to drop the act. They seemed friendly enough. He took a step closer and tipped his head up a little. "Yes, something like that. I would be mighty obliged if you could give me a ride to the nearest town?" Kurt raised onto tiptoe. "Please?" he said, then cursed inwardly as his voice sounded so young and plaintive to his own ears.

"A ride? Why sure, little stranger!" The man waved down at him happily. "Climb on up here. We'll get you to town before you can lick a palm and smooth down a curl. Won't we, Bud?"

"Really?" Kurt was nearly felled from the relief that spread across his chest. "Thank you so much, I-" he stopped short as the man twisted at the rein and turned the horse away from Kurt's reaching hand.

"Not so fast there, little stranger. We look like missionaries to you? You want to ride along with us, you have to pay the toll."

"Toll?" said Kurt hollowly. "But- I don't have any money." He patted at his pockets and tried to quell the panic and frustration gathering inside. "Oh! I could wire my father when we reach town. I am sure that he would be happy to pay you handsomely for your help!"

"So, an IOU?" Bud piped up. "A contract o' honour or some such?"

"Yes!" Kurt nodded. "Exactly."

"Ayuh, ayuh." Bub spat to the side, the tobacco landing sly of Kurt's boot. "See, thing is, we're simple folks and we don't hold much faith with contracts. Do we, Mac?"

"No, Sir. Can't say that we do. Can't say that we do, at all." Mac turned back to Kurt, his smile growing wider. "What if you were to take leave of our kind nature? Where would we be then?" He spread his hands emphatically. "A sorry state, that's what."

"And why'd you want to do that, stranger?" asked Bud. "Takin' advantage of two kindly folk like what we are."

"Young people these days. Got no respect for their betters. Crying shame is what it is."

"But--" Kurt's eyes darted back and forth between the two. "I told you, I have no money! I fell from my horse and--"

"And we fell outta our momma's loins yesterday, shit." Bud spat again and this time the tobacco hit its mark. He smirked as Kurt tried to wipe it off his boot with a dignified expression. "I reckon you be running. You reckon on that, Mac?"

"There might be a grain of truth in that. I'd wager so at least." Mac tilted his head. "Mayhap there'll be a reward?"

"Well, I'll be!" Bud exclaimed. "You could be onto something there!"

"I'm not running! And of course there isn't any reward!" snapped Kurt. "Do I look like a desperado?" He ran a hand through his hair, scowling. "Clearly, you gentlemen have no interest in helping me so you may as well be on your way." Kurt turned to leave, but Mac drew his horse across his path.

"Bud, I do believe this little stranger just gave us an order! Can you believe that, friend?"

"I believe I did, Mac. I believe that I did."

Kurt sighed. "Do you two talk like this all the time? Does it not get *exhausting*?"

"Got a bit of a lip on you, ain't you kid?" Mac snapped, humour dripping away from his words. "Mayhap we can work something out. Get you into that town in good stead."

"I'd rather take my chances out here, thanks." Kurt retorted, but his bravery was beginning to crack under the weight of their hostility. Something in the air had changed. Some dangerous change, which he would have to deal with carefully.

"Now let's just see what kinda varmint we have here," said Mac, dismounting his horse. He casually lit up a match and brought it close. "Let's just see."

Bud began to walk his horse in a circle round Kurt, as though wanting to trap him, a lazy smirk fixed on his face. "Fancy get-up you got on there," he said, gruffly. "Real respectable, like."

Mac's smile didn't reach his eyes. "Makes me wish I had me a shave and a clean set of pantaloons," he said, rubbing at his jaw. "Bet they cost you a pretty penny, didn't they?"

Kurt frowned. "Well, I-- I tailored them myself actually." Normally, he would be beaming with pride that someone admired his obviously superior craftsmanship. But right now all he wanted to do was turn tail and run.

"A man could really look the part if he had himself a pair of britches like that. I fancy you is just Bud's size, in fact."

Kurt let his breath go in burst. "Are you *crazy*? Do you have any idea how delicate this material is? How fine the stitching? He'd never get into this!"

"Did he just call me fat?" Bud demanded. "You calling me fat, kid?"

"Well," Kurt said before he could stop himself, "If that horse was straining any nearer the ground it would be a *pony*." Inwardly, he was flailing his arms in order to quieten himself but it was no use. Years of school room taunts had taught him to be quick on his feet and sharp with his tongue.

"You is quickly becoming a tired amusement boy," said Mac, stepping closer, his face twisted and mean.

"Yeah, *real* tired."

"I'm --" Kurt's eyes darted for something, anything, but his eyes found nothing but several small rocks and it wasn't as though he could reach for one. Much better to see if he could talk his way through this. He took a step back and held up his hands placatingly. "I'm sorry. Just let me go on by and that will be that."

"You insulted us," said Burt. "You hurt our feelings. Debt like that should be paid. Fancy type like you should be obliging with your apology. You think you're somethin' else because you talk proper, like you ain't needin' to respect a decent man like me." Kurt caught a glimpse of yellowing teeth as the he opened his mouth wide and let out a harsh chuckle. "We was gonna be nice and let you hand them over yonder. But now I reckon we'll be taking them now. The shirt, too. It's a nice shade."

"Bring out your eyes," Mac called back.

"Why, thank you kindly!" Bud tapped at the rim of his hat.

"I'm not going to- to ride on the back of your horse in--" Kurt spluttered, his face heating furiously. "It's not decent!"

"Don't see that being any problem." Mac's gaze was hard and narrowed. "You see we've, ah, *rescinded* our offer. Learned that one offa my lawyer." He turned to Bud who had a bushy brow raised. "Court appointed," he explained.

"I can't-- I'll freeze out here!" Kurt said slowly, unable to hide his nerves now, his voice wavering, merely a whisper. "I'll die."

A voice echoed in his head. It belonged to Blaine, and it mocked him. "*No harm will come to you*," Kurt imagined him saying again. "*Not when you're with me*." He imagined what Blaine would do. Well, nobody would ever tell Blaine they liked his breeches just fine so hand them over, would they? And if they did? Well. Blaine would be prepared to defend himself and would do far more than debate picking up a pathetic rock.

"You oughta hope that's all you die of. And not a swift haircut or the buzzards. Fancy town boy, you're easy pickings." Mac crept closer. His stale breath wafted over Kurt's face, an invisible cloud. "Know what I mean? Now, how about you play it square and shed those duds, little stranger. And be thankful that that's all we want." His hand hovered over his gun as Kurt could do nothing but stare back, eyes wide with shock, fist curling at his side and ready to fly at the first advance. "Now!" Mac said, raising his own hand slightly as all the breath in Kurt's body halted. "I ain't foolin'."

"I've got me a better idea, gentleman," a loud voice called from the darkness. "Fill your hands."

All three turned to the source of the voice, and Kurt gasped, hearing the trot of a familiar horse coming into view under the still-flickering light of Mac's match.

"And who the hell are you?"

"US Marshall." The voice was cold and raw, imbued with something that only spoke of danger. It chilled Kurt to hear it. "And that there is my prisoner. I'd suggest you two ride on." There was a pause, as the two men didn't seem to be heeding his advice. "I'd suggest you do that now." The click of a gun sounded from the shadows and watched the two men's expressions shift as they glanced at each other, their faces uneasy.

"Sure, mister. We was just having a joke," Mac said, stepping away from Kurt and mounting his horse quickly. He tossed his match on the floor with his shaking hand. "Don't go and do nothin' foolish now."

The two horses moved past Kurt, their heads bowed. They moved slowly at first, neither one of them glancing back. Once at a safe distance, they put spurs to their horses as they hightailed it out of there.

Kurt clenched his teeth, his hands forming fists as the horse trotted towards him. The last thing he wanted to do was look at the man atop it, but his head paid him no mind and raised up anyway.

"Kurt," said Blaine blandly. "There you are. I've been looking for you forever."

## Chapter Seven

"Eat up," muttered Blaine. "It's getting cold."

Kurt exhaled then looked up slowly, his body coiled, hands gripping the rim of his wooden bowl. Blaine had barely spoken since finding him on the wagon trail, only communicating in grunts and growled directions as they continued down the road, eventually breaking off to make camp. Those five words Blaine had just uttered were the first since he had found Kurt with the two men.

Neither spoke as Blaine lit the fire, the harsh snick of flint against steel and the purposeful rustlings as he lit the fire the only noises present. He had handed Kurt his bowl without uttering a single word. Blaine stared at the flames, not sparing a glance towards the shivering boy. Kurt, though. Kurt knew he needed the food but could only tap his spoon against the side of the bowl. His eyes were wide and frightened, yet he couldn't tear them away from the man beside him.

"What--" Kurt spoke at last, licking at the dryness of his lips. "What are you going to do with me now?"

Blaine's eyes met his at last as he glanced up from his bowl, his face betraying nothing. "What do you think?"

Kurt nodded and gave a shaky laugh. "Oh, yes. I see." Blaine's stare looked through him, and he burned under its weight. As the hot rush of tears came to his eyes, he blinked them away. He wouldn't allow that. Couldn't. Blaine had already seen too much.

"It's not like you believe it to be, you know," Blaine said, his voice lacking emotion. "Back east. It's not the fairytale that you think it is."

Kurt smiled bitterly. "Well, it's got to be better than here, hasn't it?" He winced inwardly at the waver in his voice.

"No." Blaine shook his head. "You don't belong. You'll always be running trying to find that home. But you won't ever belong."

Kurt's lip curled. "And what would you know about it, *Brian*?" He pushed his bowl to the floor, satisfied at how the sound of the tin bowl hitting the dirt caused Blaine's eyes to widen. "Do you really think you can sit there and judge me?" Kurt gulped, forcing his voice to remain calm, even. "I've never hurt anyone, ever!"

Blaine blinked slowly and raised an eyebrow. "I'm sorry? What exactly do you know about me?"

"You're a *killer*," Kurt hissed. He felt the muscles clench in his jaw; the very act of speaking those words aloud causing his heart to thump harder, his blood rushing to his head. "Strando. The lookout at the north blockade." Kurt felt the bile rise in his throat, realising he didn't even know the man's name. "Lord knows how many more people are cold in their graves tonight because of you."

"You don't know nothing," said Blaine, his gaze unwavering. "Not a damn thing. You're just presuming, is all."

"Well, please enlighten me and stop being so sore about my presumptions. I always loved a tall tale around the campfire."

Looking up at the sky, Blaine folded his hands together before meeting Kurt's gaze again. "Strando got what was coming. He put his hands where they didn't belong, and Jesse isn't a man to look blue at. If the varmint is dead, I doubt anyone will shed a tear. The other man -" Blaine shrugged. "His soul don't lay on me none. I've done what I needed to do to survive. I've never taken down a man who didn't go for the draw first." As Blaine removed his hat, he placed it to his side, a sly smile framing his face. "They were just never as fast as me."

Now Kurt turned his face away. He couldn't do it. He couldn't reconcile the man he had fought he had come to know with the pistol-cold words that flowed from his mouth?

Blaine stared at him hard, though, then ducked his head. "I don't belong either," he said. "I tried to fit in. For the sake of my family. I got good schoolin', I was following my pa into law. I even had me a nice girl." Kurt looked at him again, noticing the sheen appear in his dark eyes. "But it was all a lie. Every moment was a lie. I cut a path, Kurt. I ran and I've never stopped."

Kurt worried at his lip, trying to read the clues from Blaine's expression. "I-- I don't understand," he said.

Blaine shook his head slowly. "Yes, you do, Kurt." He paused, stretching out the syllables of the name. "You do."

He swallowed. What he'd - *What, Kurt? Guessed? Hoped?* - sprang unbidden to his mind yet again. He opened his mouth to speak, closed it finally. He looked to Blaine, who watched him, eyes considering.

"Cat got your tongue?" he said softly.

Kurt looked away, his heart beating wildly. "You're - you're like me?" He heard the rustle of clothing, knowing he was rising, moving by his side. He took a deep breath, almost sensing the warmth of the other man behind him. "You're like me."

"Yes," Blaine said, gently. His voice was low but soft, and Kurt almost jumped at he felt the vibrations brush across the shell of his ear. As he closed his eyes, he felt calloused fingertips brush against his as Blaine lifted them slowly, carefully, and took them into his palms. Kurt bit his lip as Blaine's fingers rubbed gently over his knuckles, but he couldn't open his eyes; how could Blaine have changed the conversation from killing a man to, to this with barely a moment's pause? Looking at Blaine's expression would make this too real, but a cold tremble began at his throat and wired its way through his body. He'd never dared hoped. There were others just like him. All he had to hold on to were the cruel stories from Preacher Schuester's sermons. Nobody to ask, no one to confide in without risk of revealing himself as different, as wrong.

"I can't - I don't -" Kurt finally opened his eyes, forcing himself to stare into Blaine's face but his words caught in his throat. "I -"

"Hmm."

Kurt found Blaine's expression inscrutable. *Wait*, he thought. *Was Blaine--could he serious?*

Blaine nodded. "We're going to have to get you a red bandana."

"I have to go!" Shaking off the warmth of Blaine's hands, Kurt wove his hair between his fingertips. "I can't-- I have to go!" Climbing shakily to his feet, he tried to find purchase in the dirt beneath his shoes and he willed his legs to move. Clumsily, he stumbled away from Blaine. He couldn't breathe, he needed to get away, he needed to -

Blaine's fingers gripped his upper arm, and Kurt swore, his body coiled up like a rope, every nerve on edge. He pushed at Blaine desperately, roughly. He had to get away from those warm hands, from those eyes. He had to get away. *He had to.*

"Kurt! Calm down, you--" Blaine muttered something under his breath that Kurt couldn't quite catch, though he knew it was a curse. Kurt scratched at his hand, turning to run. Blaine, though. They were never as fast as Blaine. Instantly, Kurt felt strong arms circle his waist.

He was pure instinct. Fighting, struggling, doing everything he could to pry himself loose. His field of vision was cloudy with panic and he lurched backwards, spinning and catching his own heel. His hands were still curled up tight in the battered, worn fabric of Blaine's shirt, and he gasped as he brought the man with him. He groaned as his back hit dirt, and Blaine's full weight landed up top of him.

"Kurt!" Blaine reached for his hands, pulling them above his head. His fingers were rough and harsh as they tightened around his wrists, but his voice was bereft of any anger. "Stop!" he said, then lowered his voice still. "Stop running. Just stop." His voice was as soft as leaves rustling, merely a breath. These were the words that Kurt needed to quell the fire within. "Stop running, Kurt."

Chest heaving, Kurt felt dust on the back of his neck and stared into Blaine's eyes. They were wide open. Blaine's face was inches from his own, and Kurt couldn't choose where to lay his gaze. Blaine's mouth looked so soft, parted and wet from his tongue as it touched at his lower lip tentatively. Blaine was everywhere around him. He filled Kurt's vision; beautiful, rough, and incomparable, beyond anyone Kurt had ever known. Blaine's heart sounded out against Kurt's chest, hurried and strong. His scent was a mixture of soap from this very morn, the efforts of the trail, and a smell that was so primal Kurt already knew he'd never forget it. Kurt was barely able to think. Blaine was everything.

Kurt felt all the fight drain out of him, breathing in Blaine's scent, and Blaine knew. He seemed to sense it, looking unsure for the first time since they had made camp. Face flushing, a dusky bloom against his olive skin. Though close, Kurt couldn't focus on his words, couldn't focus on anything but Blaine. Couldn't help but wonder whether that dusky bloom was flushing his entire body. As Blaine relaxed his grip on Kurt's wrists, making move to retreat, Kurt's body acted on impulse. He shot a hand forward and gripped hard at Blaine's shoulder, then curled his leg tight around the back of Blaine's thighs.

"I don't--" he whispered. "I don't want to run anymore."

Blaine exhaled, eyes widening. He was searching Kurt for something more. For something he seemed happy to discover. For his lip twitched slightly, rising at the side into the beginnings of a smirk. Kurt felt colder, more exposed than he had ever known. Never before had he let the walls he had built fall down so completely. Blaine could crush him with a single word. Just one. Yet, he didn't care. He was tired of thinking. Tired of hiding. Tired of running.

At first, Kurt smiled to himself; it was a revelation. Then, nothing but sheer relief flowed through his body as the weight of Blaine's body pressed down on him once more. He nodded to himself as he let Blaine soak into his skin, and closed his eyes as he felt Blaine claim his mouth.

Kurt felt wonderful. His tongue pressed into the heat of Blaine's willing mouth, licked and sucked, nipped and bit. Hands roamed his body, one moment soft, one moment rough and hard. Kurt felt like he had spent his life below water and it had taken Blaine's touch for him to break to the surface. Everything was that much louder, that much brighter, that much more real and he felt-he felt everything.

"Kurt," whispered Blaine, breaking the kiss and pressing his face into the crook of his neck. Kurt sighed as Blaine's lips made the shape of his name into the heat of his skin. "Kurt."

Lying here like that with Blaine, feeling his body pressed so close to his, moving against him just so. It felt nothing like it had with Brittany. Truly, she had been very kind to him, encouraging and sweet, yet with her Kurt had felt nothing. He had been nervous, embarrassed, scared and ashamed. He hadn't wanted to be there, but he knew that he had to go through with it. The others looked at him oddly enough and maybe, maybe if he went through with it, they would leave him alone, and then his pa would have one less thing to worry about. And it had worked, for a little while, at least. Deep down, Kurt had hoped that something would click inside him when he had lain with her. That the desire that the others had talked about would surge inside of him, but it had never come and he had resorted to filling his mind with images of Finn to complete the deed. But this? This was what had been absent. This was the feeling he had been waiting for.

Kurt's fingers pressed over Blaine's back, curious and unsure as he felt the muscles shifting under his palms. Kissing him again, Blaine nibbled at his lower lip. It sent a fresh hot thrill of need through him and in response; Kurt rolled his hips, working on pure instinct. A whimper tumbled from his mouth as Blaine cursed and surged against him in an answering thrust. The action filled Kurt with an odd sense of power and he repeated it, harder this time, moaning at the flush of pleasure that followed.

"Wait," Blaine murmured against Kurt's lips, again he tried to withdraw but Kurt's mind revolted at the thought of losing the warmth of his body. He fisted his hands into Blaine's shirt, nails marrying skin through the thin material. Holding him still and holding him close.

"Don't," Kurt breathed, voice barely above a whisper. "Don't."

Propping himself up onto an elbow, Blaine watched him as the light of the fire flickered over them. The flames dancing in Blaine's eyes made something twist in Kurt's gut and he allowed a small moan to escape. Keeping his eyes on Kurt's, his face betraying no emotion, Blaine slowly shifted his own hips.

"Oh-- Lord." Kurt's back arched at the contact, bring them ever closer. He was aching. Grabbing at the base of Blaine's neck, he brought his mouth to his own, kissing harder and more desperate than all previous kisses. He wanted to writhe and press and push. He wanted to sink into Blaine until there was nothing left of him, just this white burning want. He had never felt this, had never allowed himself to even feel a breath of this feeling, but now it simply burst from him. The tempo of their hips was clumsy and out of time, their kiss too much tongue and too much teeth and too little contact. A burn in his chest told him that he was barely taking the time to breathe but he still couldn't stop. He needed this.

"Kurt, what-" Blaine began, breaking off when Kurt's hand grabbed at his rear desperately, pressing up in urgent little bucks. Closer, closer.

Kurt gasped as he grinded against Blaine, his pace becoming almost frantic as his moans climbed in volume. A heat coiled in his belly and he knew he was close, knew by Blaine's own grunts and bitten off gasps that the other was the same and he chased that feeling. It was the edge and he wanted to leap, to soar. Dropping his head back, he ground his hair into the dirt beneath him. "Please. Don't stop." His stomach contracted and he moaned as felt his balls tighten. "Yes, yes," Kurt hissed as he found his release, tossing his head back and forth as the warmth in his stomach spread to his cock. "Blaine!" A wet warmth spread across his trousers as Blaine shuddered and jerked with a low groan, finally slumping upon him. Blaine's cheek pressed against his own and Kurt, through his foggy, blissed out state, could feel that his skin was wet and cold against his own.

"Kurt," said Blaine, weakly pushing himself up after a long moment, once and staring down into his face. He reached out a hand and caressed beneath Kurt's eye with his thumb. "What troubles you so?" Blaine's brows were furrowed and his eyes were filled with confusion and something akin to fear.

Tears? Kurt raised his own hands and touched at his face in shock. "I don't-I don't know why." Hesitantly, he touched at Blaine's own cheek with the wet fingertip. "I don't know why I'm crying."

*Relief.* That was the feeling spreading across his chest now. Relief that for the first time in his life, he wasn't hiding from the world. Someone could see him for who he was. For a brief moment in time, everything else had melted away. His fear that his secret would be discovered. Of hurting his father. After all these years, all the worry that had constantly lain upon his shoulders had simply stopped. For once, Kurt had allowed pure instinct and desire to lead him. Had let slip his control and let himself just be.

"I'm sorry," whispered Blaine. "I-- I never meant for this to-no," he reassured on seeing Kurt's widening eyes. "Not this, this was-" he smirked, "-perfect. But I never meant to take you from your home, Kurt. You don't belong here. You're too good and it's too dangerous. We got us a posse on our tail for one and-"

"Let it lie," said Kurt softly. "Just for now, let it lie."

Watching him carefully, Blaine gave a slight nod and then leaned forward, pressing his lips to Kurt's cheek and kissing away the tears one by one. Kurt curled his arms around him, taking comfort from his warmth. He was right. There was that. He was traveling with a gang of wanted criminals. The border was coming. Every moment they had was only a moment of borrowed time.

With a shudder, Kurt pushed the thought away and pressed a chaste kiss to the side of Blaine's mouth. *Let it lie*, he told himself as Blaine deepened the clinch, fingers stroking down his side.

In the depths of the night, they refused to let the shadow that loomed over them be acknowledged.

## Chapter Eight

Kurt, with his arms wrapped around his knees, stared out at the pale sky that was slowly draining of the night. It had been three days since he had lain with Blaine. Three whole days and he was still in a haze of want and a muted sort of happiness.

The others had bought Blaine's story about why they were so late in returning. He had deftly mixed the truth about their run-in with the desperadoes but adding meat to the affair, making it sound more complex and dangerous. Jesse and Rachel had listened with wide eyes and rapt faces, but Kurt knew that Sebastian was suspicious; he could tell by the narrowed eyes that constantly sought him out as Blaine spoke, as if he could read the lie burning in Kurt's expression. Perhaps he knew Blaine too well by now, or perhaps it was Kurt's expression of pure awe and fascination as he watched Blaine. He could feel the silly, guilty smile staining his face, but by no measure could he chase it away.

The problem was that now Kurt knew what it was like to live without an anchor around his ankles, he could no longer rein it in. He was finding it harder and harder to hide the effect that Blaine was having on him. Whenever he wasn't at his side, Kurt's eyes would seek him out hungrily: the way that he would roll his shoulders and rub wearily at his shoulder at the end of long days ride would make Kurt's fingers ache. He longed to press his face into the nape of his neck as they rode, his hands wrapped tight around Blaine's middle. And at night?

Well. He flushed when he recalled what they entailed.

"You're up early," Blaine said softly, interrupting his thoughts. He nudged Kurt's arm with his knee. "Jesse's snoring wake you?"

"I'm pretty sure that's Rachel, actually." Kurt smiled as Blaine sat down next to him. He huddled closer. "But it's better than her waking us up with a rendition of *The Wild Ripling Waters* again".

"You have it straight on her snoring, but I reckon you keep it to yourself in case you offend her feminine sensibilities." Blaine watched him from the corner of his eye. "You should sleep, though. Long days out here."

"I do sleep," answered Kurt in a soft voice. "A lot better now I am no longer tied down at night."

Blaine flinched and glanced away. "Sebastian doesn't trust easily. But I've explained it to him. He knows you be safer here with m-with us."

Kurt tilted his head. "How did you meet him, Blaine? I know how you met Rachel and Jesse, but--"

"It's-" Blaine pursed his lips looking for the words. "It's complicated. And not my tale to tell. Would you mind if we didn't discuss it?"

Kurt faltered, shrugging after a moment and offering a small smile. "I don't think he likes me much."

"Well, you are supposed to be our prisoner," he teased. "And you've already got Rachel and Jesse fawning over you in a way they never have over him. Jesse's even trying to think up a cowboy name for you. Sebastian is--he--" Blaine's voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. "He can be quite prickly."

"Really?" Kurt pressed a hand to his chest and shook his head slowly. "And yet he hides it so well!"

Blaine's lips twitched. "I'm certain he was only throwing that bowl at you for you to wash."

"Maybe. But perhaps he could just *hand* me the cutlery next time?"

"Rachel's had a word with him. And by word, I mean she showed him her old Betsey and threw him a stink eye. Ain't a man in the west that's a quicker draw on the gun than Rachel Berry."

"Yes, she's told me. Repeatedly. With numerous demonstrations." Kurt smiled at him, his voice bright. "So, will she do it? Will she dispose of me at the border? Or will that be Sebastian's treat?"

Kurt's chest seemed heavy as the words left his lips. Where had that come from? He had been pushing the worries away since that night. He refused to let them back after allowing his desires through the gate. And yet, as he heard the sentence meet air he knew that the fear and never truly gone away. It had merely had lain in wait. He cursed himself for ruining the moment, but staying alive had never seemed so vital as it did now.

Blaine's face had paled at his words. He swallowed, looked away. He turned back to his Kurt, his expression serious. "I told you. I won't hurt you. I won't allow anyone to hurt you."

"But the others-"

"We aren't monsters, Kurt! We do what we do to survive. Killing a slight, unarmed boy is not what we are about. And no offence, but it's not it's something we'd crow about."

Kurt bristled. "How patronising. Is that all I am to you?"

"No," said Blaine simply. "Truth be told, I don't know what the hell you are to me." He stood up. "All I can ask, Kurt, is that you trust me. You have no reason to. I dragged you out here on this owl hoot trail and if you've got any brains in that hair you won't, but I'm asking you that you take a chance and do." He held out a hand. "What do you say?"

Kurt regarded him coolly for a moment, weighing his words. "Okay," he whispered, taking Blaine's hand and allowing him to be brought to his height. "Okay, I trust you."

"Good!" Blaine grinned. "Now how about we see if we can get you aiming truer and faster than Rachel, huh?"

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Blaine pointed towards a dead stump. "That scoundrel wants to drop me because I admired his companion's lovely slim ankles."

Kurt nodded. "He looks terribly angry about it."

"Naturally." Blaine nodded. "As the ankles were wrapped around my head at the time."

Kurt blushed beetroot and Blaine grinned back toothily.

"Now," Blaine continued. "He's mad as hell and fixin' to clear leather before me. But, I can't let that happen, can I?" Kurt shook his head. "So what I propose is-" Blaine snatched at both his Colts. In a wild blur, they came up level and cocked. His bullets thundered into the stump, throwing out little clouds of dust and wood.

"Gosh," Kurt said in wonder, feeling a heat stirring in his stomach. "I guess you and the ankles can run away together now."

"Mayhap," he said, handing over the still smoking pistol to Kurt. "Let's see you let fly."

Kurt tucked the gun into the holster that Blaine had loaned him, and dropped his arms straight. He stared down the stump like it was every bully that had ever turned their sourness upon him and went for the draw. He curled his hand round the gun and he whipped it out.

Only to throw it behind him with a clattering thunk.

"Hmm," Blaine mused. "Least you'd knock out anyone trying to sneak up on you." He laughed as Kurt shot him an angry stare, picking up the Colt. and handing it over. "Try it my way instead, though. Just for now." Kurt narrowed his eyes as Blaine took four large comical steps away from him. And ducked low.

Tossing his nose in the air, Kurt stuck his arm out straight, pointing the Colt. at the stump, and pulled the trigger. The gun blasted and jumped. Through the ungodly ringing in his ears, Kurt heard a quiet thump. A puff exploded off the stump.

"I hit it!" Kurt yelled excitedly. "Did you see?"

Blaine peered in amazement at the smoking wood and then back to Kurt. "Do it again."

Holstering the gun and rubbing the sweat off his palms onto his trousers, Kurt once again went for the quickdraw. Clearing leather, he thumbed the hammer and let loose at the stump. Once again a perfect shot.

Kurt turned to Blaine, a smug smile playing at his lips. "And you made it sound so hard."

Blaine scowled but there was no real malice in it. "Okay. You got yourself a natural skill." He walked up

behind Kurt pressing up close. "Now let's see how way you draw when distracted." As Kurt re-holstered the gun, Blaine pressed up close, his torso aligning against Kurt's back. "Draw, pilgrim," he whispered into Kurt's ear.

The shot went wide. It was a wonder it didn't take out the back of Blaine's head from the shivers of pleasure in Kurt's body. Blaine's hand smoothed its way down Kurt's arm and encircled the Colt. Extricating it gently from Kurt's fingers, he tossed it far from them both.

His hands moved to Kurt's front, and his lips settled against the sweaty nape of Kurt's neck, tongue tracing in tiny whorls. He slowly began to unbutton Kurt's shirt, fingers rubbing along every trace of skin he slowly revealed.

A soft whimper escaped Kurt when Blaine's nails raked down his chest, leaving tingling reminders in his wake. Holding Kurt's arms, he slowly slipped Kurt's shirt just a few inches down and kissed and nipped along the pale junction of his shoulder. Blaine pushed the material down to Kurt's elbows before stripping it entirely away and dropping it to the ground with the gun.

Kurt's hips began to move in gentle thrusts and undulations as Blaine's hands rested against his hips, pulling him backwards and rubbing his groin against him. Kurt gasped at the hardness he felt pressing into the crack of his ass and the delicious thrill that shot through him almost turning his legs to wisps of air. But Blaine had him tight. Wrapping his arms around Kurt's front, he began to move the two in a slow, punishingly slow, grind.

Reaching behind him, Kurt put his hand to back of Blaine's head, bringing his mouth to his own neck and sighing in pleasure as Blaine took the hint and began to nibble at that one perfect place, biting and then licking over the skin in apology.

"Does that please you?" said Blaine in a hot whisper against his cheek. He pressed up hard, raising Kurt up onto his tiptoes.

"Yes, oh, yes, don't stop," pleaded Kurt through gritted teeth, the insistent throb in his groin almost unbearable. Suddenly, there was nothing but cold air at his back as Blaine moved away and Kurt stumbled backward in a haze of lust and surprise. He didn't move far, though. Gliding around him, Blaine made short work of Kurt's trousers, hands running up and down his thighs as he dropped to his knees. "Blaine, what are you-" Blaine's fingers curled around his underwear and Kurt gasped as he dragged them down, and his

aching cock bobbed into view.

Despite Kurt's newfound confidence, self-consciousness overcame him fast and his palms found his burning face, hiding him from view.

Blaine's hands were on his thighs, warm and heavy, moving up and over his hips in a slow caress. Kurt lowered his hands, face still flushing but his desire overwhelming his shyness. He watched as Blaine touched him, surprised by his gentleness, by the way that he pressed his hands to the inside of Kurt's thighs and urged them apart, still stroking his skin, firm yet soothing.

Soft kisses, again and again, working his way up until Kurt could feel warm breath and the brush of Blaine's cheek on his balls.

"So beautiful," breathed Blaine, tentative fingers touching at him. Kurt bit his lips as Blaine's fingers dance along his foreskin and his eyes observed him as if waiting for permission. Shakily, Kurt gave a brief nod and Blaine smiled slowly "So very beautiful," he murmured again. Kurt hissed in shock as Blaine's fingers pushed the foreskin back exposing the sensitive glistening head. Watching Kurt all the while, Blaine snaked out his tongue and delivered light touches followed by more lingering ones. Kurt moaned at the traces of heat moving over him as Blaine swirled his tongue over the entire head. With a final glance up at a wide-eyed Kurt, Blaine wrapped his head around the head, sucking noisily.

"Oh," Kurt said weakly. He stared in disbelief as his cock slowly disappeared between Blaine lips and into his mouth. "Oh." Blaine moved his tongue in long, savoury strokes, fingers loosely coiled at the base and Kurt moaned at that wet heat and firm pressure as Blaine sucked, deliberate movements drawing slow curls of pleasure from deep within.

It was like nothing that Kurt had ever imagined, not even since that night in the hills. His hands fisted at his sides, curling and unclenching and all he wanted to do was bury them deep into Blaine's curls. To have more of that tight, slippery velvet surrounding him.

But then there was a cold breeze and Blaine's mouth was gone. Kurt almost cried in frustration but it was a short lived sorrow, for Blaine had moved to mouth Kurt's ball sack and now there was no stopping his fingers from grabbing at Blaine's head if only to maintain his balance, as Blaine tenderly sucked one, then the other. He tried to hold still against the intense sensation, eyes screwed tightly closed but when Blaine ran his tongue up the underside of his cock, Kurt gave up, groaning and twisting his hips, pushing against

Blaine's mouth. "Please," he begged wantonly. "Please." With a low chuckle Blaine licked the head. Kurt jerked his hips. "Blaine."

Blaine licked his hipbone, ran his tongue down his stomach and pressed his face against his pubic hair. His mouth travelled everywhere yet left Kurt's cock alone and needing. Dimly, Kurt was aware of Blaine's own fisting hand tucked deep inside his trousers, but the cloud of lust that swarmed Kurt was almost impenetrable. He needed that heat. He couldn't live without it. Blaine maybe deserved every single one of those wanted posters of his. "Please, Blaine, just-- please!"

Finally, Blaine's mouth engulfed him again, and Kurt almost wept in relief, falling forward only for Blaine's hand to snatch at his hip to grab tight, lest Kurt choke him. Oh. Guilt flooded through him as realised what he had nearly done and he tried to pull away, stuttering apologies as he did, but Blaine only held him firm and took him further into his mouth, groaning around Kurt's member, the vibrations causing Kurt to throw back his head in a guttural yell.

Blaine drew off and Kurt looked down, his eyes lidded, knees shaking and that telltale sign building in his stomach. Oh, Lord, Blaine looked so debauched and sinful staring up at him like that with those dark eyes. His breath coming faster now as his hand sped on ever more.

Watching him, Blaine smirked, leaned forward and pressed his tongue into Kurt's slit, then with a flick of his tongue lapped at the moisture there.

Kurt groaned and fell back. "Please," he begged, his skin feeling three sizes too tight. "Please!" Kurt dug his heels into the ground, and Blaine tugged at Kurt's hip, encouraging him to thrust deeper. Kurt's hands dropped from Blaine's head and onto his shoulders, fisting at the shirt and holding himself steady as Blaine sucked harder, his cheeks concaving on an upward stroke as he watched Kurt fall apart. "I'm going to-" he warned, "Blaine, I-"

Toes curling, Kurt gasped as his climax tore through him and he shouted Blaine's name as he came, hot and hard against Blaine's lips. With an undignified noise, Blaine released Kurt's cock and wrapped his hand tight around Kurt's dick, as the remains of Kurt fell over the edge. Licking and suckling at Kurt's head, Blaine's groaning began to rise and Kurt winced as the pleasure slowly became painful so soon after orgasm. He didn't have to endure it for long though as Blaine quickly followed, spilling over his own blurring hand and pressing his face tight against the crease of Kurt's thigh.

"Yes, yes," Blaine gasped, mouthing at the skin there and Kurt couldn't stand it any longer. Limp and breathless, he dropped to his knees and pulled Blaine into a kiss, tasting the bitterness of himself on Blaine's tongue.

"That was-- How did-- I don't--" Kurt struggled out as Blaine swiped at his lips with his tongue. Licking away the last trace of Kurt's pleasure.

Blaine began to answer but then cocked his head, brows joined together in confusion. "Something's coming. Quick, dress yourself. Mind me now!"

Falling over numb limbs and aching tiredness, Kurt dressed as fast as he could, tucking the shirt into his trousers just as Sebastian trotted into view. He fumbled for his belt, dusted himself down, and turned to face Sebastian.

"Howdy," he said, taking in Kurt's flushed cheeks and heaving chest. "I heard shooting."

"I was teaching Kurt here how to shoot." Blaine placed his hat back on his head, flicking at the rim. "He's mighty fine at it, too."

"Oh, I don't doubt that," said Sebastian coldly. "You're needed back at camp. Jesse's seen something."

"What?" Blaine asked, dodging around Kurt and picking up the Colt.

"A wagon. A full one, too." Sebastian fixed his eyes on Kurt's. "We're fixing to turn it over. You in?"

## Chapter Nine

"Scared?" Kurt winced at Sebastian's hot breath against his cheek.

"I'm *fine*." He shifted his body away, mindful to be quiet as the gang stared down into the valley below. The stones dug hard into his chest, and the sun's heat had made the ground uncomfortably warm, but following the others suit, he pressed himself closer still.

"One wagon," Jesse hissed. "Three horses and they don't appear to be a part of no trail."

Blaine nodded, tongue pressed into the corner of his mouth as he thought.

"Dry gulch?" said Rachel. "Jesse and I could take the hind and you and Smythe the front. Kurt can stay and mind the horses."

"Too clumsy." Blaine pressed his palms against the dirt and sat back up. "No. This calls for... Sheridan Shuffle."

Rachel clapped her hands in delight. "Grand! I reckon I'll be English this time. No, Irish. Let's see, let's see-- My name is Mary Rosemary O' Nightingale. I was born an impoverished, yet greatly gifted child, who overcame her humble beginnings with beauty and grace and--"

"Actually, what about Kurt here?" Sebastian turned to him, ruffling his hair roughly. "Look at that face? Who wouldn't trust that face?" Kurt slapped at his wrist with a glare. "Don't y'all reckon he'd be just fine?"

"Idea's got gumption," said Jesse with a nod. "No offense, Rachel, but it'll add that touch of realism and believability." He considered. "And diction."

"For the last time, I do not mumble, Jesse St. James!"

Jesse frowned. "I beg your pardon?"

"What is a Sheridan Shuffle?" Kurt queried, feeling uneasy as the others glanced at him. "What do you need me to do?"

"No," said Blaine, his eyes downcast. "I ain't sending him out there like cannon fodder."

"They'd have no reason to hurt him," reasoned Sebastian. "Hell, he don't even have to lie. He just needs to go down there and look pasty, feeble and weak. It don't even require no acting."

Kurt really wished he still had Blaine's gun.

"And what if the person in that cabin is no tenderfoot?" Blaine looked up, his eyes frighteningly dark and his jaw tense. "What if they take one look and just know? Then ventilate his skull? What then?"

"With all due respect, Blaine, you were fine with me going down there," Rachel pointed out. "I could be mighty offended if I chose to be. But I'm bigger than that."

"That's true," agreed Sebastian. "How come the thought of him getting hurt has you calling for your smelling salts yet Berry, a member of this actual gang, barely gets you blinking. Berry who has saved your hide more times than Jesse here can count."

"Okay," Rachel said. "Now I might be a *little* offended."

"Yeah," Jesse crossed his arms. "And I can count just fine."

"There's *two* horses, genius." Sebastian jutted out his chin. "So out with it, Blaine. Kurt too good to lend a hand? Too fancy and highfalutin for the likes of us?"

"No, it's not--" A dark red rose in Blaine's cheeks and Kurt felt himself blush in answer. "It's different, is all. This is our life. It's all we know. Shave tail like Kurt has no business in such things. It's dangerous and--"

"I want to," said Kurt quietly, heart hammering in his chest. "I want to help." And he did. He wasn't even entirely sure what on Earth this plan actually entailed but it was a way in, a way to go from amusing prisoner to an actual member of the gang. A way to be with Blaine.

"Don't be a fool, Kurt. This ain't a game!"

"I'm quite aware of the stakes, Blaine." Kurt scrambled to his feet, hoping his voice felt surer than he actually felt. "I am more than capable of rising to them." Blaine stared at him with wide eyes, his lips parted. It made Kurt's pulse quicken to see such fear and worry directed at him, and all the more determined to succeed. "Sebastian." He tried not to sneer as the man's face curved into that hateful, familiar smirk. "Tell me what to do."

\*

Okay. Okay. He could do this. There was nothing to it. Why, he had taken part in the fete skits ever since he was knee-high and wasn't he always grand then? *He could do this.*

He had to, because this was the only way to prove to Blaine... What, exactly? That he was just as tough as them? That he was worthy? That he would make a stellar addition to their gang and that he, Kurt, had no compunction about robbing decent folk?

Watching the wagon approach, he bit at his lip, hand rubbing his shoulder as he thought.

Was this really the life he wanted? Or was the thought of being with Blaine over shadowing everything else? Everything Kurt knew himself to be.

He sighed heavily, nerves settling over him. What was he doing here? It felt like years since he had been taken from his father's shop. As always, the thought of his father gave him pause and he tried to push the image of home away. It was too much. Too confusing. Mixed up with his fear for his life, the longing for his father and this new strange emotion that he was feeling for Blaine. It struck him how unbelievably tired he was. What if they hurt them? The people in the wagon? Kurt found it hard to believe that Blaine and his gang were as ruthless as they had led the west to believe but then again, Strando. The man at the point. And Jesse and Sebastian regularly recounted their tales of wildness each night at supper. Kurt thought of Blaine's soft brown eyes and gripped his shoulder hard. He wouldn't hurt them. He wouldn't.

Standing out as instructed, he raised an arm and gave a weak wave. The wagon slowed on approach and Kurt took a final deep intake of breath. It was now or never.

"Thank God, you stopped!" he gasped. "I need help- the Carmel gang! They escaped and they took me and my shoulder is hurt something fierce. Please, you have to help me!"

The stagehand opened his mouth to speak but another moved from the confines of the wagon to see why they had stilled. "What is this? We stopped not but an hour ago. What is-oh." He looked Kurt over slowly. "Kindly do us the favour of stepping aside, boy."

"He says he's hurt, boss. Looks in a sorry state, too."

"Are you going to stop at every pathetic thing you see?" He didn't even spare Kurt a further glance. "I need to be in Westervale by morning. Carry on!" He went to move back inside but Kurt stepped forward with a shout.

"Please! I'm hurt! And-- and I'm cold and hungry. Won't you please help me? I won't be a bother." Kurt focused on widening his eyes as large as they could go and filling them with unshed tears. It was a trick he had been taught by Quinn when they were both shy of schooling. It had served in getting them many a second helping but judging by the sneer on the man's face, it had lost its effect. He supposed he should have practised harder.

"None of this is any of my concern. Or interest." He wrinkled his nose. "Good Lord, is that stench *you*?"

Any sympathies Kurt might have considered having for the man were slowly ebbing away. "I've been out here for some time, sir," he said through gritted teeth. "And would sure appreciate the help."

"And I would appreciate not to held up any-- what? What now, woman? Keep quiet and let me deal with it." He was glancing back into the carriage his eyes narrowed in agitation. "I said that I was handling it!"

"It certainly doesn't sound like it." A hand come upon the ruder of the men's shoulder and a woman pulled herself into view. "Hello, there." She winked. "You in trouble?"

"You could say that, ma'am." He tilted his head and gave a small coy grin while trying to look as harmless as a field mouse.

"He could be a murderer, Ms. Jones. He could knife us all in our sleep and spend his money on the next cathouse he comes across. I don't want him in this wagon. Especially with that stink."

"I'm not about to let you leave this poor boy out here to be picked to death by buzzards because you don't like his scent." She sniffed the air and then looked him over evenly. "Poor thing must have been out here for *days*."

Kurt felt himself beginning to blush and fought the urge to sniff at his shirt. He thought he had been maintaining himself pretty well considering the conditions he was in. "Yes, m'am," he answered, clutching his hands into prayer. "I'd be mighty obliged if you could do me the favour of a lift to town."

"Of course, dear. Of course." She glowered at the man next to her. "You mind him none. This here is Mr. Goolsby and holding us by the reins is Cooter."

Cooter touched the rim of his hat. "Obliged."

"Did I hear you right? You said a gang had taken you? The Carmel gang." She paused. "You wouldn't happen to go by the name Kurt would you?"

Goolsby looked outraged. "Ms. Jones! Kindly sit back and let me handle this!"

"You-- how do you know my name?"

"We passed a posse about two days ago. They asked if we had heard anything." She glared to her side. "They spoke to Goolsby here. Made him well aware we should be on the lookout for a stolen boy. I heard it myself." He shrugged, spitting tobacco over the side. She shook her head and softened her voice. "They'll be mighty happy to know you're still alive. You got some folks worried about you. Your pa among them."

"You saw my pa!" Kurt stepped closer, his eyes fixed on the woman. "Was he okay? Did he look well? How many? Did he say anything else? Was-"

"He was fine." Her voice was soothing. "He was just worried that's all. And now he has no more concern to be!"

Shame hit Kurt so hard it nearly felled him. His father.*His father*. How could he have been so selfish? So foolish. What would his father think to know what he was here doing to this woman who was trying to show him nothing but kindness?

"You should go," he whispered. "Forget I said anything. Just go."

"You heard him," Goolsby said. "Let's ride out."

"You hush. Of course we can't leave you!"

"No, please! You have to go! Now!"

She sat back, surprise on her face. "We can drop you at Forrigan." She gestured to Cooter to help him up. "And then maybe--" Her words died in her throat as she stared into the distance behind Kurt.

"We like you here just fine," Smythe called out and Kurt didn't need to turn around to know that his gun was aimed at the Ms. Jones. "How about y'all dismount and-ah, ah, big guy!" Cooter stopped, his fingers hovering over his holster. "You got six shooters looking you over fine. Seven if you include mine." A foot nudged at Kurt's elbow. "Good job. Maybe you aren't useless after all."

Kurt could barely raise his head as the sound of hooves drew closer, and the laughter of Jesse and Sebastian surrounded him. But he knew that she was looking at him. He didn't need to look up to feel her burning, accusatory gaze, much less to feel shame at being such a despicable, two-bit bandit. He knew what he had done.

## Chapter Ten

"Fill it up, kid," Jesse said, throwing a burlap sack towards Kurt and watching the fearful travellers smugly. "I'll search the lady!" He rubbed at his hands gleefully.

"You just try it and the only thing they'll be searching for is your body, St. James. Kurt here can see to the woman." Rachel flipped her hair over her shoulder and climbed down from her horse to join Kurt and Jesse. "We apologise for the inconvenience, ah-- lady and gentlemen, but we would be mighty obliged if you were to hand over just a trifle of your belongings." She smiled brightly. "No doubt you've heard of us. Perhaps seen my wanted poster?" She turned to the side, then back to the front. "They really got the fierce ingenue character in my eyes."

Ms. Jones paid no attention but kept her own eyes fixed on Kurt's. He tried to convey his regret, his resolve that he would keep them safe, but knew by her unchanging expression he was having no effect. Well, what did he expect? He bowed his head and rubbed the rough material of the sack between his thumbs.

"Sure, I know you, miss," Cooter drawled. "You're that Carmel gang. Folks all over be looking for you."

Jesse laughed, holding out his palms. "Your dukes, if you would be so kind." He took the guns from Cooter, turning them this way and that and admiring the make. "Folks can look. Looking never harmed anyone."

"But findin' us now?" Sebastian grinned down from his horse. "Findin's a whole other matter."

Jesse laughed harder and handed the guns and Cooter's coin purse over to Kurt, who dropped them into the sack dutifully. He risked a glance upward but Blaine's gaze was fixed on the three travellers, a tiny twitch in his cheek.

"What you doing, son?" Cooter directed this at Kurt. "You ain't one of these. You got good people out there looking for you. You don't have to let these outlaws bring you down." He gestured to Jesse, who looked back at him with an amused grin. "You'll end up with lead in your spine or swinging on a rope."

"I ask you kindly, sir, not to harass the boy," Blaine spoke up, riding closer. "He's following orders, that's all." Blaine nodded at him. "He's got about as much choice as you in this transaction, on account of being our prisoner."

It felt like Blaine was trying to give him a way out of this, but the look on his face indicated he didn't want him going anywhere. Was Blaine trying to protect him? Kurt shivered. He supposed he wasn't the only one feeling conflicted.

"Now, don't get feisty, madam, I ain't going to hurt you. I just want that pretty thing around your neck." Kurt looked towards Rachel, who was struggling with Ms. Jones. The latter slapped at Rachel's hands and covered her neck protectively.

"Please-- please not this," Ms. Jones pleaded. "Someone very dear gave me this."

Rachel tilted her head, her face troubled as she looked back towards Jesse. "Well, I guess we do have the coin purse. And we can probably pawn the rest. It's probably not worth much--"

"This is the trouble of letting women ride with us," sighed Sebastian. "So full of mawkish sentiment. Cryin' over varmint and flowers and ever'thin."

"I am never mawkish!" snapped Rachel.

"Less mawkish feminine caterwauling and more robbing," he retorted.

"Let her keep it!" Kurt spoke up, glaring at Sebastian. "You've-- we've got enough. We don't need that, too."

Sebastian sighed heavily. "Case and point."

Jesse and Rachel both turned to Blaine, ready for instructions. Kurt's heart sank as Blaine passed over him with a cold glance and then gave a brief shake of his head.

With a grunt, Jesse pushed past Rachel, slapped at the woman's hand and yanked at the chain. Kurt didn't miss the apologetic look that he gave Rachel before the locket was sailing through the air towards him. He caught it quickly, the cool of the metal hitting his palm squarely and sending a chill throughout his body. The woman watched him with downcast eyes, the fight ebbing out of her, and somehow that was the worst part. He glanced down at the locket, at the twine of blonde hair that lay behind the glass.

*Someone dear gave me this.*

He thought of the handkerchief that had belonged to his mother and how he kept it close to his heart, even though he knew all trace of her had left it, and it was nothing but something dead and remote and not even her, but that it didn't matter. It meant what it meant.

Casting an eye over the others, he dropped the locket into the sack, catching the link of the chain before it fell then rolling it up and pressing it tight into the dip of his sleeve. He glanced around again, none of them were watching him.

Except Blaine.

His expression didn't give away if he had seen Kurt's actions. His face gave nothing away at all, in fact. It was such a change from this morning that a trickle of fear made its way down Kurt's spine. What if, in this foolish plan to be with Blaine he had pushed him away all together?

"-- know who I am? Why this is an outrage! To be held up by common thieves, by low lives! "

"What's his problem?" said Sebastian. "And can I solve it with a shot to his caboose?"

"He ain't happy that I found his dirty pictures," chuckled Jesse, holding up a crude, caricature of a naked woman. "Now what kind of man keeps this in his *Bible*?"

"Mr. Goolsby!" Ms. Jones turned to him, outraged, as Cooter discreetly laughed into his sleeve.

"That isn't mine! They planted it there! To make a mockery of my devotion to the Lord!"

"Jesse," said Blaine softly. "Stop showing everyone. There are ladies present."

"Ladies?" spat Mr. Goolsby. "Is that what you're calling *that*?" he indicated his head towards Rachel who was on tiptoe, trying to peek at Jesse's find.

All at once the atmosphere was charged. Dangerous. And they all sensed it.

"Mind your tongue, Mr. Goolsby," hissed Ms. Jones.

Goolsby turned to her, his eyes wide in anger and a sneer staining his face. "Mind my tongue? Mind it? Oh, I have surely fallen foul to be on the end of such orders from a woman. Much worse than that mind, a goddamn--" His words stuttered to a stop as Rachel's Colt pressed up against his chin.

"The lady told you to button it. I would pay her mind now. Before you lose the ability to talk altogether." He pressed his lips into a tight line, and nodded as a bead of sweat broke free of his temple and made its way for his jaw line.

She backed away slowly, finger still hovering over the trigger.

"I know you," whispered Goolsby. "You're that whore that was raised Comanche. *Feral*. That's what you are."

"Easy, Rachel. Easy," Blaine whispered as fury covered her face. Kurt heard the click of Smythe's gun behind, while Jesse gave her his full attention, hands occupied with Goolsby's drawing. And that's when Kurt saw it.

"Never would have taken you for a gang o' Injun lovers!"

"Jesse!" Kurt cried. "Look out!"

The words weren't even out of his mouth before Goolsby was diving for Jesse's waist, for the holster that contained his guns. A shot rang out, Blaine, Sebastian; Kurt didn't know, but it missed. He simply reacted. Diving his hand into the bag, he retrieved Cooter's Smith and Wesson, drew it out and took aim.

The gun jumped in his hand and the noise filled Kurt's head. Slower than Kurt knew to be Goolsby hit the ground, the Colt. fumbling from his hands.

"Oh, Lord," Ms. Jones murmured. "Oh, Lord in heaven."

"Yee-haw! Did y'all see that? Didja?" Jesse tore off his hat and swung it above his head. "Did ya ever see such a quick draw?"

"Is he--" Kurt stammered. He couldn't bring himself to say it. He couldn't bring himself to *think* it.

Jesse nudged the body over with his foot. "Nah, you clipped his shoulder. He's just as much of an annoying streak of piss as ever."

The relief nearly made Kurt's knees buckle and he was surprised when a pair of arms curled around him and pulled him up straight.

"He's okay, Kurt," Blaine said into his ear. "He's alive."

"I say we fix that," said Jesse, toeing the man's wound and smiling at his cries of pain. "Making me look like a darn fool. Don't you know no one touches my steel? Hell, I say we put down a curse just for talking to Rachel like that."

"Don't!" said Kurt and Ms. Jones in unison. Kurt quickly glanced at her, as his hands cupped over Blaine's at his hip, thumb brushing over Blaine's knuckle again and again. "Don't do that. He was just scared and stupid. Let them take him to the nearest town. Let them help him."

"Help him?" Sebastian's brows raised. "Help him open his yap. Don't we have enough hayseeds after us?" He cleared his throat. "Maybe we should plug all the noise. Maybe that's what we should do."

"Don't you dare," Kurt said evenly, his hand tightening on the gun. He raised it high and Sebastian looked almost pleased at the development. "We've done enough to these people. You let them by, now."

"Or what, chicken feed?" He spat to his side. "You'll ventilate me?"

Blaine's hand clamped round the wrist that held the Smith and Wesson. "Kurt, there's no need for that. We aren't in this to hurt innocent folk." He gave Sebastian a dark stare. "None of us are." He lowered Kurt's arm and then slipped the gun from his grasp, callused fingers pressing gently against Kurt's skin as he did. "We'll help you get him all bandaged up. And you people can be on your way."

A pale Cooter and clearly shaken Ms. Jones nodded and stepped back as Kurt approached.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, reaching out a hand and placing it on the woman's hip. Anger crossed her face and her lips pursed. But then she must have registered the hard object pressing against her pocket. Her eyes widened as Kurt let the locket slip into the folds of the dress, patting it once more before stepping back. She gave him a small tentative smile and slight, barely there, nod of her head. The thank you shone bright in her eyes.

"Kurt, you sly dog!" said Jesse, and Kurt held his breath. "Quick on the draw and an eye for the ladies? We'll get you a cowboy name yet!

\*

As Kurt watched the wagon disappear into the distance, he released a much-needed sigh of relief.

"Not much of a haul," said Sebastian, peering into the bag.

"What do you expect?" Rachel shrugged. "They were school teachers."

"You doin' okay back there, Kurt?" Blaine said under his breath. "You're still pretty pale."

"When isn't he?" Sebastian muttered.

Kurt tightened his grip and fought the urge to bury his face into Blaine's shirt. "I guess-it didn't seem real until it was happening. I-- I didn't know it would feel like that."

"Don't kid yourself it gets better," grunted Blaine. "You just get harder, that's all. And that ain't no way to be."

"Why not?" snorted Kurt. "You let it happen to *you*."

"Mayhap I did and mayhap I didn't. Thing is, Kurt, you got yourself a choice. Don't make it a fool's one." Blaine glanced back over his shoulder. "You got nothing to prove to me, Kurt."

"I don't want to go back," he said softly. "I mean, back to the way I felt before. I want to feel the way--the way that I feel when I'm with you."

The silence stretched out between them as Kurt waited for Blaine's response. Despite the intimacy of their bodies, Kurt felt as if a chasm lay in front of him. Keeping Blaine at bay.

"You gave that woman her locket back," said Blaine at last.

Kurt stiffened. "Yes. I don't regret that. It was important to her."

"It was sentimental. And you respected that. You put that above the needs of the gang. Because you're--"  
He swallowed thickly. "You're *good*. You don't belong here with us. You don't belong here with me."

"But you're good!" Kurt insisted. "I know you are! Why you--"

"Hush your tongue!" Blaine hissed. "Listen, boy. It'll pass." His voice softened. "That's just the trail talking. We'll be at the border soon. Let it lie, Kurt. Let it lie."

Kurt was saved from answering by Jesse's horse falling into step alongside them. "Laws, you sure is fast on the draw, boy. Almost as fast as me! Or...Rachel." He muttered the last part. "Obviously, I didn't require no help. But I'm mighty grateful all the same."

"Didn't need no help?" laughed Rachel. "Why Jesse, you almost ruined a clean set of pantaloons."

"Pay her no mind." Jesse rolled her eyes. "Hey, I got me an idea. Let's stop off. Celebrate Kurt's faltering steps into manhood in style."

Sebastian tutted. "You foolin'? We could be at the border in no time--"

"What's the rush?" Jesse shot back. "I think we can afford a night at Sugar's, don't you?"

"Oh, Jesse!" Rachel sighed. "What is your fascination with that horrible little place?"

Jesse elbowed Kurt with a crude leer. "As if I haven't tried to show her enough."

Kurt could barely focus. His mind full of Blaine's harsh words, of his rejection. Images of stolen kisses, flashes of gunfire and the disappointed eyes of his father flashed before his mind. He'd made a mistake. Blaine didn't want him. Had only used him. A mistake.

So severe was his sorrow that he almost didn't hear Jesse's next announcement. *Almost*.

"I think it's high time that Kurt here lost his virginity."

## Chapter Eleven

"So- no, listen! - so two cowboys are riding across the range when one of their horses, it-- it dies, yes? So they both get on the one remaining horse and they carry on riding. And then- wait, what then? Oh! Okay, so after a while, the one in the rear shouts 'Hey! An Indian is coming! and the one in the front, he goes, *'Well. How big is he?'* Holding his hands about twelve inches apart the one on the rear says, *'this high.'* After a few minutes, the one in the front asks again, *'Now, how big is he?'* The cowboy in the rear goes, holding his hands three feet apart, *'this high.'* Then- well, then a few more minutes pass and the front cowboy asks again, he asks, *'now, how big is he?'* So, holding his hand six feet above the ground, the rear cowboy says back, *'this high.'* So the front cowboy yells, *'quick! Grab my pistol there and shoot him!'* And, ha, then holding his hands twelve inches apart again, the one in the rear replies-er, he replies-."

"Little Big Mouth is drunk," sighed Sebastian, circling the rim of his glass. "I do so cherish these moments."

"The front cowboy said-- and then-- " Rachel rubbed at her neck. "He says--"

"He says *'I can't! I've known him since he was this high!'*" Sebastian snapped. "Lord, must we go through this every time? And it's always the same joke!"

"I don't get it," Kurt said with a frown, feeling the room shift slightly as he raised the drink to his lips. It was a dry, bitter taste but he enjoyed the fire as it made its way down his throat, even as his head succumbed to the pleasant numbness as he drank. He caught Sebastian giving him the ole' stink eye and held back the childish urge to blow a big fat raspberry at him.

Rachel peered into her quickly emptying glass, giving a sombre nod. "Tastes like brown."

"It'll hold you in good stead for when you decide to yammer more of it," said Sebastian.

"You smell like mean," she muttered.

Sebastian held out his hands. "There we have it! More brown from you already!"

"Oh, I just got it!" Kurt lied. "Very good, Rachel! Do you know any more?"

"Maybe later when he's not around." She sniffed haughtily and turned away from Sebastian, downing the last of her drink. Wiping at her mouth she turned to him. "Kurt, Kurt!" She grabbed at his arm, smiling. "Do you know what the secret of comedy is?"

"Knowing the punchline?" offered Sebastian.

"The secret of comedy is--," her fingers clutched tight into Kurt's skin, "the secret is--"

Kurt winced as her head hit the table hard and she slumped in the chair. "Oh! Should I go get Jesse or-?"

"Oh, leave her," said Sebastian. "Women can't handle their liquor." He considered. "So you should probably lay off."

Kurt rolled his eyes and took a large swig of his beer, eyes scanning the noisy saloon in search of Blaine. It was a far cry from Cheerios. It made it look downright Christian in comparison to this place. Everywhere one laid a gaze there was a sin being carried out. Flesh was bared, brawls were being had, card games were being chiselled and nearly every right palm hovered over a holster. Kurt had a feeling in this place you had to be ready for anything.

"The moment someone gets out a banjo, I'm out of here," muttered Sebastian. "I can't take another night of Jesse and Rachel trying to outshine the other. I've heard more harmonic death rattles."

"Do you come here a lot, then?" Kurt asked, deciding it wouldn't kill him to try and make nice for once.

"Enough." Sebastian shrugged. "Lord, look at the face on that one." He leaned back in his chair, curling his lip. "Some real ladies in here tonight - no offense."

Kurt ignored the jibe. "Is that one Sugar?" He indicated towards the woman Jesse was currently speaking with, his hand stroking at her hip. "Because it would certainly explain the teeth."

Sebastian shook his head. "She's new. I don't remember her." He tilted his head. "Found the one you want to warm your bed, yet?"

"Blaine said that Jesse was joking." Kurt flushed as Sebastian watched him. "That I don't-because I'd rather not--." He began to tap out a beat against the tabletop, one that almost matched his heart in its nervous tempo. "Besides, Jesse has it wrong anyway. I'm *not* a virgin. Most assuredly not."

Sebastian simply smirked at him as if all Kurt's thoughts were written across his face like a headline. "Like I said," he murmured. "Some real pieces we got in here tonight."

"William! *Willy*. Will!" A hand clamped down on Kurt's shoulder and he turned to see a leering Jesse bearing down on him. "This here is Sugar. And this?" He gestured to Kurt, unsteadily whacking him in the cheek. "This desperado is my friend, Willy."

"But I'm not--"

Jesse's hand found him again, but this time it was no accident.

"Willy. *Willy*," Sugar nodded. "I like the way that feels in my mouth."

"Right-- er-- sure you do, sweetheart," said Jesse as Sebastian was felled by a coughing fit. "And ain't William a handsome one?"

She shrugged. "I guess for a child he is sorta bonny."

"Mayhap," Sebastian agreed. "But it is pretty dim in here."

Sugar smiled at him blandly. She turned back to Kurt. "Hey, Willy."

"Billy," Kurt said meekly. "I prefer Billy." He straightened up and pushed back his shoulders. "I mean if it will please you, ma'am."

"What a fine little gentleman we got here!" she exclaimed. "Don't you worry none, darlin'. We'll get to the pleasing later. I promised the first dance to Jesse." She leaned over and squeezed Kurt's face. "Don't worry, he's awfully fast on the draw."

Jesse smiled brightly. "Aw, thank you kindly!" He pulled her to him, singing loudly as he spun her round. "*She loved a warrior bold! This shy little maid of old, But brave and gay, he rode one day. To battle far awaaaaay.*"

"Oh!" Sebastian laughed as she and Jesse danced away, giggling and groping. "To be a fly on that wall." He raised an eyebrow. "Or on *your* wall."

"I'm getting another drink," muttered Kurt, pushing himself up on shaky legs and making his way to the bar. Where was Blaine? Surely he'd put a stop to all this horseradish. He knew more than anyone that Kurt would surely not wish to lie with a woman. Blaine would know exactly how to defuse the situation, turning the focus away from him. He always rose to the challenge of being the centre of attention. Kurt's embarrassment wouldn't even be noticed. *God, would he really be forced to-- oh, don't think on it.*

"That Sebastian Smythe?" the barkeep asked as he pocketed Kurt's coins and began to fill his glass. "Ain't seen that face around here for some time. Thought he'd got too good for likes of us."

"Oh, you know him?" Kurt shook his head sadly. "I *am* sorry."

The man chuckled as he handed over the beer. "Ain't that the bare bones." As Kurt thanked him and turned to go the man called him back. "Wait, you looking for work, kid?"

"Billy." Kurt pushed his hand forward and offered it to be shook. "Nice to meet you."

"Yeah, face like yours and manners like that you sure could be popular around here." The man shrugged. "You seem all respectable, like."

"Oh, thank you kindly, but I'm a shop keep." Kurt considered. "And I'm not that respectable," he added, sticking his nose in the air. After all. He was an outlaw now, too.

Waving goodbye, Kurt made his way back to the table, politely removing hands upon his person and covering his eyes from many flashes of skin. Even Santana would find her sensibilities unsettled in this place. Kurt faltered as he saw that Blaine had reappeared and was in earnest conversation with Sebastian. Their heads were bowed close and intensity hovered over them. Slowing, gripping his sloshing drink, he strained to hear Sebastian's hushed words.

"...this ridiculous act of yours."

"It's not an act," hissed Blaine. "I really--" The rest of his sentence was drowned out by the shriek of a nearby woman. Kurt shot daggers at her.

"Really?" Sebastian went on. "How terribly pretty. How terribly *dull*." He sniffed. "Anyway, I've reserved our usual room." Sebastian's words were louder this time, and his eyes flickered to the side, towards Kurt.

He regarded Kurt for a long moment, then turned back to Blaine conspiratorially. "I'd be mighty obliged if you were to join me. We have a lot of catching up to do."

Kurt felt like he had been felled by a giant. His fingers gripped at the glass tight and the room swam harder than it had before. Humiliation, anger and jealousy crashed through him in with such force that he reeled from it. He steeled his face into a pleasant smile, walked the rest of the way to the table and sat down heavily.

Blaine barely glanced his way, his stare fixed hard to Sebastian's face and fingers flexing and unflexing on the table. Unbridled lust? Was he imagining exactly what he was going to do to the other once alone. Images filled Kurt's head at once and he tried to push them aside for pleasanter things, like Sebastian being violently thrown from his horse. Repeatedly. And then maybe stamped on. Oh, kicked. And then maybe a marching band--

"Are you enjoying yourself, Kurt?" He jumped as he realised that Blaine was watching him now and he wondered if he had actually neighed out loud.

"Time of his life." Sebastian clapped his hands. "He even got himself a new name. Blaine, meet Billy the Cowboy."

Blaine smiled softly at that and some of the tension eased out of his shoulders. He reached a hand over Rachel's sleeping head and clutched at Kurt's, the skin hard and callused and so very tempting. The images rushed into his head again, but this time Kurt was the one with the room key.

"I'm going to lay with Sugar!" Kurt's eyes widened as the sentence left him, as Blaine's own narrowed into a squint and his hand was unceremoniously dropped. "Jesse-- he, well, he--" Kurt saw Blaine's jaw tighten, and felt a resolve in him. Why was it always Blaine calling the shots? *No you can't come with me. Go to church. Oh, now I've kidnapped you. Feel this, don't feel that. Let it lie. The border, the border, the border.* Kurt was tired of it. He'd proven himself, hadn't he? And for what? "Jesse arranged it. I'm *most* looking forward to it."

"Are you?" Blaine's voice was low, laced with menace. "I see."

"Yes," Kurt sipped at his drink. "I'm sure you two can find something to do in my absence. Perhaps you can help Sebastian look for his jaw?" This drink was far tastier than the others. And the speed with which it progressed was much more satisfactory.

Sebastian shook his head. "Sarcasm is most unbecoming a lady."

Kurt snorted. "How original. I am sure that of all people you wouldn't know."

"I think you've had enough," Blaine said. He looked pointedly at Kurt's glass.

"Oh, yes," whispered Kurt. "I have most certainly had enough."

Blaine stared at him hard for a moment before pushing back his seat. "I need some air." He turned from them and stalked from the bar, the crowd parting as he passed through them. Kurt watched him go, feeling sorry and vindicated all at once. He wanted to follow him, pull him into some dark corner and press his lips to his until this simmering anger twisted, turned and shimmered into something else. Feeling Sebastian's eyes upon him, Kurt coldly met his stare, sipping at his beer. This was new. This rage that seemed to have settled into his bones. Was this what Blaine had meant? About becoming hard? Or was this just jealousy, plain and simple?

"Ain't you a thing when you got some heat in your belly, make no mistake!" Sebastian looked almost fond. "I must say, I find you almost likeable like this. Makes me sadder that by dusk tomorrow we'll be leaving you at that there border."

"How did you meet him?" Kurt asked softly. His gaze glued to Sebastian's shoulder. "How did you meet Blaine?"

"He hasn't told you?" Sebastian leant closer across the table. "Whispered it into your ear during one your late night jaunts?" He rubbed along a whorl on the wood. "He saved my life. What there was of it."

"How?"

"Now you sound like Rachel," he shrugged. "I used to work here." He gestured grandly around the saloon. "Home sweet home."

"You mean at the bar?"

"Don't be naive. It's *tedious*."

Turning, Kurt took a slow look around him. He didn't know how he had missed it on the first time round. He'd probably been too distracted by Sebastian's smug little rabbit face and the overall dark and dank of the place. Amongst the frills, the boas, the scantily dressed females there lay hidden hands upon male hips, discreet smirks, young smooth faced men glancing from one to another, to the door that led to the rooms above.

"Oh," breathed Kurt. "I didn't--"

"Of course not. Because this isn't your world. You're not one of us." He laughed but not an ounce of humour lay within it. "You're a novelty to him, that's all. A shiny clean thing on a shelf. You're a distraction. And that's all you are. So don't get none fancy ideas that the two of you will be riding off into the sunset together. Never this way, and never this day." He tilted his head. "Aw, are you going to cry now? Pull up your petticoats, run to your pa and get him to make it all better?" His hand shot out and curled round Kurt's wrist painfully.

"What do you think Blaine would do if that ridiculous posse from your town showed up lookin' for their resident idiot? Lie down and play nice?"

"You're hurting me," Kurt ground out, his free hand clenching into a fist. "Let go."

"He'd shoot them like dogs in the street. All of them. That ridiculous sheriff, his law." Sebastian opened his eyes wide in mock innocence. "Your tender old pa," he raised his hand to Kurt's temple. "Bang. Goodnight, pa."

"Shut up!" Kurt banged his fist down onto the table, causing Rachel's empty glass to upturn, roll over the edge and smash against the floor. No one bore it no mind.

"It's almost a shame if we don't run into them. Mayhap, I'll head back. Mayhap I'll see if your inbred kin is still minding that pathetic shop. Mayhap I take out my gun and--"

It took a second for Kurt to realise why there was a stinging pain flaring out across his knuckles, to understand why Sebastian was now prone on the floor with Kurt standing over him. He stared at his hand with wonder, barely mindful of the slight burn across the wrist of his other hand.

"Kur-- Billy!" Jesse came up behind him, Sugar close at his heels and helping him tuck in his shirt. "Hot damn, you knocked him out cold! What did he say?"

"My-- he was talking about my father and--" Kurt shrugged and continued to stare at his throbbing knuckles.

"You took care of business?" Jesse slapped him hard on the back. "You sure is becoming quite the apprentice." He turned to Sugar. "Y'see? I told you I had me a solid gang. World famous."

She picked at her garter absently. "Did you? I just remember a lot about someone called Rachel amongst all the tears and rushed rutting." Ignoring Jesse's scandalized look she reached out for Kurt's hand. "Okay, Willy. Let's be having you."

Kurt, numbly, allowed himself to be taken from the room. He faintly heard Rachel stir behind him and give an almighty yell: "*Timing!*"

## Chapter Twelve

*"This I call the reverse cowboy."* Sugar scissored her legs in the air and peered at him from below her handstand. "You see, you climb on and it's like riding a horse upside down!"

"I'm not-- I don't--" Kurt tugged at his collar, blushing furiously. "Won't we topple over?"

She sighed and deftly rolled out of the stand, returning to an upright position. "Perhaps that *is* a bit advanced for a beginner."

"I'm not a beginner!" he protested. "I've done this dozens of times." He tried not to think about Brittany. Or about the impromptu puppet show she had put on to cheer him after his failed attempt to find arousal in her arms. "I'm rather adept at it!"

"Is that so, Billy?" She tapped her lip in thought. "It is terrible warm in here, ain't it?" She fluttered a hand at her face, and trailed the other to her bodice. "Terrible warm, indeed!"

"Really? I think it's rather chilly! Unseasonably so! Brr!" Kurt wrapped his arms around himself and rubbed at his shoulders. "Perhaps we should return to the bar? Mayhap all that body heat--oh!" Kurt gasped as she dived forward, grabbed his left hand and brought it her bosom.

"Do you feel," she fluttered her lashes, "a trifle more heated now?"

"Yes," Kurt squeaked, staring at his hand in terror. The effects of alcohol seemed to be fleeing his body, and his hard resolve with it. He couldn't do this. He couldn't. Before he could utter the words, Sugar was pushing forward and pressing her lips to his. His hand lay trapped in between them and Kurt could feel the slow steady beat of her heart at his fingertips. Not fast and erratic like Blaine's had felt as he moved his body along Kurt's. Just there. That was all.

Sugar pulled away with a loud lip smack and stared at him evenly. "Don'tcha you like girls or something?"

"I-- er, madam, you are most beautiful and alluring and fragrant and--"

"Can it, Billy." She stepped away, turning to look in the mirror at her side. Fixing her hair, she sighed. "You want me to go get you a boy? I'm sure Samuel was free?"

"Oh! Oh. No, no, no! Honestly, I'm fine!" Kurt wetted his dry lips and tried to give her a reassuring smile. "I'm just tired. That's all. I'll just head back to the bar and--"

"Jesse paid for you to be having fun and make no mistake, you'll have it." She patted his cheek, rather harder than was required, and proceeded to the door. "You just sit tight, Billy. I'll fix you right up!"

"Wait, it's fine!" Kurt tried to follow but the door was already slamming shut. For a moment, Kurt dithered. Fingers in his hair and heart hammering in his chest. He could leave. He *should* leave. Going through this was embarrassing enough with Sugar, but to have a repeat performance with another. *Mortifying*.

No. He'd leave. He'd go find the others and say that he was too tired and just try to avoid Blaine's eye contact. After tomorrow he would never have to see this people again anyway. Kurt tried not to allow the pain of that thought fall over him.

A door creaked open behind him and Kurt inwardly groaned. Sugar was surely fast off the draw. "My sincere apologies but--" Kurt swallowed his words on being confronted with Blaine.

"You're forgiven," Blaine rolled his shoulders slowly. "Ain't right sure what for, though." He closed the door behind him, tripping the lock into place. "But I reckon it's me that needs to be apologising." His eyes raked over Kurt's body, leaving heat wherever they lay.

"Really?" Kurt asked breathlessly. He placed his hands on his hips. "Do you mind? I'm waiting for Sugar."

"Oh, yes." Blaine nodded. "Round two?"

Kurt flapped a hand. "I stopped counting when we reached double figures."

"Crying shame. I liked Sugar. Oh, well." Blaine took his gun out of his holster. "I'll make it quick."

"Wait, what?" Kurt's eyes went wide. "You don't mean to? Surely?"

"I'm not happy about it, but I got me a mighty high temper and an even worse jealous streak." Blaine sighed. "Don't you worry none. I'll make it a head shot."

"Blaine, no, no!" Kurt practically flew across the room. "We didn't do anything! We didn't do-- are you *laughing*?" Kurt demanded.

"Kurt, you are so easy!" Blaine considered. "Well, maybe not according to Sugar."

Kurt gritted his teeth and went to move away but Blaine's hand snapped out and held him tight. "I am mighty sorry for the way I have behaved with you. It was ungentlemanly." Blaine gave a soft laugh. "I mean, I did not wish to confuse you with my intentions."

Kurt threw his hand off. "And what *are* your intentions? Because I most certainly do not know. You either want me or--"

"*I want you*," interrupted Blaine. "More than I have ever wanted anyone in my life. I think-- I think it's more than that. But I can't have you, Kurt."

"Yes, you can," whispered Kurt. "You can."

"Not without great cost. And that's why you can't come with me, Kurt." Blaine reached out again and encircled Kurt's wrists, pulling him into his personal space. "My life is hard and dangerous, and if something were to happen to you then I couldn't handle that pain for a second. Do you follow?"

"I can protect myself, Blaine." Kurt had meant the tone to be biting, but it came out as a plea.

"Yes, I saw Sebastian's black eye." Blaine let go of his left wrist, and reached a hand up to trail his cheekbone. "But I don't want you to have to. I want you to go to New York. I want you to have everything you want."

"All I want is *you*."

Blaine sucked in a breath at that, and closed his eyes tight. "No, Kurt." He opened his eyes. "I can't lead you into this life. I can't break you like that."

Kurt pulled his other hand free and shoved at Blaine's chest. "I can make my own decisions, Blaine! I am not a child." He ran a hand through his hair, gripping the root in frustration. "Just trust me. Please."

"I am not a good man, Kurt." Blaine turned away, his profile falling into shadow. "I've done things. Hell, I've done things that would change the way you look at me." He glanced back. "*That* look. That one right there. That would leave once you knew the real me."

"Then tell me," Kurt reached out, gripping at his shirt. "I promise I won't think anything less of you. I never could!"

"Because you are naïve!" Blaine snapped. "This is all a big game to you. An exciting adventure! But these are our lives, Kurt! And it isn't a good life, and it's a life that usually ends swift. I won't have that happen to you!" He softened. "I'm sorry, I don't mean to yell at you." He closed a hand over Kurt's that fisted at his shoulder. "Tomorrow we ride out. For the border. And we'll leave you here. Sugar has agreed to send word to your town."

Kurt watched Blaine's face carefully, filling dread and sadness spread across his chest. "So, this is it?"

Blaine nodded, wrapping his arm around Kurt's back. "This is it."

Kurt worried at his lip. "Perhaps one day--"

"No," said Blaine softly. "This is it."

Kurt closed his eyes and took a deep breath. This was it. Their last night together. So short their time had been together and Kurt had changed in more ways than he could count. Their last night. He opened his eyes. "Then let's make it count."

Blaine smiled sadly. "Are you sure?"

"Yes." Kurt nodded. "After all, Jesse *did* pay for the room."

Blaine laughed, only for his expression to even out and for his eyes to turn dark. He stepped close, breathing Kurt in deep and pushing him further into the room.

Feeling the edge of the bed the back of his knees, Kurt suddenly felt very young and inexperienced compared to Blaine's worldly smirk. Kurt's facial expression must have revealed something of that, because Blaine leant closer, delivering gentle kisses to Kurt's mouth but never long enough for the kiss to deepen.

Slowly, Blaine's fingers came to his chest and released each button from its confines. As he undressed Kurt, his eyes barely left his, his lips constantly finding their way back to Kurt's mouth until Kurt stood

naked before him. Kurt felt shyness overcoming him, and fought the urge to cover himself as Blaine's gaze finally dropped to his body.

"Damn," Blaine said with a wicked grin, and hurriedly, with a lot less care than he had taken with Kurt's clothing, Blaine followed suit, throwing his clothes into an untidy jumble alongside Kurt's.

He stepped forward and bent his head, pressing a warm, leisurely, open-mouthed kiss to Kurt's chest. Kurt gave a little gasp of pleasure as Blaine's lips moved over his nipple, softly at first with little darts of his tongue, until he worried the nub between his teeth and made Kurt's legs go weak. Almost collapsing against him, Blaine's hands found his hips and held on tight and Kurt whined as he tried in vain to grind himself against Blaine. Reaching out his own hand, he dug his fingers into Blaine's thick dark hair and pulled him closer to him.

Blaine pulled away, pushing at Kurt's shoulder's gently, he pressed him back against the mattress and followed in earnest, his body aligning with his as he lowered himself down. Kurt groaned as their groins rubbed together, sparks igniting all over his body and his mind seemingly shutting completely down. His hips rotated up and his hands pulled Blaine bruise making close, he needed that sensation again, he needed it.

"Just a--*ahh*- just a minute, Kurt," gasped Blaine against the crook of his neck. Pulling away, Kurt loathed the chill of the air that replaced Blaine's weight. He grasped at the sheets of the bed and writhed as his arousal spread through his body, dimly aware that Blaine was rooting in the bedside table, uttering little oaths under his breath. A crash caused Kurt to open his eyes and glance over with a quirked brow.

"I got impatient," shrugged Blaine, holding up the remnants of a shattered drawer and emptying its contents on the bed. "Remind me to leave Sugar something extra for the damage."

"What is it that you need?" Kurt watched as Blaine fingered through the items, throwing things over his shoulder in abandon.

"You'll see. If *I* ever see-- aha!" He brushed the rest off the bed and crawled towards Kurt triumphant, a tiny vial of oil clasped in his hand. "Turn over," he whispered, his hand resting on Kurt's thigh. "Onto your stomach."

Kurt nodded shakily, complying quickly and gasping as his cock became trapped between himself and the bed sheets. He fought the urge to grind against the mattress. He wanted this to last. Blaine's arm snaked around his waist, and a pillow was slipped under him, Blaine's fingers stroking over his skin gently as he lowered Kurt down with a kiss between his shoulder blades.

Blaine's hands seemed to be everywhere at once, his lips in their wake and Kurt sighed at every feathery touch. He felt Blaine press against the bed and his own legs parted with Blaine's knee as fingers kneaded against the flesh of his rear.

"It's okay." Words whispered against his ear as a finger pressed between his cheeks, the surface copious and slippery. Kurt cried out as Blaine's finger breached him. "Relax, Kurt. Trust me." Kurt nodded, gasping as Blaine's finger began to slide in and out of him, slowly at first and then in a rough pace that Kurt felt himself pushing back into. Warm, wet lips trailed across his back as his finger worked, and the initial comfort began to give way to a sort of pleasurable thrum. Another finger joined the former, and Kurt grasped the sheets in anticipation of the stretch and the burn, but it wasn't as bad as he had feared. His breath was coming faster now as Blaine's fingers twisted inside of him and the pleasing sensation was definitely on the rise.

"Please," whispered Kurt, not even knowing what it was that he wanted. "I need--" Blaine's fingers withdrew completely and Kurt pressed back, whimpering at their loss. A kiss to the base of his spine and then the freshly oiled fingers returned, now with a third pressing into him. Kurt rubbed his face against the sheets as he adjusted to the intrusion. "Blaine, I--" A blinding heat of pleasure racked through him as Blaine's fingers pressed at a point inside of him. "Do that again!"

Blaine chuckled and did just that, Kurt barely aware of anything but the pure and utter ecstasy of that nub being rubbed at again and again. He was hardly aware of Blaine's arm snaking under him and pulling his groin away from the bed to stop him rutting against it so desperately. "I think you're ready," said Blaine in a choked voice.

Kurt nodded, head dipped forward and eyes squeezed closed as he felt Blaine's cock line up at his entrance. He had only the vaguest notions of what sex between two men had entailed, it had always been an idea that he had held far from his imagination. Afraid that even allowing the thought of it would make it known to all that saw his face from the day on. But now that he was here it was of his body need not be told, it simply acted on instinct and want. He bit his lip as Blaine eased slowly into him, stopping before it had barely begun and holding position.

“Tell me when you are ready for me to move.”

“More,” breathed Kurt, wincing at the discomfort. “Please, Blaine.”

Blaine pressed forward slowly, his member entering Kurt inch by inch before filling him entirely. Kisses reigned down across his shoulder blades and neck as Blaine pulled back just as slowly, before thrusting back and hitting that same place. Kurt’s answering groan seemed to be enough to spur Blaine onward, for he repeated the action but the thrust deeper and harder this time and Kurt was simply lost in the thrill. There was nothing but this room, this night. *Blaine.*

Blaine’s hand grazed over his stomach and made its way to Kurt’s groin, circling round his cock and tugging in time to his hips snapping against Kurt’s body and it was too much, too *wonderful* and Kurt was crying out with everything he had. He shuddered as his orgasm rushed through him, and he spilled over into Blaine’s hand that continued to work him through his coming.

Blaine himself was gasping heavily, his own thrusts now out of time but hard and fast, and with a surge forward his teeth pressed into Kurt’s skin as his body shook and twisted from the strength of his own coming. “Kurt, Kurt, *Kurt,*” he groaned into the nape of Kurt’s neck.

Kurt was barely there for anything that followed. Blaine had slipped out of him and cleaned them both up gently, before lying down beside him and curling against his body. Kurt was lost to the dreamy hue of pleasure. Even the knowledge that this would be their last and only time together could barely break through the haze.

As fingers carded through his hair, Kurt allowed himself to drift off into a rested sleep. He thought for a moment that he had heard Blaine whisper a declaration of love, but before he could assess whether this was truth or dream, he had slipped away into blackness.

\*

When Kurt awoke, he reached out to the space beside him but Blaine was gone. He sighed with relief upon realising that his fleeing had only consisted of going to the window. Throwing back the covers, he padded across the room, wincing slightly at the ache. Reaching the other man, he wrapped his arms around his waist and kissed at Blaine’s shoulder.

"You should sleep," said Blaine kindly. "You have a few hours until dawn." He reached downward and clasped Kurt's hands, fingers rubbing over the knuckles.

"Mayhap you could help tucker me out?" Kurt teased, glancing down at the dark town and the one or two stragglers that filled the streets.

"Again?" Blaine shook his head sadly. "And I thought you were a nice boy."

"Oh, that I am, but--" Kurt's brows furrowed together as he watched the events below. "Is that *Sebastian*?" Two dark figures appeared to be pushing him between the them, while exchanging muted shouts. "Is he in trouble?"

"Sebastian is always--" A gun shot rang out into the night and the two stared into the street as others followed it. One of the men was aiming at the ground below Sebastian and making him dance back and forth to avoid the bullets. "Kurt, get my guns!" Blaine scrambled back into the room, dressing quickly as Kurt snatched up his holster.

As he ran back to Blaine, he glanced once more out of the window and down at the men below. The man that wasn't shooting was further back from the proceedings, hands in his pocket and hat tipped low. But despite the distance, despite the shadows, Kurt instantly knew who it was. He'd know that man anywhere.

After all, it *was* his father.

## Chapter Thirteen

Reaching the bottom step, barely even aware of his feet touching the stairs, Kurt was greeted with the sight of Rachel's back. She turned to him grimly on hearing him enter the saloon. "You see?"

"I saw," he confirmed, aware of Blaine hurriedly rushing into the room after him. Rachel nodded and turned back to a tiny group in the corner, a mixture of patrons and workers of the saloon who stared out at them with confused scared faces. Over by the counter, Sugar was perched on the edge, filing her nails as Jesse stalked back and forth across the room.

"We should have just kept going," he was muttering over and over. "Chrissake, we should have just kept going. We were so close."

"But we didn't." Blaine crossed to the window, peering through the blinds, angling his body from view. "How many, you reckon?"

"Enough. They have the back covered, too. God knows what they're waiting for."

"They know we got innocent folk in here. Plus Kurt. They ain't gonna risk storming in and firing up the wrong people." Blaine shook his head. "Remarkable restraint for a posse."

"Oh, they are just charming," Jesse muttered, loading his gun. "Remind me to invite them to the next barn dance."

"Do you think Sebastian is badly hurt?" Kurt said, fingers clasping at his neck as he joined Blaine at the window. "He doesn't look good."

"What do you *care*? And get away from there. You want a quick exit or something?" Jesse clutched at his hair, shaking his head. "God, if we had just kept going for the border we'd be living it up proper--"

"Now," a voice outside cut him off, booming in the hollow of the night. *Strando*. "We got your boy out here and he ain't much for talking." Kurt winced at Sebastian's loud grunt of pain that was no doubt the result of Strando's boot. "We know you is hiding. We know you is outnumbered. So, how about you come out and jar a little?"

Kurt made forward but Blaine pulled him back, harshly. "Stay out of the way, Kurt." Shrugging him off, he continued on to the side of the frame, and peered through the dirty glass. Strando was facing away, Sebastian's hair gripped tightly in his hands and gun held at his waist. Other men now stood with him, and Kurt could recognise men from his town, Puck included but no Karofsky. Leaving that query well alone, he zeroed in on the figure of his father. Kurt could hear the low rumble of his father's voice, earnest and placating but Strando was paying him no mind. Throwing Burt's hand off his arm, he pushed towards the brothel and dragged Sebastian along. With a shiver, Kurt realised the distance didn't hide the fear that covered Sebastian's face. "I need to go out there," he announced.

"Are you tapped?" Jesse glared. "I reckon he might be sore about that headache I threw him, and the fact we are *fugitives* from the gallows."

"But my father's out there!" protested Kurt. "If anyone can talk him down, it's me. He'll make Strando listen."

Jesse watched him, his face solemn and jaw set. "That there your father?"

Kurt nodded and then frowned in confusion as Blaine moved in front of him, partially shielding him from view. "No," said Blaine. "Don't even think it."

"He's our captive, ain't he? I mean, that is why we took him in the first place."

"Don't do that. Don't dismiss him to suit your own ends," Blaine was all but growling now.

Jesse pushed past him and whipped out his gun, pulling Kurt near.

"Don't!" hissed Blaine, moving forward.

Jesse pulled the catch on the gun. "Step right back, partner." He pressed the barrel harder into Kurt's face. "Step right back, now!"

Blaine reluctantly moved away, hands raised. "This is crazy," he muttered.

"What Blaine said!" gasped Rachel.

Jesse smirked. He pulled the gun away from Kurt's face slightly, but did not loosen his grip on their captive. "The thing is, Kurt, the thing is that it's a bit of a bind but you have to understand my position, don't you? I mean you're a swell guy and all but sometimes you got to take one for the team."

Kurt cast a sidelong glance at the gun aimed at his temple and swallowed. "Well, if your finger slips, I'll try not to take it too personally."

Jesse grinned. "That's the spirit."

"Jesse, please. Let me go out," Kurt whispered, "they only want me."

Jesse snarled. "And then you'll turn and they're free to blow us to kingdom come!"

"What Jesse said!" gasped Rachel.

"Let him *go*!" said Blaine, pushing forward and pulling the gun away from Jesse before he could react.

They grappled for a few moments, before Jesse moved away, sullen. "You want to let him go! Are you touched in the head?"

Blaine frowned. "I just meant stop pointing the gun at his head, not you know, *let him go*." He shrugged at Kurt. "No offence, Kurt. They really will just fill us full of lead if we don't come at this smartly-"

Kurt waved him away wearily. "It's fine," he sighed. "It was just a suggestion." At this, Jesse pulled him into a bizarrely affectionate hug, before marching him carefully to the window. Keeping them out of sight they both ducked down to peer out at the world outside. "Jesse, you can let go you know. I'm not going to run."

Jesse watched him closely for a moment before relinquishing his grip. "Stay near, though. I may need to use you as some sort of cover should they start firing."

"Right--thanks for that." Kurt crawled nearer, pressing against Jesse's thigh as he stared from the window and trying not to meet Blaine's eyes across the way. From his limited view, he could see that Sebastian was still on his knees, but his face was now a bloody mess and his head hung low between his shoulders, defeated.

"This is Jesse St. James!" Jesse called from the window, minding his face didn't move too far near the target. "To whom do I owe the pleasure?"

"Deputy Strando, you no-good heel!"

"Deputy? Why, you are alive and well?" Jesse laughed. "Come on in, I think I owe you a drink!"

"You owe me a hanging!"

"We've got the boy!" Blaine called out, strong and determined. "We got the Hummel boy in here with us. Don't go ventilating the walls now or you'll be liable to--" Jesse stared at him curiously as Blaine's voice wavered. "-- liable to hit one of your own."

"Prove it!" Strando yelled. "You expect us to believe that you didn't slit that boy's throat first chance you had?" Blaine winced, and the knuckles on his Colt turned white. "Hell, I barely held back on that myself!"

"Strando!" Kurt yelled as loud as he could. "I see you are still kidding yourself that you are three sizes smaller than you are. Why bother to carry a gun when you can breathe out and kill us with speed-defying buttons?"

"Er, Kurt," said Jesse. "The point of a hostage is that the rescuers don't *want* you dead."

Kurt shrugged. "He said to prove it."

"Kurt!" His father now and Kurt felt his stomach grow heavy just hearing it. "It's your pa! Kurt, it's your--" He broke off and from his spot, Kurt could see him having a hushed argument with Strando. After a long wait, he began again. "Anderson, I want you to send out my boy."

"I'm afraid not, sir." Jesse looked to him in shock, mouthing *sir*? "What I want you to do is, come inside here. Just you. See if we can't come to an agreement."

Kurt watched the men through the window, speaking heatedly between themselves. Burt moved away, pushing off Strando's arm and staring straight in Kurt's direction, seemingly unseeing. Kurt's hand moved forward as if to reach out and touch the shadowy figure, and almost grazed the glass before Blaine's own circled his wrist. He smiled kindly at Kurt, understanding in his eyes. And perhaps a little sadness. After all, somewhere out there was Blaine's own family.

"Alright, Anderson. Tell your men to keep those guns lowered. I'm coming in." At these words, Blaine let him go and he scrambled away to door to allow Burt entry. As his father approached, Kurt held his breath and moved closer to the door.

The older man entered the building with a quiet, commanding dignity. The group parted intuitively such was the respect he commanded. Kurt had always wondered at how he did it, but more than this, he wondered if he would ever manage to inspire the same respect as this man. And then his father stepped into a shaft of dusty light and Kurt gasped to see the difference in him. His father looked older than when he had seen him last. He looked tired and beat, with large dark shadows under his eyes and shoulders that bent forward under an invisible weight. Was this the price of loving somebody, for worrying about them?

His father's eyes travelled the room, searching each face before landing on his with a soft sigh. "Kurt." There was more in that simple utterance than a thousand, a million words could have conveyed and Kurt's feet were moving before he could even think.

"Pa," he moaned into his shoulder as he hugged him tightly, fingers clasping behind his back as he held his father. "My Lord, I've missed you so."

"I-- I thought you were--- I thought I'd lost you, Kurt. God, I thought--" He grabbed Kurt by the shoulders and held him away. "Are you okay?" His face hardened. "Did they hurt you, kiddo?"

"No, no!" Kurt shook his head, tears running free. "I swear, pa, they were good to me." He risked a glance at Blaine, who remained in the shadows of the room. Hand over holster. "They were good to me." He paused. "Except for hitting me over the head. But that was only that one time."

Burt gritted his teeth at that and glared at Jesse and Blaine. Holding Kurt tight, he drew him behind him. "Any of those people hurt?" He jutted a thumb behind him to the others watched over by Rachel.

"No, sir." Blaine moved forward into the light. "Nor will they be."

Nodding, Burt stepped closer, ignoring Jesse's hiss of protest. "Now you said you wanted to talk. So talk. What's it going to take to walk my son and those folk behind me out of here without any one of us reaching for the holster?"

"Time," said Blaine. "We aren't naive enough to think you'll grant us a pardon, or let us go on how well we treated Kurt---"

"I gave him my spare boots--" interrupted Jesse.

--or stand aside saluting us--"

--but he preferred Rachel's."

-- as we canter by. But we want time for us giving him back to you safely. Time to head for our horses and make this fight even at least."

Burt stiffened. "You want me to give you a chance to shoot at my men? To shoot us in the back?"

"We won't fire unless you fire, sir. And there won't be nothing yellow about it."

Burt laughed but no humour was in it. "You *know* that we'll fire, son. I can't control that." He paused. "Even if I wanted to, *Warbler*, which I assure you I do very well not right now. You hit him *on the head*?"

"Is-- is this a source of contention?" asked Rachel. "Because I stubbed my toe coming in, and Jesse told me to shut up because nobody likes a gal dwelling on the past, but if Kurt hurt his head *weeks* ago and people are going to die over it--"

"Nobody's going to die, Rachel!" snapped Blaine.

Is this going to take much longer?" Sugar spoke up. "Because I really need to set my hair for tomorrow, and all of this is super boring."

Burt inclined his head. "I'm sorry that our possible deaths are weighing on your toilette, Miss, but we hope to bring this matter to a relatively amicable conclusion shortly, so don't you worry none."

Sugar giggled coquettishly. "You're a charmer, honey."

"Thank you kindly." Burt fixed her with a genuine smile, which slid from his face as he turned to face the gang. "The lady has a point. Let's resolve this."

"How about we resolve it by taking *you* hostage?" said Jesse.

"How about you try it, son?"

"This isn't helping!" said Blaine. "We need a plan."

"You need a plan," said Burt. "This is a situation where your hides are toast if—"

Jesse scowled. "If we die, then so do you and your boy."

"Is that a threat?" snarled Burt, stepping forward.

Jesse backed away. "I'm just saying, is all."

Burt watched him for a long moment, then turned to Blaine. "Do you have a plan, Mr. Bigshot?"

Blaine ignored the jibe. He considered. "You can spar awhile, get them to hold off coming in. And my gang will hold off defending themselves for as long as possible. You have my word."

"Your word? Hear yourself, Anderson. I don't make no deals with outlaws that kidnap my kin."

"Then maybe we take back our offer," announced Rachel loudly.

Turning, Kurt gasped to find her gun trained on him. She was obviously a better actress than he had ever thought because not a glimpse of falseness lay upon her face. At least, he hoped it was acting.

"Honourable," Burt muttered, his eyes narrowing and fingers twitching. She wagged her finger at him and he left the gun alone, but Kurt could feel the tenseness emanating from him. "Okay, say I give you this time. How do you expect me to stop them storming in the moment we are clear? Huh? I'm not their sheriff."

"You'll think of something," said Jesse. "Plus, if you're anything like your son says you are, you'll keep your word."

"Why don't you just use the secret underground tunnel?" Sugar was observing her reflection in a spoon's surface. She stared at it glumly for a moment, before turning it around and staring at her reflection the right way up with a grin. "Go out that way when Billy and pa mosey out the front. Then my nice place doesn't get all shot up and holey. I just had it redecorated, you know."

Blaine turned to her, confused. "Wait, *a secret underground tunnel?*"

"Sure! It's just beside my bed. It leads right to the church." She blinked. "You didn't know?"

"It leads to the church?" Jesse added, eyebrows high.

"Pastor Ryan can hardly be walking in here in broad daylight now, can he?" Sugar laughed and then added sincerely, "That would be indecent."

"And a tunnel to a whorehouse *isn't*?" Jesse shook his head. "I gotta get me religion."

"Jesse, can we drop the hows and whys and concentrate on how it helps us?" Kurt chose to ignore the scepticism in his face at the utterance of *us*. "A distraction," he nodded, clasping his hands together.

Blaine chewed at his lip and nodded. "Mayhap that could work. It's a fair walk from here. Would it give us enough time to round up the horses?"

Kurt shrugged. "It gives us more time than sitting here waiting for them to storm the place." His father was watching him curiously but Kurt kept his eyes trained on Blaine's face. "It's a head start at least," he said softly trying to quell the images of Blaine shot up and dying outside in the dirt. He'd be fine. *He had to be.*

"If I go now, I can get them there and rounded up. Jesse take over here." Rachel nodded at Sugar. "Show me."

"Wait!" Jesse reached out, grabbing hold of her wrist. "It's not safe. I should go. You should stay here with Blaine." He tucked a stray hair behind her ear and stared softly down into her eyes. She seemed to visibly melt under his stare and even Kurt was moved by the gesture.

"Oh, Jesse! You *do* care!" She flung her arms around him. "I knew it was so, despite our grandeur ambitions and the rough independent road, the road of the Lone Wolf, that we both chose to ride -- I mean, I know it was together, but the lone wolf analogy stands, kinda. I knew that deep down you---" she paused and glanced up, suspicion clouding her features. "Wait a minute, you aren't planning on riding out on us are you?"

"No!" Jesse said immediately. "*Of course not.* How could you think that? I was going to give you ten minutes at the least and--" the rest of his sentence was drowned out by Rachel's rapid slaps to his arm before she turned on her heel and stormed out, Sugar in her wake.

"Now that I'm getting to know you, I'm finding it hard to believe people get you confused with that other James fella," Burt said turning to Jesse.

Jesse held out his hands. "I know, right?"

"After awhile he kinda grows on you," Kurt explained to his father, feeling a burst of affection for the other man.

"We need to get these people together," said Blaine. "Jesse, gather them--"

"Wait, wait!" They all jumped as Rachel came flying back into the room, her arms flying and face determined and settled on Kurt. "I nearly forgot to say goodbye."

"Rachel, my all--"

She held up a hand to Jesse's face and carried on as if he had never spoken, crossing to Kurt and pulling him tight into her arms. "You take care, okay?" She squeezed tight and Kurt returned the embrace in kind. "You are the best thing we ever stole."

"I think I'm really going to miss you," whispered Kurt into her hair, beginning to feel slightly choked up at the thought that was the last time he would ever see her.

"Obviously," she sniffed pulling back and pressing a kiss to his cheek. *"Farewell, my brother, fare thee well. The elements be kind to thee, and make thy spirits all of comfort--"*

"Rachel! *Seriously!* The horses!" cried Jesse.

"Absolutely no sense of drama," huffed Rachel, flipping her hair over shoulder. "Fine, I'm going."

"Interesting group of people you've met here," remarked Burt dryly. "Now let's get these folk rounded up. Say your goodbyes, son."

"Goodbyes?" he repeated. "But I'm not-- it's a little abrupt, pa."

"Kurt," said his father sternly. "We have to go."

He opened his mouth to protest, but Blaine had already moved forward, reached for him. Blaine clasped Kurt's hands tight in his, thumbs rubbing over and over against his skin. "I guess this it. I mean really it." His voice was so low Kurt had to strain to hear it. "Funny, I didn't think--" he paused, became solemn. "You should just go."

Kurt pressed forward, fully intent on pressing his lips to Blaine's. Jesse gave a polite cough, and Kurt pulled back, remembering that that a dozen strangers, Jesse and his father were in the room. Instead, he smiled as wide as he possibly could and squeezed Blaine's hand in his own. "I'll never forget you. Not ever."

Blaine nodded and Kurt was startled to see tears in his eyes, even more surprised he could see this with his own vision so blurred. Reluctantly he stepped away, walking backwards until his shoulder brushed against his father's.

Burt turned to look at him, frowning. He made to speak, but at Kurt's expression, he decided against it. He placed a hand on Kurt's shoulder and squeezed gently.

"Anderson!" Strando shouted from outside. "Your tete-a-tete is up. Send out Burt and the boy. Then come out with your hands up." Braying laughter came from outside, followed by; "Or we are coming in, guns blazing."

Kurt glanced towards the door, and then turned pleadingly to his father. "Please. Give them the time. *Please.*"

Burt looked at him, his eyes taking in every part of Kurt's face as if seeing him for the first time. But there was something else there, too. In his father's eyes, he could see something shifting into place as if it had always been there- waiting. Perhaps it *had* always been there; how possible was it to really know someone? Was his father thinking the same thing? Breaking the stare, his father glanced over at Blaine, his jaw hardening.

"You took my son, boy. And I don't take to that none. But if Kurt here says you treat him right, than that's just what you did. That don't change that you are a criminal, though. Or what has went on before." Despite his father's hands hovering over his gun, Blaine's fingers never strayed to his own. Kurt could have loved him for that alone. "I figure I owe you a debt, boy. Now I won't be reaching for steel at your side or pleading tearfully at your trial, but the very least I can give you is a little time." He rubbed at the back of

his neck. "And if your horses do carry you far enough, here's hoping you find a little good in you. Consider it payback to me."

"Pa--" Kurt began but only shook his head and hugged his father once more. "Thank you," he whispered into the shell of his ear. "Thank you."

"Come on, son," Burt said, placing his hand on Kurt's shoulder. "Time to go."

Jesse caught his gaze and nodded slowly, tipping his hat. It was as close to a sign of affection Kurt could expect from him.

And then finally his eyes rested on Blaine, a silent and brooding figure in the shadows. Kurt had never been great at goodbyes; he found himself rehearsing what he'd say in his head, but when the time came, he'd say something cold, or he'd weep, or he'd mess up his words and dwell on what he should have said and how he failed a thousand times over once that person had gone.

He hadn't rehearsed a good bye with Blaine. He wasn't sure why; everything had to end, didn't it? But somehow he hadn't allowed himself to dwell on the ending, perhaps because he envisaged it being very grisly. Perhaps because – he glanced at Blaine again in the dim light – and he lost the thought. He was simply glad that there had been something good, something desperately precious in his life, however brief. Burning the image into his mind, he closed his eyes and turned away, following his father and the others out in to the open.

Sebastian glanced up at him as they came to a stop in front of Strando. Spitting blood from his mouth, he smirked as their eyes met. "Don't take it to heart none, but blubbo here kind of over shadowed your right hook."

"Shut up, varmint," Strando kicked at his back and Sebastian dropped with a grunt.

"Is that necessary?" Kurt said icily. "He isn't going anywhere."

"Fond of him, are ya?" Strando nodded at the hostages huddled behind Burt. "They all right?"

"They're fine."

"Check them over, make sure they ain't sneaked out pretending to be whores or something." His men jumped readily to the command, ignoring the men for the women. Kurt wrinkled his nose in disgust.

"Trust me, they didn't. They are still in there. Leave the girls alone!"

"Trust?" Strando raised a brow. "I ain't so sure that's a thing I want to be doing now." He patted at an ugly wound that lined his skull. "You'll understand, I'm sure."

"Stand down, Strando." Kurt turned, surprised, to find Karofsky was among the men. "You okay, Hummel?" His smile was odd and strained, and Kurt nodded at it warily. "Good. That's good--"

"Can we can this touching reunion to later? How many are in there, Hummel?"

"My kid has been through hell and back," Burt said, smoothly but Kurt knew he was stalling. For him. "He don't need no integration right now."

"You want us to go in blind, Burt? Nuts to that. How many, Hummel?"

Kurt pressed a hand to his brow and feigned a wince. He wasn't the only one who could act. "I can't-- my head-- I--"

"It's a simple question. Answer it."

Kurt shook his head. "Could I get some water?"

"Answer the damn quest--"

"Good Lord, Strando. *I'll* answer it." Burt grouched. "There was Anderson and--"

"No. Him." Strando narrowed his eyes. "I've already had enough bullshit from the waste of space on the floor. I want the truth from him."

"Why does it matter who the hell tells you--"

"Keep your beak out of it, Burt." Strando stepped closer. "How many are there, Hummel?"

Kurt chanced a glance at Sebastian who shook his head slowly. "Three," he said but the tremble in his voice gave it away. "Three."

"Hogwash!" He lunged forward and tore him from his father. "How many are in there, Hummel?" Strando demanded, gripping his arm tight? "Just the squaw, James and Anderson? Or they got more?"

"Let go of me, you oaf!" Kurt tried to shake himself free; Strando twisted his skin and Kurt gasped. "What on Earth do you think you are doing?"

"You a turncoat, boy, is that it?" Strando pulled him close, spittle covering Kurt's cheek. "Plenny of rumours flying around about that wagon your pals overturned. Plenny saying you weren't quivering into your skirts like a good little lady."

"Get your hands off my boy, Strando," warned Burt. "I ain't going to make a habit of telling you twice." He made to intervene and Karofsky and another stepped in to hold him back.

"Hummel's right, Strando. Go easy on him."

"Stay out of this, Sheriff. Remember who got you here." Strando slapped at Kurt's face. "You play maid for them, didja?" Alcohol ghosted his breath and Kurt winced as it wafted into his nostrils and the ache stung in his cheek. "I hear that the trail sure is lonely, and Lord knows they wouldn't be keeping you around for your toughness." He shook Kurt hard, and Kurt tried to escape his grasp but it was like trying to shove a canyon. "You play squaw with that filthy Injun bitch? Is that it?"

Pure white rage filled Kurt's head, and his neck was springing back before the thought had even registered. "Her name is," his forehead smashed into Strando's mouth with all the force he could muster, "Rachel!" Kurt dropped to the ground and stared up in defiance. "And she's worth ten of you."

"You little shit!" Strando roared as he covered his bleeding mouth, staring in horror at his front tooth that now stained the dirt below. "You turncoat piece of fucking---" he kicked out hard and Kurt choked as the force of the blow hit the softness of his belly. So hurt by the first kick he barely registered the third or fourth until the pain ceased. Clutching his stomach, he glanced up wearily, coughing and spluttering to see his father had charged at Strando and the two were fighting in earnest on the ground next to him.

"Pa," he groaned, trying to crawl closer. Arms enveloped him and he was surprised to see Karofsky at his side, helping him up with surprising gentleness. "Pa, don't-- your heart."

"Azimio, break that up!" Karofsky ordered. "Before someth---"

## **BANG**

The sound was deafening in the dead of the night, and twice as frightening for it. The assembled men immediately dived for cover, but there were no further reports from a gun. And before he had checked himself to see if he was wounded, Kurt's foremost thought was to ensure that his father was all right.

There had been many such incidents during this adventure, where he'd worried for Blaine or Rachel, goddamn it, even Sebastian. And there was the rush of dread, the cold jolt of fear down his spine, and it had always been all right. Most times in your life, even when you were an outlaw, it was all right.

This wasn't one of those times.

This was the price of loving someone.

Kurt tore himself from Karofsky's arms and threw himself to his father's side. "Pa? No, pa, please-- get up. Just get up." His father stared back at him, mouth silently gaping and eyes staring into a darkness that Kurt could not follow.

"What in tarnation is wrong with you?" Karofsky bellowed.

"Man was interfering with posse business. We ain't got time for it, and I don't take kindly to it." Strando said breathlessly. Absently, Kurt could feel that amongst the gazes of the others, he could see from the corner of his eye that Sebastian was one of them. But Kurt only had eyes for his father. "I ain't too happy myself, but he was protecting a traitor and stopping us from doing what we came here to do. Men, get your hands to your irons, we are going in to wipe that scum from the earth."

"The hell you are! If you are going anywhere it's to the big house with me." Karofsky gestured to the others. "Take that man down!"

Puck stepped forward but no other man moved, all stood frozen, eyes on Strando. After a moment, Puck frowned and lowered his head, taking that step back.

"Take his gun, Azimio," Strando demanded, watching as Karofsky struggled and lost his weapons. Striding past Kurt as if he no longer mattered, he came to a stop in front of Karofsky. "You as yellow as the sun is

hot. You ain't fit to wear this." He ripped the badge from Karofsky's chest and shoved at him hard. "Sheriff, you is demoted. Now do something useful and tie up the prisoners." Karofsky made to start forward but Strando felled him with a single punch.

Kurt clasped his father's hand in his own and noted everything around him in a foggy faze. Dimly he could hear Strando yelling and hollering, the posse responding in kind but without the same passionate ferocity, he could hear Sebastian hissing his name over and over. But none of it mattered. Not a bit. His father was gone and the fault lay at his door. It was his selfishness that had brought him here, that had kept him by Blaine's side. He had allowed himself to be blinded by love, and now his father had paid the price.

A cold came over him then, steeled and wounded. And Kurt thought back to all the things that Kurt had been taught while travelling in the gang, the gang that with any luck was now gone. He had learned what it was like to be accepted, what it was liked to be wanted, needed and loved. But most of all, he had learned how to aim true.

With that in his mind, his fingers closed around his father's abandoned gun.

## Chapter Fourteen

The gun felt solid and real in his hands, the very weight of it seemed to anchor Kurt. Focus him on the task at hand. From far away, under the roar of Kurt's own mind someone was speaking to him, calling his name over and over, but all Kurt had eyes on was Strando, who barked out orders to the others. Kurt stared at him, frozen, but he couldn't concentrate on the words; he felt as if he were hearing sounds through a tunnel, lost as the rage consumed him.

"Kurt," said Sebastian. His voice was muffled by the blow his nose had taken. "You crazy? Give it to me, at least."

Kurt didn't look at him. "You shot my father." He repeated, his voice flat, though his eyes never left Strando.

"Listen--"

Again, directed at Strando: "You shot my father."

"Shut up, you idiot," hissed Sebastian. He reached out a hand, his fingers circling Kurt's wrist. He shook him off and began to rise, his legs more steady than he would have expected. Distantly, he realised that his knees were caked in blood. His *father's* blood. "You wanna be kilt or something?"

"You shot my father," whispered Kurt, gun raised high.

"This isn't you, Kurt, *come on*." In another time, such concern in Sebastian's voice might have been something to wonder at, to ponder over. But here and now he may as well not even have existed. "Kurt, just--"

But Strando's head was turning now, and he finally sensed the danger he was in, finally sensed what Kurt meant to do. The knowledge made him throw back his head and give a guttural laugh. "Boy, what in tarnation do you think you're doing?" He placed a hand on his hip, shaking his head. He pointed his own gun at Kurt almost conversationally. "You just cool your skirts, now, son --"

"*You killed my father!*" Kurt's bullet hit Strando's gun dead on, causing sparks to fly and find the sky behind him.

Strando jumped back with a yell and stared at his hand in horror. "Shoot him, *shoot him!*" he screamed as Kurt raised the gun once more. The others made no move to follow, as they glanced at each other warily. "Shoot him!" Strando turned to glare at Puck, spittle flying from his mouth. "What the hell are you waiting for?"

Puck stood stock still, confusion on his face as he stared at Kurt and back to his newly-appointed Sheriff. "He's--he's my best friend's brother."

"I wouldn't give a fuck if he was the Second Coming -- put another eye in his forehead!"

Puck's eyes grew wide and his jaw tightened. "Or what, huh? You'll shoot me down like Hummel?" Puck gave a cold smirk and turned to the others. "Seems to me like Kurt here has got him some valid complaints. Can't say I blame him none." There was a low murmuring from behind him, more than one in agreement.

"What the hell is the matt-- I said shoot him! Shoot him! *Shoot him!*" Strando screamed, pulling his other gun from his holster as Kurt thumbed back his own hammer. "Kill that mother fuc--" He gave a grunt of pain as another body slammed into him and brought him to the ground roughly.

Kurt didn't get a chance to recognise the assailant before Puck was charging at him, grabbing at his arm and dragging him backwards to crouch down behind a nearby wagon. He fought against the hold. "*No! No!* I had him! I had him!"

"You were standing out there like a dummy, Hummel. You might as well have had a bullseye painted on you!" Puck shook his head. "Where the hell did you even learn to shoot like that?"

"Wait, wait--" Kurt looked around frantically. "Sebastian's out there and--" *My father's body.*

Around them dirt hit air and the soft thud of bullets fell amidst the shouting from the gang behind. Kurt sneaked a glance round the wagon, fighting against Puck's hand. In front of him, Sebastian was crawling weakly, wincing every time a shot danced too close.

"We have to get him!"

"Yeah? Well, I don't copy to that bet. We'd be dead before we hit the floor. Oh, hell, oh, hell. Quinn is going to *kill* me."

Kurt risked another glance, adrenaline still soaring through his body. Sebastian hadn't made much ground, and the look in his eyes was one of pure desperation, but it was the resignation that was sinking in that finally had Kurt's feet moving. Kurt may not particularly care for the man, but he meant something to Blaine, and perhaps despite their differences, he had even come to mean something to Kurt.

"We have to help him," whispered Kurt, eyes darting as he searched for a clear route.

"And the *baby*, what kind of life is that? Growing up without a daddy? Shit! Sorry, Kurt-- Kurt! Come back, are you tapped in the head? *Kurt!*"

Kurt bore him no heed, running towards Sebastian's prone body and hissing as bullets tore at his clothes and stole some for themselves. Reaching Sebastian, he skidded in the dirt but managed to hold on and grip his shoulder. "Come on, try and move we have to be--"

The pain was immediate, bringing Kurt to his knees beside Sebastian, pulling a scream from Kurt as his wounded right hand hit the ground, his gun clattering to his side.

"Hell, Kurt, move-- *move--*." Sebastian tried to drag them both as shots rained down around them and the dust rose in great clouds around them.

Kurt looked back to see that while Strando's numbers had depleted, they were still enough to ensure this battle was only going to end one way. A sense of failure and disappointment bloomed in his chest. Blaine would have managed cold revenge without being thwarted by well-meaning idiots who made his decisions for him. Hell, Blaine would probably not have been fazed by such a small injury as Kurt had taken. But then, Blaine wasn't there. He wouldn't be there for him, and this terrible, baffled rage of his was all he had in the world right now.

The dust cleared for a moment, just a moment, but the figure of Strando was clear as daylight to Kurt. He was close enough to see the cruelty in his smile as he raised his barrel towards the two. He supposed he should feel fear, sadness, anger. But all he felt was numb. Closing his eyes, and fleeing the pain in his hand, he imagined a reality where his father still lived, where the Carmel gang were safe. And that Blaine was with him. *If only.*

"Howdy, boys!" Jesse catcalled. "You miss us?"

Kurt eyes flew open as the sound of hooves hammering the ground accompanied the rebel yell, Nursing his bleeding hand to his chest, he looked, stunned, to his side. "Blaine?"

He barely had time to register the arrival before Blaine was reaching down and grabbing Kurt with one hand, throwing him over the horse's saddle. Behind them, Kurt glimpsed Jesse and Rachel grabbing for Sebastian and dragging him alongside the horse.

"The bank!" yelled Jesse. "Ride the horses through!"

They charged the building opposite, the horses crashing through the narrow doorway with their powerful hooves splintering the wood and coming to a violent halt. Rachel clambered down quickly, and helped lower Sebastian to the ground.

"Kurt, are you okay?" Puck flew through the doorway, dodging as a bullet whizzed past his head. He fired a shot back towards the posse and swung round the door, shielding himself by the wood. "Hudson's soured at me enough without me coming back without you. Could you at least try not to run *towards* the bullets?"

Kurt held his hand to his chest and stared up into Blaine's concerned eyes. "Why did you do that? You were clear, Blaine!"

"I had to," he said. "Let me see that." Blaine took his wrist gently in his palm, frowning down at the wound. His fingers pressed against Kurt's skin hot, clammy and *there*. "Your hand, Kurt, oh, God."

"Now's not the time--"

"You!" Jesse pointed at Puck, start barricading that doorway. He wrapped his hand around the inside of his shirt and smashed through the glass in the pane, kneeling down beside it and placing the barrel on the edge. He turned to them with a broad grin. "Of all the buildings in all the town. Someone make sure the horses don't eat the dough."

"You came back?" Kurt's voice was dazed, and it didn't help that the throbbing pain in his hand was causing him to feel light-headed. "You-- I don't understand."

"This is going to need stitches. Can you move your fingers?"

"It's not that bad," murmured Kurt, relieved to see movement when he flexed them. "You came back?"

"We heard the shooting-- I-- no, *we* couldn't leave you." Blaine raised a palm, and a thumb tracing over a tear Kurt hadn't realised he had shed. "Your father...?"

"Dead." The word tumbled out, harsh and ugly and final. "Out there. Strando killed him."

Guilt flooded Blaine's face and he turned away wretchedly, cursing under his breath.

"No, don't you dare do that," hissed Kurt, spinning him back around with his good hand. "Strando did this, and he's going to pay." Kurt glanced down at the red staining his knees, his own blood mixed with his father's, and then the adrenaline from earlier was easing its way back into Kurt's bones. "*I'm* going to make him pay."

"Don't be a fool, Kurt! Your hand is busted for one thing! And-- that isn't you, it was *never* you! You are moral and kind and good and--"

"Weak?" spat Kurt. "Weak enough to sit back and let my father's murderer suck in the air he robbed from my own kin?"

"It's not weak! It's smart You're injured for one, and we are outnumbered for another--"

"I know what I need to do! I'll get him to stop firing! Just me and him, one on one!"

"Look!" Blaine grabbed at Kurt's shoulders and twisted him to see out the window. "There's your pa, right there. And it's painful. It's wrong, but you loved that man and he loved you! You go out there and get yourself killed, all that love will have been for nothing!"

The sight of his father, alone, was enough to set a shake throughout Kurt's body. He sensed that if he didn't batter down his emotions that they would tear him in two. He couldn't allow that. Not before he had avenged his father at least.

"Kurt, this isn't you. This is your anger talking. Your pain. But this isn't you. Don't you see?"

"Can you two save the dramatics for later?" asked Jesse. "You're missing all the fantastic shots I've been making. Look! I just took that guy's hat off."

"You are supposed to be aiming for his head," mumbled Sebastian, slapping at Rachel's hand as she tried to tend to his swollen cheek.

"Christ!" A figure appeared in the doorway and slumped against the wood. He was quickly followed by a second and a third. "He got me, he took half my damn thigh off," Karofsky bellowed.

"He's with us!" Puck said to Rachel, who was raising her knife. The others helped him in moving aside the boxes to allow him entry, their eyes darting warily around the room as they entered.

"We ain't *with* you," said one that Kurt recognised to be Azimio, a regular at the shop. "We just ain't with that crazy son of a bitch out there."

Azimio lowered Karofsky down, while Puck knelt down next to him, ripping parts of his shirt up to tie a tourniquet around the wound.

"I'm Sebastian, by the way." Puck eyed the offered hand warily, and the owner even more. "That looks pretty bad. Perhaps some more of your clothing would help stem the flow. Mayhap the pants?"

It was too much colour and it was too much noise. All Kurt wanted to do was centre on the fury inside, let it take him. Let it mould him. Let it allow him to take revenge. But Blaine wouldn't let him follow the feeling down, he wouldn't give Kurt up.

"---are you listening, Kurt? This isn't what your father would have wanted."

"Hell's bells, Blaine, let the kid alone. Hey, Billy, find a piece and pick a window. The pickings are ripe."

"Pipe down, Jesse," snapped Blaine. He turned back to Kurt, his hand cupping his cheek gently, thumb brushing against his lips. "There's got to be a back way out of here. Maybe you and your friend can ride to safety. We can hold these--"

Kurt slapped the hand away. "Ride to safety? And leave you all to die? This is all my fault, Blaine! What they did to my fath--- what they *did*? And you expect me to just leave you here?"

"He makes a fair point," Sebastian chipped in.

"This is *not* your fault! You didn't ask for any of this, Kurt. I should have turned you loose the first chance I had. But I didn't. I couldn't. Because-- because of the way I feel about you. I love you, Kurt. Don't you get that? Don't you see? And to see you dead in the dirt like just another low-down cowhand would tear my heart out!!"

Kurt sucked in a breath at the words. "I love you, too," he whispered, stunned to realise that he could feel so much when loss weighed down so heavily upon him. "I love you, too, Blaine."

"As *a friend*." Jesse turned to the others and nodded with a stern expression on his face. "*A friend*. That's the way it is in a gang, you see."

"Yeah," Azimio eyed them warily. "You do seem a *friendly* bunch."

"Oh, Lord in Heaven, I can't take anymore of this," said Sebastian. "Rachel, be a dear and slit my throat, please."

"Sebastian, there is nothing noble and dramatic in my slitting your throat."

"I'm not looking for noble and dramatic, you idiot."

Rachel tossed her head. "Perhaps we should take lessons from Jesse here on how to conduct ourselves, though of course I did become the most infamous of us in the last four towns."

"Because you designed your own wanted posters!" snapped Jesse. "You hung them from every darn rock and tree and dog."

"They were fetchin'," said Sebastian begrudgingly. "Now about that throat slitting?"

"You let them alone. I think that it's deeply thrilling," Rachel wiped at the corner of her eye and smiled at Kurt and Blaine. "Why don't you ever say things like that when we are in moments of great doom and peril, Jesse?"

"What are you talking about?" Jesse said, reloading his barrel. "I do!"

"Yes, but you are usually talking about *yourself*--"

Karofsky got up shakily, pressing a trembling hand to his thigh. Glancing up, his eyes met with Kurt's. For a moment Kurt felt as if there was something there, that there had always been something there waiting for Kurt to see it, but before he had a chance to decipher what it could be, Karofsky bowed his head and limped to the window furthest away. Following Jesse's suit, he broke the window and took aim across the way.

Blaine, who had been watching the look that passed between them, lowered his head. "Don't you mind none, Kurt. It's not been a good day."

"I hadn't noticed," said Kurt, a bitter laugh erupting from his throat. His lips upturned in a parody of a smile, but that collapsed away and he felt the stinging tears rise again. He raised his good hand to his mouth to hold back the choking sobs.

Blaine pulled him close, his eyes sad and wondering. "Don't hold it back, it ain't nothing you can stop. Don't you worry none."

Rachel shook her head slowly, overwhelmed at the scene before her. "Do you remember, Jesse?" she murmured. "I had that terrible gaping wound right across my hand, and did you cradle me? Did you react like Blaine did to Kurt?"

Jesse scowled. "You had a splinter."

"A huge splinter!" Rachel threw her arms wide. "It was an ell if it was an inch!"

"That's your pretty mouth, darling."

"Again I can't help noticing that you are sorely lacking in Blaine's affectionate manner."

"A mite *too* affectionate if you ask me," muttered Azimio.

"Hey, don't knock it." Sebastian winked. "It can be a lonely trail."

"Of course I love you," replied Jesse, his brows furrowed. "You're everything to me. You are the only one who can match me, both in delinquent prowess, as well as sharing my emotional depth and penchant for headline spinning misdemeanours. "

Rachel tapped her foot. "I'm waiting."

"For what? A ring? Give me ten minutes to sort out this vermin and we'll see what we can find in those safety deposit boxes back there."

"No, for you to say something insulting or demeaning. Or-- *wait*, you mean you do mean it? A ring?" Rachel's beam was wide and bright. "Really truly?"

"Please, God," Sebastian sighed. "Let me bleed to death."

"I knew it. I knew that deep within the confines of that chest, there lay a heart that only paid heed to me!"

"Rachel." Jesse turned from the window, hand pressed tight to his breast. "Ever since the first moment I saw you, I knew that ours were hearts that were meant to beat in mutual rhythm for all etern---"

"*Will you concentrate on the damn posse across the road trying to kill us!*" Karofsky yelled from the other side. "Lands sake, I can't believe I've been chasing a bunch of washer women all these weeks!"

"Ain't that the truth," agreed Sebastian. "Try *living* with it. There's nights I've nearly entered a sheriff's office with my own wanted poster." He winked again and Karofsky's cheeks reddened. Shaking his head and grumbling under his breath he returned to his position.

"Karofsky's right, Blaine. Give me a piece. I can aim just as good with my left." Kurt shrugged at Blaine's sceptical eyebrow. "Okay, I can make enough intimidating noise firing from my left. How's that."

"Just give the kid the gun, Blaine," added Jesse. "We need all the help we can get. If anything he can make me look good. Well, look gooder."

"Damnit!" Blaine shook his head, running a hand through his curls. "Fine," sighed Blaine, placing a gun into Kurt's hands. "But stay back. Let us handle this. If there's even the tiniest chance of you getting out of here, I want you to take it. Promise me that."

"I've already told you-- I'm not--"

"*Promise me, Kurt*"

Amazingly, Kurt could feel his mouth stretching into a smile. Grabbing Blaine's hand, he gave it a tight squeeze. "I promise."

Blaine gave a swift nod, and grabbed Kurt's arm giving it a tight squeeze. He then turned and joined Karofsky and Puck by their window, pulling his own gun from his holster. Azimio and another ex-member of the posse fired from the door, while Sebastian lay against the counter, cursing them all under his breath.

"Okay, Billy," said Jesse. "You and Rachel take over the firing while I re--" He gasped as Rachel grabbed his hair, pulled it to the side and fired from the window. Kurt gaped at the bullet hole embedded in the wood above Jesse's head.

"I love you, too," Rachel said with a smile, blowing at her smoking pistol.

"I always told you I'd believe you more if you didn't *sing* it to me." His mouth began to move in a grin that he never had chance to complete, his head springing to the side and back before he slumped down against Rachel's chest, a dark stain marring her shirt.

"Jesse?" Rachel's voice sounded impossibly young. "Jesse are you--- *no, no*, Jesse!"

Kurt moved quickly, lifting Jesse from her and easing him to the floor but it was too late. His eyes stared up at them and past them into the unknown.

"Oh, Rachel," breathed Kurt. He looked up at the others. At Sebastian's grim expression, at the concerned interest of Puck and the others, at Blaine. Blaine who looked so terribly hurt and so terribly lost. Lastly he glanced at Rachel. Her jaw was tight and her eyes dry. Kurt recognised that anger immediately, he also recognised the danger. "Rachel, I--"

She shook off his hand and picked up her gun. Kurt knew what she planned before she even acted, but nevertheless he was too slow. She was running for Pavarotti who was the nearest to the partially barricaded door, and Kurt barely had time to grab for her. She easily evaded Blaine and Karofsky's reaching hands as she climbed up upon the horse, and with a guttural yell was charging through the entrance into the hell outside.

"I have to go after her!" Blaine called as he ran for Jesse's horse, that was chewing through forms disinterestedly. Kurt was close at his heels. "Stay here, Kurt. We need cover!"

"No," snapped Kurt as he followed Blaine up onto the horse. "You aren't going out there alone!" He kicked in his steers, holding his gun high in his left hand. "Come on, Blaine! Hurry!"

They rode into the battle, hard and fast, Kurt firing at the attacking fray with his unpractised hand. He gasped as a bullet soared close, and shot back into the shadows, wincing at the responding cry of pain.

"Do you see her?" called Blaine, pulling the horse back to avoid a targeted area.

"No, I can't-- wait! There!" The dust from the bullets and horses was high in the air, making it difficult to see, but Kurt managed to spot Rachel, her horse reared back and her hair flowing in the wind. Through the night, he saw a silver gleam flying with perfect speed and aim, the blade embedding a firing opponent before she was lost in the chaos once more.

"Blaine," yelled Kurt into his ear. "We have to go back. We are too exposed!"

"No, not until I find her. She--" Blaine hissed in pain and grabbed at his neck, throwing himself backward in the saddle. The motion caused Kurt to lose his balance and both fell from the horse and hit the ground hard. Winded, Kurt attempted to sit up, eyes searching for Blaine.

"Blaine," he gasped, on seeing he had landed a few feet away, his body still and a vibrant red seeping into the ground around him. *No, no. Please, not Blaine, too. No!.*

Crawling towards him, using his good hand to press him onward, Kurt could feel the bile rise up in his throat. Was this the way his life was meant to be? Good people entering it, only to be lost too soon. His mother, his father. *Blaine?* Was Kurt perhaps some curse that brought down and stained the souls of all he touched? He sobbed as he moved, slowly- too slowly, towards Blaine, the sounds painful and racking to his own ears. Dimly, he realised that Blaine had fallen close to his father and the pain was afresh inside. *I've lost them all*, he thought, as he finally reached Blaine. *Everyone I've ever loved.*

"You back, boy?" Strando yelled, staggering out. Shots rang out from behind Kurt but all failed to connect with their mark. Strando fired a shot and Kurt heard a hiss of pain from the bank. "Hold your fire! Unless you want this boy's blood on your hands!" Silence fell.

Kurt squinted through the clouds of dust for Rachel but could not find her or Pavarotti. From the grunts of pain coming from the posses side of the road, she hadn't gone far. Hopefully it was close enough to stop

Strando. Wrapping his arm around Blaine's chest, he pulled him towards him, resting him on his thighs. The wound Blaine had taken was to the neck and blood flowed free. *Please*, Kurt thought. *Please live*.

"You see the mess you made, Hummel? All this fuss?" Strando began to limp towards him. "You think I'm happy about your pa? I ain't. That ain't it at all, but it was justice. I think you know that deep down. Well, if he raised you right, you do." He stopped and coughs racked out of him, deep and rough. "I don't mean you no harm, boy, this ain't no place for you. You belong at home with your stepma and brother. This is going to mighty hard on them. Especially since Fabray turned that boy out and what happened to old Hummel here. You want to cause them more heartache? Huh? Come on, you just-- you just come to me now and it will all be--"

"Stay back," said Kurt, glaring up at Strando. "Don't you come near him."

Strando grinned, teeth yellowed from years of chewing tobacco. It was a malicious grin, a cruel grin. "Come on, son. Don't you want to go home?" Kurt saw the glint at his side as his gun began to rise. "Go on home to that family of yours."

"I said stay back!"

"Maybe I'll hang you side by side?" Strando hissed, pretence of concern falling away. "Hmm. You'd probably like that. Make a nice example of ya. Teach others not to be foolish. To stay where they ought." Strando indicated towards Blaine with his gun. "I'll hang him dead, though, I ain't listening to that death rattle all the way back to McKinley." He smiled. "Might want to move yourself from under him, unless you want a hole in your pretty skirts." He cocked the trigger. "Imagine that, *me* catching Blaine Anderson. Ain't that something. Don't that beat all?"

Strando's trigger finger came down and Kurt was on the move. Grabbing at Blaine's holster, he rose up, thumbed the hammer on the gun and let fly at Strando, who answered in kind. Kurt closed his eyes and braced himself for the explosion of pain which must surely follow -- or perhaps it wouldn't, perhaps he wouldn't feel it at all, let alone hear it. All he wanted, more than anything, more than his happiness with Blaine, was that his own bullet found revenge for the person he had loved most his entire life.

And then he *did* hear the report from both guns, and there was no pain and he was still standing. He opened his eyes slowly.

"Well, don't that beat all?" Strando said again, before falling backward and hitting the dirt hard.

The gun dropped from Kurt's hands and he followed it to the ground. Crawling around Blaine, he pulled him to him tight and buried his hands in Blaine's curls, interlacing it with his fingers as he rocked back and forth. Just over yonder, Kurt's father lay still and gone and Kurt could almost feel its draw. Pressing a kiss to Blaine's temple, Kurt felt overcome by a weakness and collapsed onto his side. The pain inside seemed to be spreading, becoming more real by the second. Blaine still in his arms, Kurt glanced at the stars above. So Strando was dead, but there it was: he'd achieved what he wanted this day, and did it really matter? His mother and father were still gone, as remote and silent as those very stars. His side hurt, and he sensed rather than felt the intruder that lay there, hot and angry. *He got me, after all*, he thought. *Ain't that something?* How simple, how easy it would be to give up, to stay on the ground and just go with them.

And yet--

With a sigh, Kurt lowered his hand to press once more into Blaine's hair and closed his eyes.

\*

Dawn had risen, but there was a deep frost on the grass. Kurt couldn't recall the last time he'd even seen frost, and never in summer. He stepped out from the shade of the trees and stepped on to the grass, feeling it crunch satisfyingly beneath his feet. He reached down to feel the cold shards forming on each blade, but his hand was numb. Ah, yes. He'd been shot there. Maybe the nerve endings were dead.

The sun was rising rapidly, and it cast great bars of gold on the grass. Such an expanse of greenery! It stretched for miles, further than he could see. What a welcome change from the endless plains, the dark beautiful forest and this lush expanse. And farther, right at the edge of this world, was a lake. He could see it shimmering in the distance. Perhaps he'd go on right over and see what was there.

"Kurt."

He turned to see his father standing there, and his pleasure slipped away to confusion. "You aren't supposed to be here -- are you?"

Burt shrugged. "What are you doing here?"

"You always answered a question with a question." Kurt gave a rueful smile. "I have to tell you, pa. It was frustrating sometimes."

Burt laughed easily. "Only sometimes?"

"Yeah."

"You said *was*."

A great sadness crested within Kurt. "You know why." He looked around his father, to where the trees were swallowed up by the dark. "What's through there, then?"

"Just trees. Never much if you don't look beyond." He opened his palm, revealing a small crushed bullet. Tipping his hand, he let it slip from his grasp to the green below. It landed with a harsh ping.

"There's something on the tree."

"There is?"

"Mother's portrait." Kurt frowned. "Now, how did that get up there?"

Burt squinted. "Are you sure? It don't look like your ma much."

"Of course it is," said Kurt, striding over to the tree in question. "See? It's -- oh." He studied the Wanted poster, and it was a crudely-drawn portrait of Rachel. She'd hate how they did her chin. He smiled to himself.

"You know I love you, right?"

Kurt reached out to him. "I know, of course -- don't step away from me."

Burt came close, produced a damp washcloth and wiped it across his son's brow. "Kurt, you ain't gonna leave us, are you?"

"Who?" asked Kurt.

"You were mighty brave."

Kurt pushed his hands away, turned around. The sun was blazing. It was so hot! The forest was gone. Had there been a lake? The grass was as dry as hay underfoot. "Where did you go?" he asked.

"But I'm right here."

"No, *where did you go?*"

Burt didn't answer. He began to hum softly. Kurt recognised the melody. A vague memory, his mother singing it to him as he drifted off to sleep. His father began to sing:

*My love is a rider, wild horses he breaks,*

*But he promised to quit it all just for my sake;*

*He sold off his saddle, his spurs, and his rope,*

*And there'll be no more riding, and that's what I hope.*

"Kurt," said his father. "You know, don't you?"

"I don't know --what?"

"You two go on, get out of here. You mind me now. The boy needs air."

"Get out of whe--"

\*

A harsh light laid down heavy on Kurt's eyelids, and he fought to open them. A groan escaped his lips as he turned his head to the source, a flickering candle-light on a familiar bedside table.

"There, honey." *Carole*. A damp cloth found his face and patted at his skin. "It's about time you woke up."

"I don't--" Kurt licked at his dry lips desperately, looking down and seeing his right hand bandaged against his chest. Another bandage covered his skin there, and he felt a dull ache in his ribs. "Carole, my father--"

"*Shh*, sweetheart." She cupped his face and stroked gently at his cheek, her eyes were filled with unshed tears. "Don't upset yourself so. The fever has only just broken."

"Fever?" Kurt blinked and attempted to sit up, groaning at the pain. Another figure stood in the doorway, a dark yet familiar shadow. "Finn."

"Kurt." The name was cracked and broken. "I'm glad you're okay. I'm so sorry about-- I'm just so sorry, Kurt." He turned to Carole. "Can we still move him? Now he's awake?"

She nodded and patted gently at Kurt's chest. "The wounds are clean. I've packed plenty of supplies to keep it that way. It has to be tonight, Finn."

"Move me? Move me where."

"For your own good, darling. The townsfolk don't know you are here. They would have conniptions if they found out we lied to them. It's because of their sorrow over your father that they have taken me at my word and not raided the place."

"You can't stay, Kurt," said Finn, moving into the light and taking Kurt's uninjured hand. "Not after, well, Strando."

"Strando killed my father," hissed Kurt. *And Blaine*. "I don't regret that. I won't."

"True enough, and that's the same song the others have sung. But you still killed a man, Kurt, and you helped the Carmel gang, heck, some are saying you helped them escape in the first place--"

"I never--"

"*We know*. But there's going to be a trial and what with the gang escaping and all, things don't look too good for you."

"Escape?" Kurt barely registered the knowledge that he was to be tried. "Who?"

"A few weeks back now, Puck brought you back to us." Finn's face twisted in distaste at his friend's name. "He had help. That fair woman and another of the gang." He rolled his shoulders. "I've been meeting with Rachel most nights, letting her know how you are doing. She-- she's quite something, isn't she? Very loud for one so small."

"Did Blaine-- did he---" A wave of nausea overcame him and Kurt fell back against the pillows. Darkness threatened to tell him down towards it, and he fought a losing battle to stay conscious.

*"--him now, Finn, it's almost dawn and you know how itchy Sheriff Nelson has been getting. It won't be long before Burt's name won't be enough to keep that door closed."*

Hands at him now, gently easing him into clothes, fingers pulling his bangs back from his face and a gentle kiss to the forehead. A slight sting as hands brushed his side and air below his feet. A woman's voice humming.

*"Take care, Kurt. Come back to us one day."*

Flashes of the night sky as he was heaved up onto a horse, rope binded around his waist and a solid chest at his back. An arm holding him tight and the harsh breathing of the animal carrying him.

*"They are north of here, at the old railway line. You take care of him, Hudson."*

*"You stick to taking care of your new wife, Puckerman."*

A snarl and a kick, and then the rock of a horse hightailing it for the hills.

\*

"Kurt? Come on, wake up. We're here." A hand slapped at his face and Kurt shoved at it groggily. Blinking awake, he realised that he was lying on his back on the cool ground, bathed in the light of the moon.

"Where's here?"

"North of McKinley, up by the valley. Pa took us fishing here once, remember." Finn untied the binds, encouraging Kurt to hold tight to the reins as he climbed down. "And you hit me with your rod because I splashed you."

Kurt smiled at the memory, wrapping his arm around Finn's shoulder as he helped him down. "Of course. You spoiled my Sunday best!"

"Yeah? Well, your singing was scaring off all the fish!" Finn helped him stand, Kurt holding the saddle of the horse to keep you upright.

"It's probably his tone. Amphibians respond to only the most gentle of melodies, it reminds them of a slow tide. It's quite understandable. It's hard for an amateur to pull off perfectly."

"Rachel!" Kurt span round at the side of his voice, his shock clearing the last of his dizziness. "You're--- I can't believe it!" He grabbed her tight, burying his face in her hair. "I'm so sorry about Jesse."

"Thank you, Kurt, thank you." She pulled back, wiping at her cheek harshly. With a brave smile she said; "I've been working through my grief by writing a series of tragically inclined sonnets. Sadly, not enough words rhyme with corpse."

"Horse?" suggested Finn.

"Oh, yes, good! Remind me of that later, Kurt." She pulled him her again, mindful of his injured chest. "I'm so sorry about your father. I wish that we had never involved you any of this-- I wish I could turn it all back." Tears were running free now and Kurt had to fight from joining her. "Back to when Jesse and your father were safe, back to when Sebastian was still here---"

"Shh," soothed Kurt, "I know, I know." Strange how so short a time could make you care for someone so deeply. "And Sebastian?" He stepped back holding at arms length. "His wounds were fatal?"

"No." She wiped at her eyes and gave a small smile. "Took off somewhere yonder with that ex-sheriff of yours."

"*Karofsky*?" Kurt turned to Finn in surprise. "Is this true?"

Finn nodded, rubbing at the back of his neck. "Guess he thought he'd be best off taking his chances with a known felon rather than the town baying for his badge."

Kurt laughed harshly. "I'm not sure even Karofsky deserves to be stuck on the trail with Sebastian."

Finn stepped forward, taking firm hold of Kurt's shoulder. "As far as McKinley knows, you rode out after the gunfight. Might be dead for all we know." Finn looked over Kurt's shoulder and blanched. "Sorry, I know that your friend--- I didn't mean--"

"It's fine." Her smile, for the first time since he had known her, didn't meet her eyes. She tucked a stray piece of her behind her ear and looked away. "We'll look after you. I mean, better than last time, obviously."

"I can't believe that I'm saying goodbye," whispered Kurt, thinking of that long lost flyer from Harmony's show. It was all he had ever wanted, but he could never have imagined the cost would be so high. "Wait, you said we and Sebastian---" Kurt trailed off, eyes wide, the name already leaping from his tongue. "Is he--?"

Rachel nodded, and for a moment the sorrow left her eyes. She indicated to her side, at a tree that overlooked the three. He stepped out of the shadows, his hat low and his walk almost crooked but Kurt knew him. Kurt would know him anywhere.

"Howdy, Kurt," Blaine said, limping towards him and raising the brim of his hat. All weakness that had held Kurt down slipped away as he ran to the other man, his body slamming into his so hard, that Kurt's ribs groaned at the contact.

"*Blaine!* I thought--- Oh, God-- I thought--" Kurt pressed his face into the crook of his neck, feeling the rough scabbing of a healing wound against his cheek. Arms wrapped around him tight and Kurt held on for dear life, for fear someone would take him away once more.

Finn coughed loudly. "I reckon I oughta get back to ma. She's not going to want to be alone."

It was with great difficulty that Kurt could leave Blaine's arms, but Finn was his brother. And this could be the last time that he would ever lay eyes upon him. "Finn. I don't know what to say. Thank you. Thank you for everything."

Finn gave him a soft punch in the shoulder, smiling sadly. "Maybe, maybe-- you can come say howdy sometime?" He suggested, his stare hovering over Rachel and then back to Kurt. "Just-- maybe once a year or something."

"I'd like that, Finn. I really would." Even as Kurt said it, he knew it to be a lie. But sometimes in life, a lie was a kindness. "Wait," he said as Finn turned back to his horse. Hands feeling at his trouser pockets, he wondered if maybe it was left behind in his old room-- but no-- Carole had known. She had remembered and kept it close. Removing the beloved handkerchief, he raised it to his face and inhaled deep. In the dark halls of his memory, he fancied he could smell his mother's perfume once more. *Goodbye*, he thought as he took Finn's hand and placed it in his palm. "Could you bury this at her grave?" That part of him was gone now, that part of him was no more.

Finn nodded, although his head was tilted in confusion. "They buried your father next to her. Ma insisted." Kurt smiled tightly at that, touched at the kindness Carole had always bore him.

"Say my goodbyes for me. Tell her I love her." Kurt grabbed his brother's arm. "And you, too."

"You were a good brother, Kurt." Finn wiped at his eyes with the heel of his hand. "I'm going to miss you." Without waiting for a reply, Finn turned and climbed back up onto his horse, spurring her away without looking back.

Blaine came up behind him as he watched Finn ride into the rising sunrise. "We need to get going, Kurt." Blaine murmured into his hair, pressing a gentle kiss at his temple.

Kurt turned to him, slipping his arm around Blaine's waist and drawing him closer, their bodies moulding together. He leant down and pressed his lips gently against Blaine's, mouth turning into a slow smile as they parted, Blaine tracing his lips with his tongue. "Blaine, please, I..." Kurt paused, meeting Blaine's eyes, in the pale moonlight. Dimly, Kurt heard Rachel make her excuses as Kurt pushed closer, needing more.

Groaning low in his throat, Kurt watched Blaine's eyes flutter shut before their lips pressed together again, Blaine kissing the words from Kurt's mouth. The pain, the love, the anger. There was so much Kurt had to say, but none of that mattered for now, as Kurt raised his hand to Blaine's cheek, caressing soft skin and stubble as Blaine's own hand clutched at Kurt's shirt, pulling them even closer until Blaine was moaning into his mouth. Blaine's hands were frantic at first, searching Kurt's back as though committing it to

memory, but his fingers moved so carefully as they reached up to card through Kurt's hair then slid down to rest gently at the nape of his neck.

Kurt broke away with a tiny gasp. Blaine stared up at him, his smile slightly cocky but the eyes brimmed with sincerity. "I can't believe you are okay," he whispered, thumbs tracing Blaine's jaw line. "I was so convinced I had lost you."

"Flesh wound," shrugged Blaine. "But you-- I didn't know what to do with myself when I came to." The smile vanished and his voice lowered. "I'm so sorry, Kurt. All of this-- it's all my fault. I should have let you alone. I should have insisted that we leave you."

"There still would have been a posse. There still would have been bloodshed."

"But not yours, Kurt. Or your father's."

"You can't know that. My father would have gone with Karofsky no matter what. And me? If you conked me on the head and left me to be found on a dirty floor you are sure as heck I would have come after you!"

Blaine smiled weakly, playing with Kurt's fingers as he glanced away. "This life, Kurt. You are worth so much more than this life. I can't ask you to live it. It's dangerous and immoral and-- I can't see you hurt again. I just can't."

"Then I won't get hurt."

"You can't promise that."

"No. I can't. No one can. But I promise to try." Kurt shook his head. "We can't change what happened, how we came to be. But we can have a future together, Blaine. Truly. All I want to be is with you. No matter where. No matter how."

Blaine closed his eyes and pressed his forehead to Kurt's, inhaling him deep. "I love you so much. It was you. It was you I was looking for all along. You're the dream."

Kurt kissed him again and pulled away with a smile, taking Blaine's hand, he let him direct them to Pavarotti. Blaine helped Kurt up, apologising as Kurt winced at the effort, and Kurt slipped his arms

around Blaine's waist, resting his chin against his shoulder. He slipped another tie around them both to ensure Kurt didn't topple from the house, should he fall unconscious once more.

"We are going to have to get you a new handle," announced Rachel, riding up alongside them. "Something that doesn't tie you to McKinley. Something cowboy like. And menacing. That cherub face of yours is going to be quite the hindrance."

"Well, Jesse was right partial to calling me Billy, so let's stick with that." Rachel grinned at this. "Hmm. What about William Bonny?"

"Oh, I like it," said Rachel. "It has an added touch of class. You should add an initial, however. An initial exudes mystery."

Blaine shrugged. "Needs work. But *I'm* going to stick to Kurt, if it please ya."

"Whatever you say, *Brian*." Kurt pinched at Blaine's side, resting his head on his shoulder once more.