



Rachel Berry's bedroom, Monday morning

A tiny drop of sweat inched its way down Rachel Berry's cheekbone and rolled delicately onto her pink floral pillowcase. Sunshine was surging through her curtains, illuminating her just as a strong spotlight should. It was as if her room were a Broadway stage and the light had finally found its star. Rachel stirred, rubbing her eyes and sleepily stretching herself awake. A smile spread across her face. Sunshine like that could mean only one thing: Beautiful, delicious summer was about to be here. And it was all hers!

The *Wicked* calendar on her wall, with its neatly drawn x's inked with a chartreuse glitter pen on each day, signaled that there was only one more week left at McKinley High School. One more *measly* little week before

Rachel's time completely belonged to her. Five days, that was it.

“Good morning, Patti!” she said to her brand-new ceramic bust of Broadway legend Patti LuPone. It was an early end-of-year gift from her dads. They'd even wrapped it in *Sweeney Todd* wrapping paper. You really could buy anything online these days.

Rachel began humming a pitch-perfect rendition of “Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'” from *Oklahoma!* as she booted up her computer. *I got a beautiful feelin', everything's goin' my way.* The lyrics seemed fitting, but she sang them only inside her head. One's vocal cords needed time to wake up. Not worth risking an injury.

As she typed her password, Rachel wondered if this feeling of impending freedom could ever be matched by anything other than the end of a school year. Probably not. Maybe the end of a yearlong run as Maria in *West Side Story*, but even *that* would be bittersweet. When that day came (and it would), she would be showered with praise and admiration — which is more than she could say currently of her Glee Club counterparts. They were all way too self-involved with their silly issues to congratulate her daily on her numerous talents.

But that didn't matter for now — it was going to be Rachel's summer. Or, as the brightly colored Excel spreadsheet now open on her desktop proclaimed, RACHEL'S STAR POWER SUMMER! It was going to be a tightly packed, intensive schedule consisting of various classes, training sessions,

and even an impossible-to-secure meeting with a real Broadway talent agency. Rachel had charted her very own way to the stars. She was like Galileo, only tinier and with much more charisma.

Rachel assessed the schedule once more. She was positively brimming with excitement at the strides she was going to make in her career from the rigorous workload. Of course, it didn't seem like work to her. She was a girl who made things happen for herself—and sometimes for her fellow Glee Club members. Not that they had a choice once Rachel decided to include them in her agenda. Resistance was futile.

This time, the lucky recipient of her wishes was none other than Finn Hudson—the leading man who somehow always maintained a notable presence in her life, whether they were together or not. They'd reconnected and broken up so many times that no one at McKinley High could even keep track of their status anymore. They'd come to accept that Finn and Rachel would always be drifting in and out of each other's orbits. It was just a question of whether the planets were aligned that day.

Rachel tore her eyes away from her schedule for just a moment to cast a dreamy glance at the glittery picture frame on her desk. It contained a snapshot of her and Finn gazing into each other's eyes, taken while singing the Journey medley onstage at last year's regionals. A great shot.

She was proud of him—she really was. Finn had come so far in Glee Club. She appreciated the improvement more than anyone else. But Rachel always saw new ways to sculpt

people into perfect specimens. Finn was no exception. His dancing skills were atrocious. One time last year, when they were rehearsing for regionals, Finn had crissed when he should have crossed. He accidentally smacked both Rachel and Quinn Fabray in the face. Not that Rachel minded so much about Quinn (actually she really enjoyed it), but Rachel's face was very precious. It was going to be the second reason she was famous. Her voice would be the first.

Lots of the kids in Glee could use practice in dancing, but Finn needed it most. So Rachel had taken it upon herself to include him in her Star Power Summer. Not that he knew it yet. She had seen an ad for couples ballroom-dancing classes in the back of an issue of *Ohio Bride* magazine (which she flipped through at the bookstore sometimes to look at the gorgeous ball gowns). Obviously, she wasn't gearing up to marry Finn or anything. This was just the perfect venue for them to practice some much-needed partnering skills. Besides, Rachel thought it seemed incredibly romantic.

Rachel imagined that twice a week at the dance studio a scene would unfold just like the one in *Singin' in the Rain* where Don Lockwood and Kathy Selden waltzed through the empty soundstage. Rachel would float in wearing a gauzy dress, her dark hair fashioned into a finger wave. Then she would be swept into the debonair arms of a suit-and-tie-wearing gentleman. If all went according to plan, it was going to be perfect. She couldn't wait to tell Finn when she got to school.

A lemon-yellow sundress and red sequined ballet flats sat

expectantly on the cushy armchair by her bed. Her outfit for the day was perfectly suited to match her sunny mood. Rachel believed that success was the result of preparation-meets-opportunity—she could never be too prepared in any aspect of her life, including each day at McKinley. That was why she always finished her homework before singing an entire Broadway soundtrack each evening. And that was also why it was absolutely essential to choose each outfit the night before.

As Rachel began getting dressed, she went over her new summer schedule in her head. Mondays would start each week off with a four-hour studio session at Lima’s only recording studio, Lima Beats. It wasn’t much—just an old converted house downtown that some ex-record producer named Tito opened up a few years back. Its customers mainly consisted of pimpled teenage boys in garage bands with MySpace pages and ridiculous names like Twisted Agony. All very amateur stuff. Of course, that would all change when Rachel stepped through the door and began recording her album of Idina Menzel cover songs. Rachel’s voice was going to sound even more amazing on professional recording equipment. She just knew it. No Auto-Tune necessary.

Tuesdays and Thursdays would begin with tap, jazz, and ballet classes, followed by elocution lessons with a local private tutor, Sir Paul Stanton. He was a friend of her dads’ and had apparently attended Oxford University and everything. He had already assigned her a book to read before her first lesson—*Elements of Elocution*, by some old-timey actor

named John Walker. It did sound a bit dry, if Rachel was being honest with herself. But she personally thought that proper pronunciation was an oft-overlooked yet very important skill for any performer to possess. She had pointed this fact out to her fellow Glee member Tina Cohen-Chang once during practice last year and had received little thanks for her efforts.

Tina had been trying to suggest a new song for the club to practice, but every title that had passed through her lips had been peppered with stutters. Rachel thought it sounded worse than when someone's nails accidentally scratched the chalkboard in math class. Or when Noah "Puck" Puckerman did it on purpose just to watch everyone cringe. After Tina suggested doing a song by the "B-B-B-Buh-Beach Boys," Rachel could stand it no longer and lectured the group on the importance of speech lessons. Tina ran out of the choir room crying, and once again Rachel was greeted by nothing but angry expressions and crossed arms. Except from Brittany Pierce, of course, who had asked if she could bring her cat to the speech lessons. Apparently, poor Britt had been having trouble understanding the kitty over all the extremely loud purring.

Rachel was used to being chided for her efforts, though. Just because others didn't care whether they sounded like uneducated country bumpkins didn't mean she couldn't. She had clocked enough hours watching *My Fair Lady* to learn that lesson! Anyway, it turned out that Tina had only been faking the awful stutter. Why someone would want to

make herself sound anything less than perfectly poised was absolutely unfathomable to Rachel.

As she brushed her shiny dark locks and stared at her reflection, Rachel's smirk faded to a frown as she noticed the beginnings of a tan line on her shoulders. It must have been from the camisole she had worn in the backyard. She had spent some time out there over the weekend memorizing a new monologue from *In the Heights*.

Rachel had to be careful in the sun. Her skin browned very easily. Unlike the Cheerios—who were practically tanorexic with their Sue Sylvester-funded addiction to the sun beds down at Total Tan—Rachel didn't like to over-expose herself. She wanted her skin to remain young and beautiful forever. She would never understand Coach Sylvester's obsession with the look of a fake tan against a Cheerios uniform. Regardless, a visible tan line was *so* not part of Rachel's plan, especially because she had just booked a photographer to take her head shots this Saturday.

She needed something that looked extremely professional yet screamed "future star" to hand to the casting directors at her upcoming auditions. The head shots would also come in handy for signing autographs for her adoring fans. She was going to give one to Breadstix to hang on the wall, where people could admire Rachel's megawatt smile and ponder her humble beginnings while they ate their spaghetti and meatballs. She would sign it, "To Breadstix, Thanks for all the pasta and good times! Ciao! Rachel Berry." It was a far cry from Sardi's in New York City, but it would

have to do. The restaurant would certainly thank her for it later, when her photo drew in lots of business.

Rachel reminded herself to call the photographer to confirm her appointment. She also had to e-mail some outfit options to him. She was thinking polka dots, but did they seem like too bold a choice? Quickly typing a note into her spreadsheet, she double-checked the rest of her smorgasbord of training sessions. Voice? *Check*. Acting? *Check*. Ballroom dancing with a hunky male lead? *Check, please!* She printed out three copies of her schedule and scribbled *Rachel Berry* in the top-left corner of one, then *Finn* and *Mr. Schuester* on the other two. The one that bore her name was marked with a gold star sticker, of course. At this point, it was still just a metaphor for stardom. But soon it would be true!

She thought it was important to keep Mr. Schuester in the loop on all her plans. He should know how dedicated she was to continuing her training throughout the summer and be able to refer to the schedule at any moment during vacation in case he needed to contact her about set lists for next year.

Since Mr. Schuester's Glee takeover, Rachel had been carrying the majority of the club's vocal weight. She had suspected this on several occasions and even proved it once by bribing Lauren Zizes from the AV Club to secretly tape the other kids during practice. Hardly *any* of them had been singing at all! Being the most talented, she didn't mind much. But if she was going to be the one doing all the heavy lifting, she should have certain power when it came to song

selections and costume ideas. That was why she always took every opportunity to make her opinions known, much to the chagrin of her lazy New Directions teammates. And man, were they lazy.

Rachel grabbed her brand-new copy of the McKinley High *Thunderclap* from the top of her white lacquered dresser. It was so heavy, almost like a textbook. The shiny black cover was emblazoned with the school's red-and-white crest. The symbol seemed to give Rachel that giddy feeling of anticipation she got when she watched the opening credits of *The Music Man* and knew she was about to experience a musical tour de force on-screen.

Despite the substantial weight, it was the one book that students from any clique at school didn't mind carrying around. Yearbooks had always been kind of a big deal at McKinley High. And they were sort of a game for Rachel. She liked to make sure her presence at the school was known by appearing in as many pictures as possible. It would prepare her for the days when her face would grace the covers of fashion and star magazines. Sadly, she had little control over her appearances in the yearbook. Most of the photo spreads were of the Cheerios doing backflips and flirting with the football team between classes. However, the one trump card she did hold was her secret weapon, Jacob Ben Israel. To Rachel, "J-Fro" was extremely creepy, almost like a stalker at times, but he was also a *Thunderclap* photographer. And that meant she had to play up the charm around him a bit every year during layout finalization. It was great acting practice.

This year, she had let J-Fro include her in a feature called “A Day in the Life,” which followed different McKinley students around during the same day at school. Rachel was ecstatic to be selected—the feature would probably have double the number of pictures of her that appeared in the previous year’s edition. She even allowed J-Fro to begin the day at her house, taking pictures of her getting ready in her bedroom while she sang her morning scales (“*me me me me me me me me meeee*”). He scampered around all day behind her like a clumsy, drooling puppy with a frizzy Afro, snapping away and asking her incredibly invasive questions.

She fired off answers like a true professional. It was only when J-Fro got to “What color underwear do you have on today?” that Rachel gave the most celebrity-like answer of them all: “No comment.” She doubted that part would appear in the *Thunderclap*, but she had been in the moment.

Rachel flipped to the feature she had so eagerly awaited all semester. She had held off until she was home to give it her full attention and properly soak up each detail. It hadn’t come out quite how she’d expected it to.

It looked more like the back section of *Us Weekly* where the magazine picked apart fashions and made jokes than a young starlet’s profile in *Vogue*. Not one of the photos was flattering. There she was, singing in her bedroom with morning hair sticking out in every direction. Getting slushed in the hallway. An action shot of her singing and dancing in Glee Club, giving it her all while the others around her either looked bored or rolled their eyes. *Well, at least it’s accu-*

rate, she thought. And even if it didn't paint her in the best light, it was Rachel's first two-page spread. Her dads had been proud. They reminded her of the showbiz adage "Bad publicity is better than no publicity at all." At least people at school were talking about her.

When the yearbooks were handed out yesterday, J-Fro had practically groveled at Rachel's feet for forgiveness. It didn't shock her. It seemed like he was always begging Rachel for something. He claimed that some of the Cheerios had sabotaged his original layout as a prank — they had stolen his camera and used the rejected photos of her that he was keeping for "personal use." By the time he'd found out, the proofs had already been sent to the printer and were being prepped for binding. When she'd asked him what he meant by "personal use," J-Fro darted out of the room, wailing something about how the photos couldn't legally be taken away from him.

Part of being unstoppable was being resilient. Rachel was able to let this little publicity hiccup roll right off her back. In addition to witnessing the annual McKinley High tradition of defacing the Glee Club group photo in the *Thunderclap*, Rachel was used to virtual taunting. Snide comments on her YouTube videos were a daily occurrence, so it was a good thing Rachel had developed a thick skin.

For example, she had recently received a comment on her a cappella rendition of Eminem and Rihanna's "Love the Way You Lie" from a user named WMHS_CheerioBrittz. It said, *You should stay inside the computer screen, all tiny and stuff. It's cuter and way less annoying than you normally are.*

BTW, how did you get in there...? Even Brittany, who sometimes seemed as if she had an IQ lower than her age, had managed to insult her. Not *well*, but still. Rachel knew what it was like to be constantly berated and underappreciated by the popular kids.

But surprisingly, those other Glee kids could be the worst of them all! With the constant bickering and social drama that went on within the four walls of their inadequate choir room, sometimes it seemed more like an episode of *Jersey Shore* than a professional music group. Just last week, Mercedes Jones and Santana Lopez had gotten into another one of their heated diva-offs over who should get the Hayley Williams solo in a mash-up of B.o.B's "Airplanes" and John Denver's "Leaving on a Jet Plane." It was completely absurd. Mr. Schuester spent half of practice trying to mediate the fight, while everyone else just slacked off. Artie Abrams even fell asleep. Puck took the golden opportunity to draw some unsavory doodles all over Artie's face with a permanent marker. It was like working with children. Honestly.

But at least Rachel didn't have to worry about babysitting her classmates for the next three months. All she had to think about was number one—herself. Tucking the three schedules into the pages of her yearbook, Rachel blew herself a kiss in the mirror and bounded downstairs. She still had enough time to give her dads hugs and grab breakfast on her way out the door.

Rachel opened the freezer door and started searching for ingredients.

Breakfast was important. She liked to create her own unique juices and smoothies each morning to fend off any bugs she may have picked up in that disgusting petri dish of a school. All one had to do to catch a virus at McKinley was step through the door. Rachel always took necessary precautions. There was no way she was going to have an encore of her experience with laryngitis. Losing her voice had been traumatic, to say the least.

I love a good theme, Rachel thought as she tossed some fresh acai berries into her chrome ten-speed blender. She called it the StarBerry smoothie. It also required a scoop of ground flaxseeds, some raspberries, and sliced star fruit. A dash of pomegranate juice and crushed ice finished it off. She hit the BLEND option, and the sweet concoction whirled around, mixing together to create something delicious and unstoppable — not entirely unlike when all the members of New Directions actually played their parts, working together to create smooth melodies.

Rachel was totally the juice in that scenario, though. Without juice, things would get clogged in the blades, resulting in a lumpy mess. Glee Club needed Rachel like a smoothie needed juice. Yep, that was her, all right. Good old juice.

Too bad she didn't need the Glee kids. This summer, she was going to create her own sweet sounds. No matter what they had to say about it.



McKinley High entrance, Monday morning

A contented Mercedes Jones sat on the front steps of McKinley High, relishing the warmth of the morning sunshine on her face. The last week of school usually felt like a breeze. But this year was different. She still had a few big assignments hanging over her head, so she couldn't truly relax.

The most daunting was a final exam in Mr. Schuester's Spanish II class. Foreign languages were so not her strong point. Brushing the negative thoughts aside, she breathed in the fresh air and got lost in a daydream of lying by her cousin's pool. Ideally, she would be sporting her new zebra-striped Wayfarer sunglasses while flipping through *Superstar Weekly* and have absolutely, positively, *zero* Spanish homework. *Nada.*

But the impending Spanish doom wasn't the only thing that was bothering Mercedes. There was a tiny something else nagging her in the back of her mind. And it had to do with Glee Club. Or the lack of it.

For Mercedes, summer was always a time of goofing off. It consisted mainly of a combination of standing in long lines at the Lima Freeze to get Oreo milk shakes with Kurt Hummel, beating the heat in the cool air-conditioning at the mall, or even just chilling in her room, listening to new music she downloaded off iTunes. For a few months, Mercedes didn't have to worry about homework, grades, or surviving a day at McKinley High without getting slushed by her classmates. During the summer, the only slushies she would see were ones she bought for herself at the mini-mart. To *drink*. To be honest, though, she hadn't really had a taste for them the past few years. You could only get so much cherry-flavored ice in your face before you associated the taste with bad feelings and an outfit change.

Mercedes scanned the parking lot for any signs of her best friend. Kurt was still nowhere in sight, so Mercedes popped in her neon-yellow earbuds and scrolled to the B.o.B section on her iPod. She might as well use the last few minutes before school started to hear the solo again. She selected "Airplanes," which was one of her favorite songs even if it was starting to get played out. Currently it was the twenty-seventh most played on her list. The song began, and Mercedes drummed to the beat on her binder. She knew that she had to win that solo over Santana, even if it meant

another argument that took up the whole period. “*I could use a dream or a genie or a wish,*” the song pulsed in her ears.

Mercedes didn’t want to just keep wishing. Although she had always loved singing, it wasn’t until recently that Mercedes started taking the hobby a little more seriously. Maybe it was the influence of that nut job Rachel Berry — but for once in her life, Mercedes thought she might actually stand a chance at a career in the performing arts. And with senior year approaching fast, she needed to start making some decisions — or at the very least, keep her vocal chops up in the off-season. Man, Mercedes was going to miss that silly Glee Club.

Luckily, the school year had hours upon hours of practice built into Mercedes’s busy lifestyle. Every day at school, she could count on warming up with New Directions and belting out some sweet tunes (that is, if Rachel could stop berating the rest of the club long enough for them all to actually get some verses in). Mr. Schuester did his part by trying to get them to perform as often as they could. And even on Sundays, Mercedes could count on clocking some time singing with her church choir. It was all very convenient. A total no-brainer. Until now.

It didn’t occur to Mercedes that she might be losing momentum until a few weeks ago after practice. She normally tuned Rachel out, but on this particular day Rachel was giving Sam Evans one of her “lessons.” Sam had been new to McKinley at the beginning of the year, but he was a quick learner and had acclimated faster than a fish to water.

He certainly didn't need much help. Yet Rachel still insisted on teaching him useless facts from time to time and pretending it was charity. Everyone knew she just relished the opportunity to boss some new blood around. Poor guy. He was too nice to ignore her.

"Sam, I think it's important that you continue your pursuit of vocal perfection," Rachel had proclaimed.

To which Sam had replied nonchalantly, "Uhh, sure. Sounds good."

"Excellent choice. I think you'll find that a career in show business is not easy, but you have shown some early potential. With a ton more practice, I think you could be sculpted into something adequate. Perhaps part of an ensemble. Leads like me are always looking for a great ensemble to back them up. Have you considered your options?" The fervor with which Rachel interrogated him would seem psychotic to anyone who didn't know her.

"Options? I dunno, I guess I will just be in New Directions again next year or something..." Sam wasn't really listening anymore. He was too busy ogling Quinn Fabray, who had bent down to pick up a tube of glitter lip gloss she had purposely dropped on the floor. Her Cheerios skirt was pretty short.

"You wouldn't want to let those shiny new vocal cords of yours go dormant over the summer, would you?" Rachel's voice had become all breathy and desperate. "That would do practically the same damage as shouting at the top of your lungs for a week straight! Did you know that if you don't use

it, you really *do* lose it?" Thankfully, Mercedes hadn't heard the rest of the conversation, because Rachel followed Sam and Quinn out of the choir room and beyond.

Girl needs to learn to take a hint, Mercedes had thought. Maybe one of the AV kids could create an app on Rachel's cell phone that beeped when she became annoying. On the other hand, it would probably turn into one constant, eternal beep.

Even though what Rachel had said about losing your voice if you didn't use it was decidedly ridiculous, Mercedes secretly thought she did have the tiniest little bit of a point. This, quite frankly, scared Mercedes because Rachel didn't often make sense. It was fine for Sam or the other kids, who were only a part of Glee to make the school year more bearable, to slack off during summer. But maybe Mercedes should get a little more serious.

Her only chance to perform for a large crowd during the summer was at her church's annual Fourth of July barbecue. Every year, the church rented the outdoor stage at the Lima Community Park and put on a patriotic musical revue. People would come with their picnic baskets and blankets, staking out seats in the early morning and throughout the day. Mercedes would just chill with her family and eat tons of tasty food, including her mom's famous potato salad. That dish even eclipsed the deliciousness of McKinley High Tater Tots.

Then, when dusk fell and the crowd had fallen into a happy, satiated post-food haze, the show would begin. The

costumes weren't much — just T-shirts in red, white, or blue and sequined top hats that had been used for so long that most of the sequins were falling off. It was the closest to a packed auditorium she had ever gotten until nationals in New York this year. And for the past two years, Mercedes had been selected by her peers to sing “The Star-Spangled Banner” during the meager fireworks display. It was pretty nice to be recognized as the star of the group, unlike at school, where it seemed that Rachel had claimed that title for all of time. Rumors had been circulating among the congregation that Mercedes was going to be chosen for a record-breaking third year. Fourth of July was her favorite day of the summer. A guaranteed good time, filled with music and friends.

But as much as she loved performing with her church choir, it lacked in certain departments, which Glee usually made up for. For example, the only dance moves the choir ever did had to match the abilities of a seventy-year-old grandmother. It wasn't really Mrs. Wilkins's fault, though. Mercedes didn't mind including everyone (it *was* church, after all), but she had come to really enjoy the challenge of matching her melodies to elaborate, choreographed routines. She knew she had some serious moves. Why shouldn't she get to show them off?

Mercedes knew hip-hop better than anyone at McKinley High. Mike Chang argued that *he* did, but homeboy was seriously kidding himself. Sure, he was good, but he lacked a certain something. Last year, when she and Kurt had done a brief stint on the Cheerios, all the red-and-black-clad McKin-

ley robots had managed to loosen up a little under her supervision. She even made them look a little human. Mercedes could only imagine how great the squad might be if they employed more funky moves regularly. Didn't those girls learn anything from *Bring It On*? Mercedes secretly loved that movie, even if it was about cheerleaders. Maybe it was because the squad of stiff automatons in red uniforms got schooled by the soulful, inner-city girls with the hip-hop-infused routine. It showed that you shouldn't mess with the power of funk, which was a valuable lesson indeed.

Mercedes quickly typed a note to herself into her phone to slip a copy of the DVD through the slots in Brittany's locker, Netflix-style. At the very least, it would be entertaining to watch Brittany try to figure that one out. She would probably think it was an offering from the "Spirit Gods," like she did that time when she found a pair of her old Cheerios briefs under the bleachers during litter detention. Mercedes was pretty sure Brittany had just left them there during a completely inappropriate make-out session with that kid from the tennis team, Charlie Reeves. Brittany, however, insisted they were delivered back to her by a pelican. "He's their messenger bird," she'd explained. Mercedes thought that girl had fallen off of one too many human pyramids.

Mercedes minimized the note application and practically jumped when she saw the time. 8:13! The bell should have rung three minutes ago! Sure enough, when she looked up, it was like a ghost town. She must have had the volume of the music up too high. Damn. The only students left were a few

latecomers scrambling up the steps, juggling books and boxes of orange juice while rubbing sleep out of their eyes. But still no Kurt Hummel.

Mercedes should have been worried about being late to class, but this was very weird. Kurt was almost never late. In fact, she could only remember two mornings in the past few years when he hadn't been at least ten minutes early. "Early bird gets the best worms, and the best off-the-rack Dolce and Gabbana," he'd always remind her. The first time he'd been late had been because of his inability to accept Lady Gaga's decision to start wearing pants. He'd stayed up really late the night before Photoshopping a campaign poster that displayed "the repercussions of a style icon bending to the petty whims of polite society." It had a picture of a tiger wearing pants and the slogan TIGERS DON'T WEAR PANTS. NEITHER SHOULD GAGA. He'd hoped it would go viral. It didn't. Good thing Lady Gaga still sported jeweled panties occasionally on her way to the airport.

The only other instance Kurt had been late was during the Dave Karofsky bullying incident, when he was too afraid to come to school. Mercedes sincerely hoped this time was nothing like that. Especially since Kurt had finally rejoined New Directions and McKinley High after a hiatus spent at Dalton Academy. Mercedes was pretty sure everything was fine. But she should probably wait for him, just in case. With any luck, he had just decided to stop at that new bakery next to LaPaloma's to get the two of them some fresh cinnamon buns for breakfast. Mercedes's mouth started watering like

Pavlov's dog at the delicious prospect. Class could definitely wait.

It was almost ten minutes after the first bell when Kurt's black SUV finally screeched to a halt into one of the unshaded spots in the McKinley parking lot. Both students and teachers avoided these undesirable sunny spots at the end of the school year because the pavement got so hot, you could fry an egg on it. Some of the guys from the football team had even tried to do that once instead of egging Finn Hudson's car, as they had originally intended to. Mercedes thought it was funny how easily amused those oafs were sometimes. Such simple minds, such simple pleasures.

A frazzled-looking Kurt tumbled out of his car unceremoniously. He grabbed his distressed-leather satchel and fumbled for his keys. He double-clicked the button as he ran up the steps to meet Mercedes. The loud honk signaled his car was locked, but it also made their presence known to Principal Figgins, who was across the lot, sipping his morning coffee. It was most likely a latte from Coach Sylvester, who liked to butter him up with unsolicited treats every time she was about to make a ridiculous request on behalf of her Cheerios. Which was often.

"Where in the Mariah Carey have you been?" Mercedes stage-whispered as she began to take in Kurt's unkempt appearance. She could see Figgins making his way toward them with a furrowed brow. The entire student body at McKinley knew that Principal Figgins's main rules were "no monkeyshines, no sass-back, and no lollygagging." Mercedes

still wasn't sure what the first one even meant, but she didn't want to get caught doing the other two. Mercedes often provided sass-back, and right now they were most definitely lollygagging and late for class.

"Hurry up! I sure as hell ain't spending *my* last week in litter detention!" She grabbed Kurt by the arm and pulled him inside.

"Go ahead. My shirt is already wrinkled," Kurt announced dramatically. "And I have worn this outfit before. So it doesn't even matter..." He tried to smooth down a piece of hair that was pointed skyward. "I'm such a failure."

Mercedes took stock. He was wearing a pair of blue-and-white seersucker shorts with a brown leather belt, a crisp white button-down, and a red-striped bow tie. It looked pretty standard Kurt to her. Mercedes considered herself a fashionista, but he somehow always managed to cling to tiny details that no one else would ever notice. She had learned that lesson earlier this year after wearing the same rhinestone pendant of a boom box three days in a row. Kurt had been less than subtle when he asked her if she needed him to go accessories shopping with her after school. Sometimes he was best taken with a grain of salt. This was one of those times.

"Have you been inhaling too many fumes at your dad's tire shop? What I wanna know is, why are you so late? Please tell me nothing is wrong and that you brought me the Spanish notes from last week." Mercedes's face twisted into the expression of a puppy dog awaiting a Milk-Bone. Kurt's

attention to detail certainly paid off when it came to his class notes, which she sometimes borrowed. And Mercedes could use all the help she could get right about now.

“Ugh, I can’t even *think* about homework at a time like this.” Kurt shuddered. “My life is over.”

“Did Katy Perry decide to stop wearing bras in the shape of cupcakes or something?” Mercedes retorted, wishing she had just gone to art class. Ms. Kowalski never took attendance anyway, and Mercedes wasn’t sure she wanted to deal with Kurt’s issues on top of her own (especially without the Spanish notes she’d been promised). “If you are going to be such a drama queen, you can at least clue me in.” She followed Kurt to his locker.

“I am doomed to a summer of outfit repeats. My dad” — Kurt sighed heavily before gathering the strength to continue — “took away my clothing allowance and eBay privileges. It’s a cruel and unusual punishment for such a minor offense!” He rummaged through his locker like a maniac, even accidentally ripping the corner of the picture of his friend Blaine from Dalton Academy. “I thought I had a — aha!” Kurt produced a white bow tie and a white canvas belt and proceeded to quick-change with the alacrity of a Broadway professional right there in the humble halls of McKinley.

“What exactly did you do?” Mercedes’s interest was slightly piqued. Kurt didn’t get into trouble too often.

“Last night I got sucked into a *What Not to Wear* marathon while I was doing my homework. Carole came in and

asked if she could do anything to help . . . and I told her that it would help *everyone* if she didn't wear pants from three seasons ago," Kurt recounted.

Mercedes jaw dropped. "You told your new stepmother what?"

"I didn't mean it! You *know* how I tend to absorb the persona of characters if I watch them for too long. Especially Stacy and Clinton." Mercedes nodded knowingly, recalling the time Kurt had gotten sucked into an *America's Next Top Model* marathon. He had watched almost three cycles before morphing into a weird version of Tyra Banks. He kept coaching everyone on how to "smile with your eyes," or, as he kept saying, "smizing."

Kurt continued. "Anyway, my dad overheard it. He thinks I am becoming too superficial and selfish. I spent all morning trying to convince him otherwise. But he still says he won't give me back my allowance until I prove that I am doing something to help others. And it can't even be a makeover on some girl . . . or me." Kurt's shoulders slumped in defeat.

Burt Hummel sure knows his baby well, Mercedes thought. The boy loved makeovers a little too much.

"Any suggestions?" he whined, straightening the fresh bow tie in the reflection of his locker mirror. The frame was emblazoned with scrolled letters that asked WHO'S THE FAIR-EST? It was an obvious throwback to Snow White, which made Mercedes chuckle. Much like the original asker of the question, Kurt could certainly be the biggest drama queen. She wondered if the mirror's message was intentional.

Mercedes wrapped up her earbuds, which had gotten mad-tangled in the dash from Figgins. She finally offered, “Well, once a month I go with my mom and some friends from church to visit the elderly at the retirement home. I can ask if you can come. We play games and stuff.”

Kurt wrinkled his nose. “Thanks, but no thanks. Ever since competing against that old Hipsters group at sectionals, I haven’t been able to get the smell of Geritol out of my nose.”

Mercedes thought that was a little extreme. She’d thought that the Hipsters were sort of charming, but maybe it was because she was used to performing with Mrs. Wilkins. Kurt clearly had a long way to go in the whole selflessness department.

Come to think of it, he hadn’t even asked how she was doing. Nor did he seem to care that they were both extremely tardy. He slammed his locker shut, popped a piece of peppermint gum in his mouth, and whipped out his cell.

“Any chance I can have a package shipped to your house? I just bid on a vintage straw fedora that was *made* for my beachwear, and I can’t let my dad see it.” He was now tapping furiously on the screen. Kurt was somehow one of the only kids in school who managed to get around the McKinley High official no-cell-phone-during-school-hours policy.

At that precise moment, Mercedes’s ears perked up to a familiar sound. The purposeful squeak of athletic shoes on the shiny linoleum unmistakably belonged to Coach Sue Sylvester and her less imposing lackeys Santana Lopez and

Brittany Pierce. Today, Coach Sylvester was sporting a navy blue tracksuit with red and white stripes.

Upon spotting the two renegades, Coach Sylvester immediately pivoted on her heel and changed course. She never missed an opportunity to belittle an underling.

“I’m not nearly as concerned about your blatant disregard for punctuality as I am about your obvious intention to injure my eyes by wearing that hideous outfit. At least now I know why they call it *seersucker*. That’s right, because you, my friend, are a sucker. Get to class, Porcelain. You, too, Queen Latifah,” Coach Sylvester barked before powering down the corridor.

“B-T-dubs, Colonel Sanders, changing the bow tie does *not* make it a new outfit,” Santana added, and sashayed off after Coach Sylvester.

Before falling in line, Brittany regarded him with a cocked head and her usual gentle, childlike voice. “Whenever people wear all white, I think they sometimes look like toilets. Is that why she called you Porcelain?”

Kurt shook his head dejectedly. He gave Brittany a condescending pat on the top of her blond high ponytail before she scampered off to follow her leader.

“Well, girl’s got that right. People *do* give you a lot of crap,” said Mercedes, cracking a smile.

“True. But they actually had a point!” Kurt insisted. He took Mercedes’s hands and begged. “I look awful. You have to help me find a way to fix this. I refuse to ruin my

impeccable wardrobe record over something so silly.” He flicked his man-bangs out of the way.

Mercedes rolled her eyes. He really seemed to be entirely missing his dad’s point. But maybe she could come up with something to make Kurt Hummel a more giving person.

“Fine. But you know what it’ll cost ya. . . .” she said as she finally started toward the art room. A squeal of delight took the place of Kurt’s answer.

Mercedes had a feeling there would be a hot-from-the-oven cinnamon bun waiting with her name on it tomorrow morning. If only it came with a side of super-fresh summer plans. Now that would be the *real* icing on the cake.

glee

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