



McKinley High parking lot, early Monday morning

The McKinley High School student parking lot was almost completely deserted. Even the faculty lot was only sparsely populated by a few cars belonging to overeager young teachers who had yet to reach the burnt-out phase of their careers. Snow had blanketed the town overnight, and it seemed as if the only sound in all of Lima, Ohio, was the scraping and whirring of the giant yellow snowplow as it pushed across the empty lot and deposited another load of snow on top of the already-dirty snowbanks. It was a brutally cold late February morning, and the lonely snowplow, driven by Janitor Bob, in his thick, dirt-brown coveralls and orange gloves that looked like giant oven mitts, was the only thing moving in the frigid air. A few chilly-looking

birds sat on the telephone wires, probably regretting that they hadn't made the winter migration to a warmer climate.

"This is beyond pathetic," Kurt Hummel said as he navigated his father's car into one of the newly cleared parking spots. "No one else is even awake. And my leave-in conditioner barely had time to work overnight."

Mercedes Jones yawned as she peered at her reflection in the passenger-side rearview mirror. She held her tiny green box of eye shadow and ran the miniature, doll-size brush across her eyelids, leaving a pale blue shine behind. She hadn't had time to put on any makeup before Kurt honked his horn in her driveway, and a no-makeup day just would not do. Especially not on a Monday. "I don't get it. Why does Mr. Schu really need to see us before school starts?"

"Maybe he discovered that torture is the best way to keep one's students from growing complacent." Kurt slid the gearshift into park but didn't turn off the car. He held his hands, in their sleek, black leather gloves, over the vents blowing warm air through the car. Although he enjoyed the cold Ohio weather, mainly because his winter wardrobe was fabulous, his Alexander McQueen belted car coat was more aesthetic than functional.

"Look!" Mercedes pointed at the flagpole. An American flag normally flew at the top of it, when it wasn't being used by devious jocks to hoist up unfortunate underclassmen by their underpants, giving them the infamous "patriotic wedgie." But in honor of McKinley High's Multicultural Week, several foreign flags hung beneath the American one.

“Isn’t that a Canadian flag? That seems like a strange culture to choose to celebrate — aren’t they kind of just like us?”

“Yes, except they like socialism and hockey more than we do.” Kurt’s eyes grew dreamy as he pictured burly guys with square jaws and broken noses hurling around on ice skates and pummeling one another into the clear plastic walls of the — what was it called? Hockey field? Court? No, rink. “Hopefully the dining hall will not be celebrating the cuisine of our dear northern neighbors today.”

“What would it be? Canadian bacon?” Mercedes wrinkled her nose. One of the features of Multicultural Week was that the dining hall chose a different culture to highlight each day. She still remembered Polynesian Day freshman year, when dining services hauled in a pig on a spit with an orange in its mouth. Mercedes still hadn’t recovered from that and couldn’t even think about bacon — or pork or ham — without gagging.

“God help us.” Kurt made the sign of the cross, but, not being Catholic, he flubbed it. “You know Mr. Hausler will have a fit when he sees the American flag forced to share its noble post.” The balding civics teacher was a former Marine who vigilantly wandered up and down the aisles during the Pledge of Allegiance to make sure all the students in his first-period class recited — loudly — each and every word.

Mercedes’s eyes scanned the grounds for other signs of life. Mr. Schuester’s beat-up car (the muffler actually touched the pavement) was sitting in the corner of the teachers’ lot. There was already a faint dusting of snow on it, as if it had

been there for a while. “Seriously, are you worried that maybe there’s something seriously wrong?”

Last night, all the members of Glee Club had received a mass text from Mr. Schuester asking them to show up before school for an emergency meeting. It was an unprecedented move, and Kurt and Mercedes had immediately texted each other to discuss possible catastrophes that had happened to cause the extra-early morning meeting.

“You just used *seriously* twice in the same sentence.” Kurt’s blue eyes scanned the message on his phone one more time for clues. Cryptic was not normally Mr. Schu’s style, although Kurt did like surprises. “Seriously.”

“Correcting someone’s grammar is a serious turnoff.” Mercedes stuck out her tongue at Kurt and tightened her hot-pink knit scarf around her neck. The windows of the car were starting to fog up, and she wiped clear a circle in her passenger-side window. She squinted as a blue car turned into the lot, its bald tires sliding across an icy patch. “Finn’s here,” she announced, recognizing Finn Hudson’s oversized figure inside the car—his head almost touched the ceiling of the car. Mercedes opened the car door, letting in a blast of cold air. “Let’s see what he thinks.”

“Finn’s not exactly known for his brilliant theories,” Kurt said affectionately as he grabbed his leather messenger bag and slung it over his shoulder. *Finn is known for other things*, Kurt thought. *Being the star quarterback, the star forward of the basketball team, homecoming king. His chiseled cheekbones.*

*The way he can make tears spring to your eyes when he sings
“Faithfully.”*

As Kurt’s leather ankle boots carefully stepped over the gray clumps of icy snow the plow had left behind, a familiar red minivan with a dented bumper pulled into a spot near Finn’s. Mercedes waved a pink mitten at Tina Cohen-Chang, whose fingerless black gloves clutched the steering wheel. “Hey, girl!” Mercedes cried when Tina stepped out of the minivan, a homemade knit cap with flaps tugged down over her ears.

Kurt tried to walk slowly so that they would pass Finn’s car just as he got out, but Finn was playing with his radio and Kurt was forced to walk past it with Mercedes. A cold wind nipped through the air.

“You don’t look like your bright-eyed and bushy-tailed self this morning,” Kurt said to Tina, glancing over his shoulder at the sound of Finn slamming his car door behind him. Perfect timing.

Tina blinked her eyes sleepily and shifted her faded-green canvas backpack, which she’d covered with patches of bands and inked doodles, higher up on her shoulder. Even though she looked exhausted, she’d still had time to put on bright pink eye shadow and thick navy eyeliner. “I was up late working on the Chinese dragon costume.” Tina was a member of the small but enthusiastic Asian Student Union, and she had volunteered to rehabilitate the group’s ancient dragon costume, recently dug out of storage in honor of Multicultural

Week. The papier-mâché costume had warped since its last use, and Tina was painstakingly reconstructing the parts that had torn off. She still had dried glue stuck to her fingers.

“What do you think this is all about?” Finn’s deep voice asked from behind them. In his varsity letterman’s jacket, he didn’t exactly look like the kind of guy who would be caught dead talking to Glee kids, but he had changed a lot this year. He’d always thought he knew what he was going to do with his life—try to work hard and get an athletic scholarship to a big school, play football until his knees blew out, eventually get a decent job doing something boring but well paying. It wasn’t much, he knew, but he had a hard time visualizing a more exciting future. All he really knew was that he wanted to get out of Lima.

But things with Glee had kind of taken him by surprise and given him another option. He hadn’t ever expected to join the group—thinking, like most people did, that it was a complete dorkfest—and then he’d actually ended up liking it. When the group won sectionals, his heart had wanted to burst. He thought back to the time last spring when he’d hit a walk-off home run in the division finals against Maryvale High, which had been the highlight of his athletic career, and it hadn’t felt as good as when the judges handed the McKinley High Glee Club the giant gold trophy.

“We were debating, but we couldn’t even decide if this meeting means good news or bad news.” Kurt glanced at Finn, whose handsome face was lined with worry. Despite

the cold, Finn was the kind of hot-blooded jock type who didn't even own a pair of gloves, much less a scarf. Kurt had to admire that, even though he believed in taking advantage of every opportunity to accessorize.

"You think it could be *good* news?" Finn's face lit up as they all hurried up the freshly salted steps to the main entrance of the school. His cheeks were pink from the cold, and his just-showered hair was freezing into short hair icicles. "I was afraid maybe he'd decided to be an accountant again." There was a brief period last fall when Mr. Schuester had considered leaving McKinley to work in an accounting firm so that he could better support his pregnant wife. He decided against it, which was fortunate because Glee Club really needed him. Also, his wife was only fake-pregnant.

The glass and metal doors clanked shut behind them. "There's Artie." Tina pointed ahead to Artie Abrams, who was wheeling down the hallway toward them from the cafeteria, where the school's only wheelchair-accessible ramp was located. She hoped it was nicely salted for him. They all paused and waited in the airy foyer for Artie to catch up. They wiped their wet feet on the industrial-size floor mat, which already seemed saturated with slush even though the day had just begun.

"Did anyone catch *Pretty Woman* on cable last night?" Kurt asked, loosening his royal-blue cashmere scarf from around his neck. "It's been on three times this month already, but I just can't look away."

“You just like seeing Julia in her very fashionable street-walker attire,” Artie teased as he pulled up next to him. He was wearing his warmest winter coat, which his mom called his ski jacket—ironically, as he’d never skied in his life. He smiled faintly at Tina.

“What can I say? The black thigh-high patent leather boots get me every time,” Kurt said as he glanced at Finn, who looked slightly embarrassed. He was so easily scandalized.

Tina fell in step next to Artie. Things between the two of them had been . . . weird lately. Last fall, it had seemed like something was really happening. Artie was the only guy at McKinley High she could imagine herself with. He was sweet, and he had a wicked sense of humor. All the other boys seemed stupid and infantile in comparison. But things had sort of fizzled out before they really got started—maybe because she was shy and Artie was really insecure. Plus, Artie was really upset when he found out that Tina had faked a stutter. And now, so much time had gone by since they’d kind of gone to the homecoming dance together, Tina wondered if they’d ever be able to get things started again.

“It’s *got* to be bad news,” Mercedes said, taking her baby blue earmuffs off her head and stuffing them into her pocket. Her tan Uggs squeaked against the clean floor, the noise echoing through the otherwise quiet hallways. “Like, Mr. Schu’s had another change of heart and is leaving us to join the Peace Corps in Africa or something.”

“That wouldn’t happen.” Artie’s thick black glasses had

fogged up when he entered the building—yet another disadvantage of wearing glasses. He'd considered contact lenses, but they didn't have the same gravitas. He removed his glasses and wiped them on his plaid scarf. "Mr. Schu would never leave us like that. Besides, he doesn't seem like the hands-on type. I can't really see him building a school."

"Maybe our budget got cut again, and we're going to have to share the choir room with the wrestling team," Kurt offered, raising his eyebrows. "Maybe they could teach us some moves."

"What if someone's leaving the club? Or dying of some weird kind of cancer that takes out your vocal cords?" Finn asked suddenly. He glanced over his shoulder at the sound of the doors opening and saw Matt Rutherford and Mike Chang, football players who had also joined Glee Club last fall. They were usually the last to arrive.

Finn didn't want to say anything, because he felt like he was always bringing her up, but wasn't it weird that Rachel wasn't here yet? Even though they weren't dating or anything—at least, not anymore—he still had this kind of Rachel radar. A room, or a hallway, just felt different when she wasn't in it, maybe because she had such a big—and loud—presence. It was like he couldn't get her out of his head, even when he wanted to.

"Where's Rachel?" Tina asked as they turned the corner to the choir room, as if she had read Finn's mind. Rachel Berry liked to be the first one at any practice, meeting, or

event, and it was weird that she wasn't standing outside the choir room, waiting impatiently for everyone else to arrive and chastising them for being one minute late.

There was silence except for the squeaks of their wet shoes against the linoleum floor as they approached the choir room door, collectively pondering what it would mean if Rachel was gone. Finn immediately wondered if she'd done what she'd threatened to do a few months ago — transfer out of McKinley into a performing arts school where she could get the training she needed to become a star.

But...she would have told him, wouldn't she? He felt a lump in his throat. "Maybe it's Rachel who has the weird kind of cancer. Maybe she *is* dying..."

Just as Kurt started to picture himself wearing his black fedora to Rachel's funeral and singing Elton John's "Candle in the Wind," Mercedes interrupted his fantasy. "I'm not sure cancer is strong enough to kill Rachel."

Just then, everyone heard a noise come through the walls of the choir room. "I think someone's in there," Kurt whispered, feeling like he was in a Scooby-Doo cartoon. Finn, of course, would be Fred, the manly alpha male with the broad shoulders and the devastating chin.

Mercedes rolled her eyes. *Kurt can be such a drama queen.* "If it's an axe murderer, I guess I'll be the first one to go." She grabbed the door and pushed it open as everyone behind her peered inside.

Rachel, looking anything but dead in a baby blue plaid skirt and white mohair turtleneck sweater with a giant straw-

berry knitted into the front, had a look of incredible concentration on her face as she sang out a line from *Cabaret*. At home each morning, she drank her protein shake for breakfast and put in thirty minutes on her elliptical trainer, getting herself physically ready for the day. But her early morning practices in the choir room helped her get spiritually ready for it. (And there was the matter of her neighbor's threatened lawsuit if she continued to sing at 6:30 every morning.) She loved singing Liza Minnelli tunes in the morning — they prepared her to face the day, putting her in exactly the right mood to confront the haters and naysayers and those who, despite her success in *Glee*, insisted on continually throwing slushies in her face. Early morning practices were an integral part of her routine, and without them, she'd be lost.

It wasn't until she finished the verse that she felt something was wrong. She whirled around. Standing in the doorway, her fellow *Glee* Club members were crowded like groupies, gawking at her.

"What..." she started, glancing at the clock on the wall. "What are you *doing* here? This is my private practice time."

Mercedes's jaw dropped. "You come to school this early every Monday just to get in some more practice time?" She threw her backpack down on a chair and unzipped her puffy coat. "You're crazier than I thought."

Rachel stared at the backpack, as if its presence was personally threatening her space. "No, I come here every *morning* to practice." She crossed her arms over her chest, feeling like she was under siege. The half hour before everyone else

got to school was her sacred time. “What are you all doing here?” She tried not to let her eyes land on Finn any longer than absolutely necessary. She was still trying to convince herself that she was over him.

“Didn’t you get Mr. Schuester’s text last night?” Artie asked, rolling toward the first row of seats. His wheels left a faint trail of slush behind them.

“Text? No.” Rachel eyed her phone, which played “I Feel Pretty” from *West Side Story* every time it rang and pinged each time she got a text. “I shut it off last night when I went to bed early, something I advise all of you to start doing as it helps the vocal cords repair themselves overnight.” She held her head high.

“Then why didn’t you hear it when you turned on your phone this morning?” Mercedes sat down in a plastic chair and stared straight at Rachel. This girl had an ego the size of China and an excuse for everything. Mercedes just liked to give her grief.

Rachel met Mercedes’s eyes. “I guess I couldn’t hear it ping over my incredible talent.”

Mercedes jumped to her feet. “Oh, I’d like to take your incredible talent and see what it looks like when . . .” Before Mercedes could finish her threat, however, the door to the choir room flew open again. Mr. Schuester entered, carrying a huge pink pastry box under one arm and a giant plastic jug of orange juice in the other hand. The sweet, fragrant smell of freshly baked pastries swirled through the air, and Mercedes immediately sat down. Her stomach rumbled, reminding her

that she hadn't had time for her bowl of cereal before Kurt's car honked in the driveway.

"Hey, gang!" Mr. Schuester's handsome face beamed at them. His curly brown hair, still wet when he left the house, had frozen earlier in the cold. "I'm sorry to freak you all out by calling an early morning meeting, but I wanted to get the chance to talk to all of you and I couldn't wait until practice after school."

"So what's the big news?" Kurt asked, eyeing the box. Something smelled delicious, and he wanted to know if it was something that was worth the extra calories. "We've been frantic with anticipation."

"Well..." Mr. Schuester scanned the room. Mike and Matt stumbled through the doorway, looking barely awake. But there were no signs of Noah "Puck" Puckerman, Quinn Fabray, or the two Cheerios—Santana Lopez and Brittany Pierce. "I really wanted to tell everyone as a group, and it doesn't look like you're all here."

"What?" Rachel, who had sat down when Mr. Schuester entered, jumped to her patent-leather feet. She was always on the lookout for unfairness, and this was extremely unfair. "But Puck and the Cheerios are always late. It's not fair to punish us for their faults."

Mr. Schuester's eyes glazed over slightly, as they often did when Rachel opened her mouth to express her opinion on something, which she did at least a hundred times an hour. "Let's just wait and see if they show up."

Finn, who was dying to tear into that pink pastry box,

couldn't stand waiting anymore. He hoped there were jelly donuts in there. The kind that were covered in gritty sugar. "Uh, Mr. Schu? I talked to Quinn last night, and I, uh, don't think she's going to make it this morning." Even though he and Quinn were not dating anymore, he still cared about her. Maybe he shouldn't—especially after the way she had lied and told him that he was the father of her unborn baby. The real father was none other than Finn's best friend, notorious womanizer Puck. This fact alone should have been enough to keep him from ever even *thinking* about casting a sympathetic glance toward her pretty face again. But Finn was a big softie. As much as he hated what Quinn had done, he worried about her. Finn often pictured Puck with a baby on his knee, trying to feed it a spoonful of hot sauce or something. Poor kid. That was why Finn allowed Quinn to call him sometimes and talk about her day. What she'd said about the early morning meeting was, "I might consider coming, if it wasn't for the fact that I have a standing appointment to puke my guts out at that exact time every morning." But Finn didn't want to repeat that in front of everyone.

"Great." Mr. Schuester threw his hands in the air. "Well, I'm sorry to drag you all here so early, but it looks like you're going to have to wait a little longer to hear my news." Amid groans and frustrated glares, Mr. Schuester held up the pink pastry box in self-defense and set it on the piano. "But I did bring you some treats—take them as a peace offering. And how about we meet here again at the beginning of lunch

period? I'll be sure to find the kids who are missing and let them know."

Finn was the first to crack open the box. Two dozen buttery fresh croissants were sitting atop the box's white waxed-paper lining. Finn bit into one, and it nearly melted in his mouth. Even better than a jelly donut. "Awesome. Thanks, Mr. Schu."

Everyone dove in. "Enjoy, everyone. And remember — it's a clue." He winked at them all but wouldn't say any more.

Rachel reluctantly poured herself a cup of orange juice. If her morning practice was going to be interrupted, it might as well be for a *reason*. Celine Dion didn't get to where she was today by canceling practice for some orange juice and croissants. Her day was already going downhill, and it wasn't even first period.

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