



Principal Figgins's office, Monday morning

Rachel Berry paused outside the door to Principal Figgins's office just long enough to straighten her kneesocks and smooth down the sides of her corduroy skirt. Her bright white button-down and pink-and-green argyle sweater-vest seemed to scream *overachiever*—not that Principal Figgins needed to be reminded that Rachel Berry was special. McKinley High wasn't the kind of high school where students wanted to stand out. And Rachel stood out.

"Good morning, Mrs. Goodrich." Rachel smiled her 1,000-watt smile at the dour-faced secretary in the outer office. Mrs. Goodrich always smelled like cookie dough, and for some reason she was always scowling at Rachel, which seemed unfair. She should be happy to see someone who

was not a juvenile delinquent enter the principal's office.
"Is Principal Figgins in?"

"Do you have an appointment, Rachel?" Mrs. Goodrich's beady eyes stared down at Rachel over the tops of her tiny bifocals.

"No, but Principal Figgins told me he is always glad to see me." Rachel breezed past Mrs. Goodrich's desk, feeling a faint craving for cookies. As her penny loafers padded quietly across the worn industrial carpet and through the open door of the principal's inner office, she couldn't help thinking it was kind of sad when a principal couldn't even get hardwood floors. But Rachel wouldn't let the sadness of Principal Figgins's existence bring her down—not today. Maybe he was stuck in a crappy office in crappy Lima, Ohio, but Rachel Berry wasn't going to be here forever. Not if she had anything to say about it.

For Rachel, freshman year had been a bit of a failure. She had thought high school was going to be all about coming into her own and helping people around her realize what a truly incredible and talented person she was. Instead, every time she raised her hand to give the—always correct—answer in history class, her fellow classmates rolled their eyes; every time she went to the front of the room to answer—correctly—the algebra problem on the board, she'd be tripped; and whenever she volunteered to act out one of the parts—usually the lead—in whatever Shakespeare play they were reading in Mr. Horn's English class, she'd

be heckled. Only in Lima would someone be ridiculed for aspiring to get out of Lima.

But the culmination of her humiliation had been her failed campaign for class president. The poster board signs she'd made with such care, combining patriotic red, white, and blue stripes with her signature gold stars, were nearly of professional quality. But the signs, along with the catchy slogans she and her dads had come up with, had all been desecrated in varying ways by naysayers. Someone had taken a Sharpie and changed VOTE BERRY—SHE'S A STAR to VOTE BERRY—SHE'S BIZARRE. After the election, which popular Sebastian Carmichael had won, to no one's surprise, Rachel demanded a recount. Jessica Davenport, one of the official ballot counters, told Rachel that no candidate had ever lost by such a large margin. In the history of the school. She said they'd double-counted, just because they thought it was a mistake. It wasn't.

"Rachel. Good morning." Principal Figgins looked up briefly from his desk. The window behind him looked out on the student parking lot in all its glory, with students hiding behind their cars to smoke the last puffs of their cigarettes. A group of football players was hovering around a couple of freshmen, probably threatening to lock them in the porta-potty near the stadium's bleachers. "I'm very busy today. Someone poured ten gallons of blue raspberry Kool-Aid into the swimming pool, and the entire swim team is stained blue." He sighed heavily.

His slight Indian accent became more pronounced when he was flustered. As the daughter of two gay dads, Rachel appreciated the fact that Lima was surprisingly diverse, for the Midwest.

“I’m sorry for the interruption, Principal Figgins, but it’s very important.” She gracefully sat down in one of the chairs facing his desk, trying to ignore the inelegant farting sound the leather padding made beneath her, and carefully crossed her legs. Yes, freshman year was behind her. Nothing but a distant bad memory.

“Yes, Rachel.” He rubbed the dark splotches beneath his eyes, and Rachel wondered momentarily if everything in his home life was okay. He never looked very happy. “Why don’t you just go ahead and tell me what it is?”

“As you know, Principal Figgins, McKinley High School has a sadly limited number of creative outlets for performance-minded students such as myself.” It was true. For as long as she could remember, Rachel’s fathers had let her enroll in any sort of activity she wanted—tap and ballet and, briefly, hip-hop. Vocal training, piano lessons, acting lessons. Public speaking training. Improv. Pageantry. Anything that allowed Rachel to be onstage.

But once she got to high school, her options seemed to disappear. It was all politics in high school.

“Yes, well.” Principal Figgins pushed his hair back, showing his receding hairline. “Budget cuts make that a very tricky subject. I’m not sure there’s anything I can do.”

“But there is, sir.” Rachel believed that when people gave

no as an answer, they were usually just too lazy to try and figure out how to say yes.

“Enlighten me, then.”

Rachel had prepared a whole speech this morning while she did thirty minutes on the elliptical trainer in her bedroom. She was a firm believer in holistic health. She woke up early each morning to do either a cardio workout or yoga. This routine helped keep her balanced. “I realized that there is one underutilized outlet that’s just being wasted away—and that I would like to be allowed to take over. The morning announcements.” She waved her arms in a flourish, as if she had just announced an Oscar winner.

“But Mrs. Applethorpe has always...”

“I know, sir.” Mrs. Applethorpe was the attendance officer who, each morning during first period, read the daily announcements with the enthusiasm of a mortician. “But I thought it would be fair to let someone else give it a try. Someone who could really pep up the announcements.” It was hard to stay still in her seat when Rachel felt so close to success. What better way to make herself—and her amazing voice—known? It was the closest thing the school had to a radio broadcast. And it was a captive audience—no one could change the station on her! After all, many important celebrities had got their start in radio, like Ryan Seacrest. *Not that he’s as talented as I am*, Rachel thought.

Principal Figgins leaned back in his chair. “It’s not a terrible idea. Mrs. Applethorpe has been complaining about

her vertigo acting up when she stands in front of the microphone.”

“Excellent!” Rachel exclaimed. Mrs. Applethorpe’s loss was her gain.

Principal Figgins nodded, pressing his lips into a warning line. “You can start it on a trial basis only. Two weeks.” He glanced at his watch. “You can start today, if you get over to the attendance office in time.”

Ten minutes later, Rachel adjusted the microphone and ran her hard-bristle brush through her dark hair. It didn’t matter that no one could see her; she still wanted to be at her best. The setup was a little simple—the attendance office didn’t have all the equipment she would have preferred to work with—but it was a start.

“Just push the red button and start reading off the sheet,” Mrs. Applethorpe directed loudly as she backed out of the room with a handful of knitting.

“Thank you,” Rachel answered politely, grateful that Mrs. Applethorpe was leaving the room. “*Da da da da da da da da daaaaa*,” she sang quietly, warming up her voice. Butterflies fluttered madly in her stomach, and she could feel her blood pumping quickly through her veins. Every particle of her body felt alive, as if it were suddenly spring after a long, cold winter. This was what performing was all about.

She pushed the red button.

“Good morning, McKinley High. This is Rachel Berry bringing you the daily announcements.” She took a deep

breath. “I’d like to start off with a tune from the seminal musical classic that we all know and love, *Singin’ in the Rain*.” In a second, she was belting out her rendition of “Good Morning”—and as she sang, she imagined her words drifting through the loudspeakers of every classroom, every student in school enthralled by the beauty of her voice. She imagined them whispering, “Who is that? Rachel Berry? I had no idea she was so amazingly talented!” There was no sign of Mrs. Applethorpe coming in to interrupt Rachel’s show. She was either spellbound by Rachel’s voice or wrapped up in her knitting. Either way, Rachel knew a victory when she saw it.

When she finished singing, she quickly rolled into the list of announcements. “And now for the news of the day. I hope you’re all planning on coming to the fall music recital: Fall in Love with Music!” Rachel had wondered if she should sign up for it; she was worried the school wasn’t ready yet to see her onstage in all her glory.

“Also, voting starts today at lunch for this year’s homecoming king and queen.” *Boring*, she thought. Like the king and queen were ever a surprise. It was always the prettiest, blondest girl, and the handsomest, most Ken-doll-type guy. “The king and queen will be announced and crowned at the highly anticipated homecoming dance, which will follow the homecoming football game next Friday night.

“I’d like to sign off this morning by awarding Rachel Berry’s Gold Star of the Week—a very special award given each week to a person who has done something outstanding

to improve life at McKinley High.” She’d thought of this last night, and it seemed to be an appropriate way to give back to the school. “This week I’d like to award the gold star to...”—she paused for effect—“myself, for taking over morning announcements and bringing them back to life.” She was glad Mrs. Applethorpe wasn’t listening. Maybe it was a little much to give herself the first gold star, but she was doing the school a big service. And what was wrong with giving herself a little pat on the back when no one else was? “I hope I’ve made everyone’s morning a little brighter. See you all tomorrow!”

She pushed the OFF button and stared at the microphone. Her fingers were tingling from her success. She’d done it! She’d taken the first huge step of the year to becoming someone people actually knew and admired. Who knew? Maybe by next year, people would be voting for her for homecoming queen. The thought gave her chills.

Rachel slung her backpack over her shoulder as she left the attendance office. The hallway was packed with students clanking their lockers open and guys doing that shoulder-thumping thing they did. She had just a few minutes to get to her locker before first period. Her face was flushed with excitement. She felt like a new woman.

But...no one seemed to be looking at her. She stared at the students as they continued to brush past her, oblivious to the fact that she’d just given an amazing performance over the loudspeaker. Was it possible that everyone was just

too jealous of her obvious talent to acknowledge her? The thought made her feel a little better.

She looked up to see Sue Sylvester, the hardened coach of the Cheerios. Rachel stood up a little straighter. She didn't exactly like Coach Sylvester, but part of her admired the woman for making the most of her situation. Having to settle for being a high school cheerleading coach was probably a big letdown, but Coach Sylvester had turned the cheerleading program at McKinley into one of the best in the state, taking the Cheerios to nationals twelve years in a row. The trophy cases that lined the walls of the main hallways were overflowing with gold-plated cheerleader statuettes.

"I hope you're prepared to be eaten alive by your fellow students for that disgusting little display of self-promotion this morning." Coach Sylvester hitched her thumbs into the pockets of her red jogging suit.

"What?" Rachel blurted, but Coach Sylvester was already walking away. "If I'm not my own advocate, who will be?" Rachel called after the coach.

"Here's a gold star for you," Rachel heard someone say as she turned around, but all she saw was a blur of football players before the icy red splash of a slushie hit her in the face. The boys' laughter trailed down the hallway as they kept walking.

Deep breath. Getting slushied was nothing new. Those football guys could learn to be more creative. She'd been slushied at least a dozen times last year; she kept a change

of clothes in her locker for just that reason. *Nice try, boys, but you'll have to work a little harder to bring Rachel Berry down this year.*

And at least they'd listened to her broadcast.

Things are about to change, she thought as she strode toward her locker, ignoring people's stares as the cold liquid dripped down her neck. It was going to be a big couple of weeks at McKinley High, and she was going to be at the center of it.

After she changed into a clean sweater.



McKinley High cafeteria, Monday lunch

The smell of undercooked Tater Tots and watery macaroni and cheese wafted from the kitchen of the McKinley High cafeteria as the student body rushed into the lunchroom. The popular students—the Cheerios, the jocks, and the beautiful and/or rich kids who wore expensive jeans—clustered around the most coveted cafeteria real estate, the tables near the long wall of windows that overlooked the courtyard. The football players, with their characteristic brio, squirted milk through straws and lobbed pieces of canned fruit at one another in their continued efforts to dominate the animal kingdom. They believed they were at the top of the food chain, and everyone else agreed.

“I can’t eat this food,” one of the cheerleaders moaned as she waved her fork in the air. A piece of spongy

macaroni dangled from the tines. “It’s like I’m on a forced diet.”

“Coach Sylvester did say you looked a little sluggish on your flips,” the girl next to her whispered. “Maybe it’s not a bad idea.”

The tables in the middle of the cafeteria were taken up by various middle-of-the-road groups—the wannabes, closest to the popular kids, eyeing them enviously. The tables along the wall were home to the more ostracized groups—the Goths, the band geeks, the kids who picked their noses in class, and, in the farthest corner, near the tray return, the Glee kids. Tina Cohen-Chang, a pretty Asian-American girl with a blue streak in her shiny dark hair, spooned some blueberry yogurt into her mouth and tapped her foot on the floor as she hummed the latest Lady Gaga tune. “Did you see that terrible girl on *Idol* last night? The one with the jazz version of ‘Imagine’?”

Kurt Hummel flicked his hair out of his face. “John Lennon rolled over in his grave.” His eyes scanned the cafeteria. He didn’t love sitting in the back, away from all the beautiful people, but it seemed that McKinley High was not ready for him. He was the best-dressed kid in school, but that didn’t stop him from getting thrown in the Dumpster by guys who had never even heard of Alexander McQueen. If he leaned to the left just enough, he could see Finn Hudson’s head as he devoured a slice of greasy cafeteria pizza. Oh, to be a greasy pepperoni on that piece.

“Oh no, they’re not,” Mercedes Jones squealed, elbowing

Tina in the ribs and pointing. Mercedes, one of a handful of African-American students at McKinley, sometimes felt like an outsider and was defensive. “Those Cheerios are *charging* for homecoming votes!”

Tina and Kurt turned in the direction indicated by Mercedes’s accusatory finger. Smack in the middle of the cafeteria, head Cheerio Quinn Fabray and her two slightly less pretty sidekicks, Santana and Brittany, had hijacked a table and turned it into a voting booth. A giant sign on a piece of Day-Glo pink poster board read VOTE FOR HOMCOMING KING AND QUEEN: \$1 A VOTE! SPONSORED BY THE CHEERIOS. The girls, in their crisp cheerleading uniforms and matching glossy lips, were doing a brisk business, with eager students handing over the change from their lunch money for the privilege of filling out one of the homecoming ballots.

“Charging for votes?” Mercedes snorted. “That’s how they tried to hold down people in the South back in the day. They didn’t get away with it then, so how can they do it now?”

“Are you g-g-going to go over there?” Tina asked, nervously chewing on her fingernail. She hated confrontation.

Mercedes sighed. She leaned back in her chair and chomped on a slice of green apple. “What’s the point?”

“Is that that Rachel girl from the announcements?” Kurt tapped Mercedes on the arm and pointed in the direction of the voting booth.

Rachel Berry, now de-slushied and wearing a navy blue V-neck sweater that was only slightly crumpled from being

stashed on the top shelf of her locker, approached the Cheerios table.

The sight of people handing over dollar bills to Quinn Fabray for their God-given right to vote made Rachel feel slightly sick—or maybe it was the sight of the congealed pieces of mac and cheese that someone had flung against the plate-glass courtyard windows. Some of the pasta had slid down the window, leaving behind a slimy trail.

“Two things,” Rachel said, stepping in front of a freshman girl in a Victoria’s Secret Pink sweatshirt. “First, you spelled *homecoming* wrong on your sign.”

Quinn raised her eyes from the pack of money in her hands. She immediately felt her back straighten. Who the hell was Rachel Berry, one of the biggest losers to ever walk the halls of this school, to talk to her that way? Quinn only knew her name because she’d copied off her world history midterm last year in Mr. Prospero’s class. She opened her mouth to say something scathing in response, but Brittany, who was too blond for her own good, spoke up instead.

“What’s the second thing?” she asked, tilting her head to the side as if she had water in her ear.

“We don’t care what the second thing is,” Quinn interrupted. She stood up so that Rachel wasn’t able to look down on her. “Now, if you don’t mind, kindly step aside and let the people you cut ahead of in line vote.”

“The second, and more egregious, thing,” Rachel said in a louder voice, “is that you’re *charging* people to vote. It’s hardly fair!” While she loved to be the center of attention,

that wasn't why she was challenging the Cheerios. She just couldn't stand there and watch as they made everyone else do exactly what they wanted.

Quinn could practically feel the steam rising out of her ears. "Maybe if you didn't spend so much on your librarian-meets-preschooler ensembles, you might be able to buy yourself enough votes to win. And then you could shut up."

"But that would take a lot of votes," Santana Lopez spoke up, eyeing Rachel's outfit. "A whole lot."

Brittany and the kids clustered around the table started to giggle nervously, and Rachel took a step backward. She opened her mouth to say something, but her mind was a blank. Why was it she could never think up the perfect comeback until an hour after she needed it?

But this time, she didn't need one. "Excuse me, coming through." Elbowing through the crowd to her rescue was... Kurt Hummel? Kurt, wearing an asymmetrical kelly green sweater with buttons down one arm, pulled his black leather Gucci wallet out of his back pocket. He was tired of Quinn Fabray and her pretty, plastic friends bossing everyone around just because their pores were invisible and their breasts were perky and their hair stayed in place even as they did cartwheels during the halftime show. He pulled out a crisp fifty-dollar bill and tossed it carelessly onto the table. "I'd like fifty votes for queen, please."

Quinn made a face. "For who?" She glanced around helplessly, as if to say, *How could anyone be expected to deal with this?* "You?"

The whole cafeteria seemed to burst into laughter. Rachel hadn't noticed how many people were actually watching the scene play out. She flipped her hair—flattened from her encounter with the slushie—behind her ears. Without thinking, she snatched back the fifty-dollar bill Kurt had tossed on the table. She didn't know what the hell he was doing, but it wasn't worth fifty dollars. He was already walking away with the confidence of someone who has made his point, his shoulders thrown back proudly, and the idea of adding anything else to the Cheerios' already oversaturated coffers made her apprehensive.

Rachel followed him out into the hallway, ignoring the stares of people over their half-eaten lunches. She didn't mind being stared at, or even laughed at. It was better than being ignored. But even so, it was nice to have someone else stand up behind you, even if it didn't totally make sense.

"You didn't have to do that!" Rachel called after him, her words echoing in the empty hallway. She strode up to him quickly and held out the fifty-dollar bill.

Kurt eyed the money for a moment before grabbing it with his thumb and forefinger. "I guess this means neither of us will be queen."

Rachel smiled. She had to respect Kurt for managing to be so confident even though he was such an outsider. Rachel was always seeing him climb out of the Dumpster by the parking lot after the football guys had tossed him in. He'd dust himself off, straighten his clothes, and go on with his day. Quinn Fabray, head of the almighty Cheerios, had practically called

him gay in the crowded cafeteria, and he hadn't even seemed flustered. "You know," she said, hiking her backpack on her shoulder, "my two dads had to go through the same kind of thing when they were in high school."

Kurt's blue eyes narrowed slightly. "You have two dads?"

"They're great." Rachel nodded. "Sometimes I forget that not everyone has two dads."

Kurt eyed her thoughtfully. She thought maybe he was going to say something about being gay, but instead he said, "I heard you sing on the announcements this morning." He pursed his lips and looked as though he was debating what to say. "You were actually okay."

Okay? For some reason, this sounded like a huge compliment coming from Kurt. And since she hadn't actually been showered with compliments for her performance this morning—the slushie and a few eye rolls were all she'd got—her heart started to soar. "Thank you," she said, with uncharacteristic modesty.

"You might be interested in what Glee is doing these days. Stop by the choir room after school and check us out." By *us*, she knew he meant the Asian-American girl with the stutter and Mercedes Jones. But if Glee was actually a club again, there must be more members. "Oh, I don't know. I spoke to Mr. Ryerson last year about joining Glee. He made it clear that I would never get a solo—he said something about the importance of having only male soloists. Anyway, I got the sense that he doesn't appreciate true talent when he hears it," Rachel said.

“True, Mr. Ryerson isn’t exactly the most inspiring Glee Club faculty adviser,” Kurt responded. “But don’t worry. He’s never around. In fact, the next couple of weeks he’s *really* not around. Apparently our pastel-clad fearless leader is attending Ohio’s annual doll collectors’ convention. Anyway, we’ll be practicing this afternoon and, to be honest, we could use some more talent.”

“I’ll have to check my schedule,” Rachel bubbled. “But, yeah, maybe I’ll think about it.”

Kurt’s blue eyes stared her down. “Maybe I’ll see you later.”

“Maybe,” Rachel said as he walked away. She tried to wipe the smile off her face. It would be interesting to check out this group and see what they could do.

Back in the cafeteria, the clamor around the voting table had been replaced by an orderly stream of voters. Quinn poked Brittany in the ribs. “Great job on the sign. It might have been more effective if you’d spelled all the words correctly.”

Brittany blinked and took a carrot stick from the small Tupperware container on her lap. “You know I hate grammar.”

“Spelling isn’t grammar,” Quinn responded, but there was no point with Brittany. Of course, Quinn should have known better than to leave something important to her. “I’ll fix it,” Quinn snapped, grabbing a black marker from her bag. She waited until there was a lull in the voting before hopping onto the table. The entire cafeteria was going to

try to look up her short cheerleading skirt, but let them look at her bloomers. She was the president of the Celibacy Club, after all, and they could look all they wanted. They just couldn't have it. Quinn popped the cap off the marker and quickly wedged an E into HOMCOMING.

"It's a little crooked," Finn Hudson said as Quinn took a tiny step back to admire her work. "But it looks good."

Quinn glanced down at Finn. "Thanks." He was gorgeous, all right, in that all-American, apple-pie-eating way. When Quinn was eight and picturing her wedding, complete with a Vera Wang princess dress in pale pink and ten thousand white tulips lining the aisle, the groom looked exactly like Finn. He was so tall that, even standing on the table, Quinn didn't feel like she was towering over him, and his light brown hair was always ruffled in the same boyish way.

Quinn held out her hand. "Help me down." Santana was staring at her. Quinn knew that practically every girl at McKinley had some level of crush on Finn. But it was too bad for them, because Quinn had recently decided that this was the year she'd become Finn Hudson's girlfriend. Or, more accurately, this was the year that she would allow Finn to become Quinn Fabray's boyfriend.

Finn grinned. Instead of grabbing her hand and helping her step down onto the chair she'd used to climb up, Finn simply reached up and grabbed her around the waist. He swept her off the table and held her for a moment before setting her feet down on the orange linoleum floor.

“Not exactly what I meant, but thanks.” Quinn giggled, then lowered her eyes and looked up at Finn through her thick lashes. Quinn and Finn. Finn and Quinn. Maybe it was a little too Dr. Seuss-y, but it made sense. Finn Hudson was easily the best-looking guy in the school, and he was also the star quarterback—if you could use the word *star* when talking about a team that had lost every one of its preseason games. But that hardly mattered. And Quinn had worked so hard to impress Coach Sylvester and become head Cheerio.

If she and Finn were an official couple, they’d be shoosins for homecoming king and queen. Quinn was already planning to wear her hair in a way that wouldn’t get messed up when Principal Figgins or whoever announced the winners placed the plastic tiara on her head.

“You look like you’ve been really busy. I mean, collecting votes and all.” Finn had a habit of staring at his feet when he talked, just glancing up when he reached the end of his sentence. It was endearing, but Quinn kind of wished he’d be a little more confident.

“A Cheerio’s duties are never done,” Quinn quoted Coach Sylvester. She glanced over Finn’s shoulder, and her gaze landed on Puck Puckerman, Finn’s teammate and one of his best friends. Puck was always doing something he shouldn’t do, and now he’d fashioned a slingshot out of two pencils and a rubber band and was trying to aim a grape at someone at the other end of his table. He looked stupid with his silly Mohawk carved into what would have

been beautiful, glossy black hair. But, still, there was something about him. Sex appeal, her mother might have called it if she were talking about a movie star. Puck exuded it. Something raw and dangerous that made Quinn shiver whenever she thought about being alone with him.

“What are you doing after school?” she heard Finn ask, and she dragged her eyes from Puck before Finn finished his sentence and his big puppy-dog eyes met hers.

“Practice, as usual.” Somehow Quinn’s eyes were magnetically drawn back to Puck. This time, however, he seemed to sense it, and a cocky half grin came across his face before Quinn could look away. Great. He was definitely going to tease her about that later, and she would have to pretend he’d imagined it all. Quinn felt her face flush, but she recovered quickly.

She turned to Finn and put her hand on his bare arm. “What are you doing tomorrow? Will you come to Celibacy Club with me after Cheerios practice? Maybe we could go out for frozen yogurt afterward.” Quinn was tired of waiting for Finn to make a move, so she’d decided to just ask him out herself. Though they’d been friends for the past year, Quinn and Finn weren’t a couple, and Quinn was ready to lose her single status for a while. After all, a queen needs her king.

“Yeah, I’d like that.” Finn couldn’t get over the feel of Quinn’s warm palm on his arm. It was worth putting up with Celibacy Club, Quinn’s second-favorite after-school activity. Going to a Celibacy Club meeting didn’t sound fun

at all, but it was a small price to pay to get to spend some time with Quinn. She was the hottest girl in school, even if she could be a little harsh sometimes. But the competitive edge she got from all that time spent with the Cheerios had probably made her so driven. And her lips—they were heart-shaped and looked like the softest lips Finn had ever seen. He'd be crazy not to be into her, and Finn Hudson was a lot of things, but crazy wasn't one of them.



three

Choir room, Monday after school

After school on Monday, the hallways of McKinley High emptied out as students scuttled off to extra-curricular activities, sports practices, or, in the case of McKinley's many underachievers, detention. The choir room, across the hallway from the auditorium, was empty except for the remaining members of the Glee Club: Mercedes, Tina, Kurt, and Artie Abrams, one of the few McKinley students in a wheelchair. The large room, lined with thick soundproofing materials, had tiered platforms designed for optimal acoustic quality. During the day, the choir room was inhabited by the band geeks, who were, for some unknown reason, seen as higher on the social totem pole than the Glee kids. Lining the walls were lockers in which students could store their musical instruments, and

the shelves were filled with sheet music. A blackboard on the front wall listed the marching band's set list for the upcoming football game—"We Will Rock You," "Another One Bites the Dust," and the main theme from *Star Wars*—as well as the jazz band's practice schedule: THIS WEEK: MONDAY THRU FRIDAY, 6:30 AM. And at the very top of the board, in big letters, it read: FALL IN LOVE WITH MUSIC RECITAL: THIS FRIDAY. A shiny black grand piano sat on the floor next to a full drum set, the drumsticks sitting on the round black stool, waiting to be used.

The evidence of the thriving band program seemed only to highlight the paltriness of the Glee program, which had devolved over the years from a group of several dozen kids to the four students in the room. Since its glory days in the 1990s, when McKinley High had been a regular threat at regionals and sectionals, Glee Club had fallen on hard times. With budget cuts and little student interest, the role of staff supervisor for Glee had become something of a joke. It had been handed off from teacher to uninterested teacher, and under creepy Sandy Ryerson's mostly apathetic guidance, the club had virtually disappeared.

That is, except for the handful of students who were still willing to spend time after school, risking further social censure, just to sing.

Unfortunately, the group of four wasn't exactly meshing. As Mercedes, the most accomplished singer, belted out the lyrics to *West Side Story's* "Tonight," the others hummed and sang backup vocals, but something was missing. It

wasn't that they were *bad*. They weren't. Tina had a lovely alto, even if she lacked confidence. Amazingly, Kurt could hit a high F. And Artie's voice was deep and rich. They just weren't *enough*.

"We sound like a bunch of amateurs," Kurt announced after Mercedes's voice trailed off, vocalizing what everyone was thinking. He stuck his hands into the back pockets of his gray skinny jeans. "No offense, Mercedes," he quickly added, seeing her face cloud over. "It's not you. You're awesome."

"I know." Mercedes cleared her throat and stared out the window at a group of boys in soccer shorts tossing a Frisbee. "We're just . . . not clicking."

"We're running out of time," Tina reminded the group, although no one had forgotten. They all could see the huge letters looming at the top of the blackboard. "The show is on Friday."

"We're going to be humiliated. Further." Artie rolled his wheelchair around in a giant circle. The collar of his white button-down shirt was stained blue. "I got slushied twice this morning."

"That's just wrong." Kurt shook his head knowingly. The jocks in this school were animals. Strong, sinewy, sweaty animals.

"We just need to get it together," Mercedes announced, clapping her hands. She'd been singing in her church's choir since she was eight, and she could bring tears to the eyes of the crankiest old lady with her rendition of "Amazing

Grace.” She was the shining star of the Glee Club, and she’d be damned if she was going to be humiliated in front of her peers. The other kids in Glee were great, too—at least, individually. They just needed a little extra something to tie it all together. They would just have to keep singing until their tongues fell off. “Take it from the top. Again.”

“Again?” Tina moaned, sinking down into a chair. She loved singing, but she wasn’t sure about doing it in front of the entire school. She’d agreed to do the show only because everyone else wanted to do it, but now she was having second thoughts. “We need more than practice.”

“Yeah, we need to stop whining and just get it right. I’m definitely not going to make a fool of myself onstage.” Mercedes shot a piercing glare at each one of them. “Are you with me?”

They started again. Halfway through the song, which had improved slightly with this round, the door to the choir room flew open, clanking loudly against a rack of music stands. In the doorway stood Rachel Berry, looking like she’d stepped out of an episode of *The Brady Bunch* in her corduroy skirt, collegiate sweater, and kneesocks. The grin on her face stretched from ear to ear. The sight was so unexpected—for everyone except Kurt—that all the Glee members stopped singing, their voices trailing off into silence.

Not for long. “That was a fairly reprehensible rendition of a Broadway classic. Artie, you were flat; Kurt, you were sharp. And girl whose name I don’t know yet”—she

pointed at Tina—"you need to actually open your mouth when you sing. And Mercedes..." She trailed off when she saw the look on Mercedes's face.

"Oh no, you don't," Mercedes replied, hand on her hip. She took a step forward, as if she were about to tackle Rachel. "Who died and made you Simon Cowell?"

"Are those sequins on her kneesocks?" Tina whispered to Artie, eyeing Rachel's white kneesocks. They were, indeed, trimmed with gold sequins. "And she's giving *us* advice?" Still, Tina made sure she opened her mouth when she said it. She knew she had a problem with enunciation.

Rachel remained unflustered. She plastered a bright yet determined smile on her face and stepped into the room, her ballet flats smacking gently against the linoleum floor. "After much consideration, I've decided to join you in Glee Club, even though I've had professional vocal training practically since birth and am overqualified for anything this school can offer." She paused while the room remained silent. "And after hearing that travesty you call a performance, I'm confident that I'm exactly what you need to take you to the top."

Tina and Artie glanced at each other in confusion, and Kurt nervously ran his hand through his hair, ruining the carefully sculpted look he'd spent twenty minutes perfecting in front of the bathroom mirror, one spray of Frédéric Fekkai aerosol hair spray at a time. Had he been so blinded by her talent that he'd forgotten completely that Rachel Berry was an irritating, brown-nosing know-it-all who had

an almost intuitive way of alienating every person in the room? Had he made a huge mistake by inviting her to the rehearsal?

He glanced at Mercedes, who was looking Rachel up and down with an unamused look. In fact, she looked positively pissed. "I don't know who you think you are, Little Miss Pink Heart-Shaped Barrettes, but you're not our coach, and no one invited you here, so maybe you should just shut your mouth and stroll back to your Disney movie."

"Actually..." Kurt took a deep breath and faced the group. "I invited her."

Mercedes blinked. "*What?*" She stared at him as if he'd just told her he'd killed her puppy.

"Look, we've got to face it. We suck. Glee is pretty much dead, anyway, unless we do something to save it." He fingered the gold watch he'd inherited from his maternal grandfather. "We heard Rachel sing this morning on the PA, and while I'm sure we'd all admit that her self-promotion was startlingly transparent, she *was* incredible."

"Thank you," Rachel replied primly. She had learned by now to ignore the backhanded parts of compliments and focus only on the positive. With a career in show business in front of her, that was the only way to do it.

Kurt nodded briefly toward her. He found it slightly shocking that someone so interested in the performing arts could have such terrible style. The kneesocks were atrocious. "Although she may not be what we're used to, I think Rachel is the obvious solution to our problem."

"I can't believe this," Mercedes cried out, rubbing her temples. She stared at Kurt. Suddenly, in his charcoal-gray cashmere turtleneck and slim-fitting gray pants, he looked like a stranger to her. Kurt thought she wasn't good enough? He was supposed to be her friend. She felt as if he'd slushied her pride.

"Mercedes, you're awesome, d-d-don't get us wrong." Tina was surprised to find herself speaking up. She thought Rachel had sounded really good that morning, too. Way better than Mrs. Applethorpe's monotonous drone. Tina realized that it might be good for her to be around someone who was so bold and confident. Maybe it would help her overcome some of her shyness. "But we need more than one really strong singer. We need someone who can make all of us better."

Mercedes narrowed her eyes. That morning in home-room, when she heard Rachel sing over the loudspeaker, she'd thought, *Damn, that white girl can sing*. Mercedes tried to picture the four of them, with no Rachel, performing on the stage in front of the entire school at the Fall in Love with Music recital. Short of some miracle, it was going to be a total disaster. Maybe, just maybe, the solution was standing in front of them in an annoyingly short skirt and sparkly socks. She took a deep breath. "Okay. She can stay."

Rachel nodded. She wanted to remind Mercedes that she didn't exactly *need* her permission, but for once she held herself back.

Mercedes glared at her. "For now."

“You won’t be sorry.” Rachel sat down on the piano bench and ran her fingers along the keys. “From what I’ve heard, we need to get serious. Enough baby steps. It’s not going to be all easy, and it’s not going to be all fun. But if you really want to improve, you need to follow my lead. And we’re going to need to practice here every day after school, until the show.”

Mercedes raised an eyebrow. This was going to be an adventure.