No One Left to Blame
by ForForever19

Summary

Quinn Fabray is well-versed in keeping the truths of her family and her past firmly hidden away. But, her efforts prove to be moot when Rachel Berry, armed with her own secrets of the past, arrives at Dalton Academy and manages to turn both their worlds upside down - or, perhaps, right way up. Faberry. Trigger Warnings.
Chapter 1

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**AN:** This story is very AU. It's littered with several triggers. It rarely goes into explicit detail but, seriously, take care while reading. Please.

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**Chapter One**

Quinn Fabray's knuckles are strikingly white as her grip tightens on the phone pressed to her ear, her jaw clenched and her eyes narrowed. She's listening to words that aren't… surprising, but they definitely don't hurt any less because of that. As a result, she's pacing the length of her bedroom in order to keep her anger in check, just waiting for her mother to finish her completely unnecessary explanation.

"It just isn't a good time, Quinn," Judy Fabray tells her daughter, sounding distant and distracted - which is normal, Quinn thinks nastily. "Your father and I aren't even going to be in Hartford. It's just better that you not come home."

Quinn waits a beat, trying to keep herself from giving away just how hurt she is by taking a steadying breath. "Okay," she forces out, surprised by how even her voice sounds. Those breathing techniques actually seem to be working. Who knew?

"Okay."

Before Quinn can even get out her farewell, the line drops, and she's left with silence.

It's fine.

She's fine.

Everything is fine.

Despite what she tries to tell herself, she still throws her phone straight at the pillows of her bed in painful frustration, growling low in her throat in a vain attempt to stop herself from bursting into tears. No. Quinn Fabray is not going to break down over this. It isn't even anything new, and she refuses to give her parents the satisfaction of successfully affecting her.

Not today.

Not ever.

Quinn barely has a moment more to recover before there's a brief knock on her door. She doesn't even bother to make a move because the door immediately opens to reveal her best friend, Santana Lopez, who immediately moves into the room and commands the small space the only way a girl with a personality as large as hers possibly can.

"Good, you're dressed," Santana says, absently checking the time on her phone. "We don't have much time before we have to be in the dining hall."
Quinn frowns in confusion. "Good morning to you too, San," she says pointedly, to which Santana rolls her eyes. It's typical behaviour for them. "And, isn't it a little early for breakfast?"

"Well, yes, but also no."

Quinn waits, carefully moving to her closet to retrieve her red school tie.

"I know you said not to," Santana continues; "but I still filled in the form for you to run for Head Student, and you were approved as a candidate."

Quinn's head snaps towards her. "You did what?" she practically shrieks.

Santana looks suitably uncomfortable but she doesn't drop her gaze. She strongly believes she made the right decision, and she's going to stand by it. "Look, in my defense, I didn't do it for me, or for you."

"What on earth are you even talking about right now?"

"I did it for the school, Q," she says, as if that makes it all better. "I know I bitch about how much I hate this fucking place all the time, but we kind of owe it to them to make sure that bastard, Azimio Adams, doesn't win the election."

Quinn narrows her eyes. "Is he the only other one running?"

Santana shakes her head no, watching as Quinn expertly does the knot in her tie. She's always been a little jealous of the deftness of Quinn's fingers. The girl barely looks as she does the perfect knot.

"There's also the new girl," Santana says, blinking a few times to clear her thoughts. "Whatever her name is. She's been hell spent on flying under the radar until now, so the fact that she's running at all is totally weird." She hums in thought. "Or, she must recognise Adams for the tool he is, and she's taking one for the team too. At least you actually have a chance of winning."

Quinn can almost picture the girl Santana must be referring to, but the actual person evades her. Despite Quinn's obvious popularity, she doesn't really mix with other students. She's far too busy with her studies and extracurriculars to be friendly with anyone other than Santana Lopez.

Which, yes, is rather sad, and definitely wouldn't gain her father's approval.

"Whatever her reasons, it's doubtful she'll win," Santana says, somewhat dismissively. "Which is why we have to make sure that tool doesn't."

Quinn arches an eyebrow expectantly. "What do you have against him anyway?"

Santana shoots her a withering look. "Do you pay any attention to anything I tell you?"

"I try not to," she returns, somewhat coyly as she finishes with her tie and ensures it's perfectly in position. It has to be perfect. She has to be perfect.

"It's just, well, hasn't it been years since that happened?"

"Q, seriously," Santana says on an exhale. "Believe me when I tell you the last thing you and I want is Azimio Adams having any control over this school."

Quinn presses her lips together, still unsure. She doesn't think she's the right person for the job of
Head Student, whether she wants it or not. She's already too busy, and it wouldn't be fair to anyone if she were to take on even more responsibility and then fail at it. It's would break her if that were to happen. Failure is not an option.

"Tell me again why you're not running," Quinn says, checking her hair in the mirror on the inside of her closet door.

"Like anyone would vote for me," Santana mutters, and Quinn has to concede to that. Santana is 'likeable' on most days, but she's not personable or approachable enough to win any followers. "Please, Quinn."

Now, Quinn has known Santana for a long time, and the only time the Latina only ever asks for things is when she has no other choice. If she knows something about Azimio Adams, then Quinn is going to take her word for it.

"Okay," Quinn eventually says, doing her best to ignore the sudden shiver that runs through her body. "We'll run."

Santana smiles smugly, as if she knows Quinn was going to give in all along. "I'm your campaign manager, by the way."

"Oh, yeah?"

"I thought that was a given."

"So, did I."

Santana shakes her head. "Crazy bitch."

"Now, that's no way to talk to your future Head Student."

She rolls her eyes. "And… the power's already gone to your head."

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Quinn's official campaign starts off slowly.

She and Santana almost fall into a routine, beginning with Quinn leaving her room early enough in the morning to station herself at the doors to the dining hall to welcome in all the students. She stays in position through the entire breakfast hour, chatting to everyone she can and trying to convince them to cast his or her vote in her favour. While she does that, Santana collects breakfast for her, which she's just able to consume before she has to be in homeroom.

From the response Quinn is getting, it's obvious to both girls that this ploy is working. Frankly, Quinn is enjoying being able to get to know the other students. They actually stop to talk to her, all of them pleasantly surprised to learn there's a actual, soft human being behind her seemingly cold, hard exterior. Coupled with the various campaign posters she and Santana have put up, everything is steadily progressing, effective and clearly going according to plan.

And, it's in that very position, stationed outside the dining hall, that Quinn Fabray officially meets one of her opponents.

It's a typical Wednesday morning when said opponent first shows up, choosing to stand on the other side of the main doors to the dining hall and attempting to do the exact same thing Quinn is doing.
The first thing Quinn thinks when she lays eyes on Rachel Berry is that she's tiny. Something about her just screams 'demure,' but she can't be sure what it is. Just, this girl is small and she should be protected. Quinn shakes her head the second the thought floats through her head, because what the hell.

This girl is her opponent.

She's the enemy.

But she's just so tiny.

"So, I see you weren't smart enough to come up with your own strategy," Quinn says the first morning, quirking an eyebrow in that way that's become synonymous with Quinn Fabray.

To her credit, Rachel fires back with a response immediately, not at all thrown off by the sheer presence of the other girl. "I don't see your name anywhere," she says, unable to keep the smile completely off her face.

Quinn can't help her own grin as she points to a poster on the wall just behind where Rachel is standing. "I assume you would have to be able to read to get into Dalton," she quips.

Rachel spins to look at the poster, flushing instantly at the sight of Quinn's name in big, bold letters. "Well, okay then," she says, turning back to look at Quinn. "You win this one, Miss Fabray, but we're just getting started."

"Should I be scared?"

"Deathly."

There's a flicker of light that dances in Quinn's eyes at the challenge. It's there for only a moment, but it's enough for Rachel Berry to stop and take notice. "I look forward to it," Quinn finds herself saying.

"Me, too," Rachel returns easily and, for the first time in such a long time, she finds she actually means it.

Quinn wouldn't go so far as to call it an outright war, but it is something of a battle.

She and Rachel arrive almost simultaneously every morning and attempt to outdo each other with the number of students with whom they engage. Even though Quinn would never admit to anyone – let alone herself – she actually finds herself starting to look forward to the morning hour she shares with Rachel. She enjoys the banter and the challenge, and Rachel Berry is the epitome of 'Challenge' to her.

It's all good, innocent fun, until it just isn't.

As the voting gets closer and closer, Santana gets more and more on edge. With the school paper, The Dalton Chronicle, claiming that Quinn and Rachel are both ahead of Azimio in the polls, Santana can't help voicing her concerns to her candidate.

"Why on earth are you worried?" Quinn asks her, as she laces up her running shoes in preparation for her late afternoon exercise session. "I would think this is a good thing, but forgive me if I'm mistaken."

"Because it's not. It's just the opposite. I'm getting more and more worried every day."

"Well, I'm not," Quinn counters, still smiling. "I'm actually looking forward to it."

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

"Deathly."

"Well, I'm not deathly."
"Don't get smart with me, Fabray," Santana grumbles, flopping down onto Quinn's bed. She lies back and covers her eyes with her left forearm. "Of course, I want us to be in the lead," she says. "It's just that Adams is probably, definitely, going to try to do something now that he knows he might not win."

Quinn sits up when her shoes are tightened and regards her best friend with careful, curious eyes. "What could he possibly do?" she asks. "As far as I know, he has nothing on me."

She says the words carefully, believing them to be true, but there's an irrational part of her that feels the fear. She has plenty of secrets she would much prepare remained behind lock and key.

At least until she's ready to set them free herself.

Santana moves her arm away and peers at her friend. "What about Berry?"

Quinn raises her eyebrows. "What about Rachel?" she asks tensely.

"Before you go into some noble tailspin there, just know that I went digging because it's part of my job as your campaign manager," she says, sitting up to meet Quinn's gaze. "I – I found some… stuff about her."

As curious as Quinn is, she knows she wouldn't feel right winning that way. She might actually be noble. "San, no," she says firmly. "We're going to win this the right way, okay? Adams can hit us with whatever he wants, but we're running this campaign the right way or we're not running it at all."

Santana rolls her eyes. "God, you're no fun."

Quinn chuckles. "So you've been telling me."

Santana rises to her feet. "It's just a random article anyway," she explains offhandedly. "I printed it out for you to look at if you want to, but you're definitely right. I doubt it's something Berry would want us to know."

Quinn clamps down on her sudden interest. She's trying to be a good person, but Santana isn't making it easy for her. "Maybe just burn it," she says.

*That's it. Get rid of the temptation. If only that worked in real life.*

Santana shakes her head. "Q, you do know that if I managed to find it; Adams probably has too, and he's not as kind as you are."

"I'm not kind," Quinn immediately says, which may or may not be true. "I just know what it's like to want things of my past to remain in my past."

Santana stares at her for a long moment. Sometimes, her blonde friend says things that give the Latina reasons to pause and pay attention. Quinn has never been the most open person about anything, so Santana takes note of these moments that Quinn offers. "I'll see if I can keep a handle on it," Santana tells her.

"Thanks, San," she returns, giving her friend a grateful smile. "Are you joining me for a run?"

"Oh, God, no," she immediately says. "I wouldn't willingly subject my body to additional pain, and you know it."
Quinn shrugs. "Doesn't mean I won't keep offering. You'll join me one of these days."

"Whatever."

Quinn just laughs lightly as she retrieves her iPod from her docking station and follows Santana out of her room. Quinn is one of the lucky ones in their year with her own room. Through her generally perfect behaviour (much to Santana's horror), impeccable grades and apparent 'positive' attitude (God, Quinn laughed so hard when she heard that), her Floor's Matron made the decision to award her and two other students with their own rooms.

It's been both a blessing and a curse for Quinn.

Too easy to hide.

Much too easy to lose herself in the silence.

"The entire summer?"

Quinn's voice is laced with bubbling frustration and obvious strain. She's generally a calm person when she speaks to her parents, but her patience is wearing thin. They're getting to that stage of the semester where the pressure to perform is starting to sit heavily on her shoulders, and the stress is making her snappy.

"I'm afraid so," Judy says, sounding much calmer than her daughter. "It's pointless for you to come all the way to Washington, when you could just stay home and enjoy your summer vacation." She sounds entirely too sweet, and it makes Quinn feel sick. "Of course, we'll visit," Judy adds, almost as an afterthought. "There are a selection of events we'll have to attend."

Quinn clenches her jaw, shutting her eyes tight. "Make the necessary arrangements then," she says. "I'll just do whatever you say."

"Good girl."

Quinn resists the urge to growl as she bids her mother farewell, doing her best not to give in to the overwhelming heaviness in her chest. She focuses on her breathing until it steadies, and her grip loosens on her phone. "You're okay," she tells herself, speaking the words out loud, because the mental mantra seems to be failing. "You're going to be just fine."

When the tension seems to have dissipated in her body, she's able to set down her phone, which is a feat in itself, because she's been making a habit of throwing it against her pillows.

If only Dalton Academy offered some form of boxing. Quinn Fabray has an abundance of aggression to work out.

She's also insanely tense with unease about the campaign and Rachel and Azimio and how much she actually wants to win the election. She's been very careful not to allow herself to want things because she's suffered one too many disappointments in her life, and she's all too aware what they can do to her general psyche and overall mood. So, she does all she can to remain in control of nearly everything in her life, but even she knows this campaign is completely out of her hands.

And, she's about to receive another reminder.

Quinn can tell from the hard, quick knock on her bedroom door that the person behind it isn't Santana. It's someone else, and the panicked knocking makes her move slowly and cautiously to
open it and reveal one Rachel Berry.

The first thing Quinn notices is how… attractive she is when she's angry.

And, she is.

Angry, Quinn means.

In fact, Rachel is positively fuming, but Quinn can't even bring herself to register that over the fire in her eyes and the way Quinn's stomach flips at the sight. What the hell?

Rachel shoves a yellow piece of paper against Quinn's chest, snapping the blonde to attention. "I thought you were a lot of things, Quinn Fabray," she says hotly; "but even this is beneath you."

Quinn's brow furrows in confusion as she traps the piece of paper against her body before it falls to the ground. "What are you talking about?" she asks.

"Of course, you would play dumb," she says sarcastically. "Just playing into the blonde stereotype, aren't you?"

Despite herself, Quinn flinches at the maliciousness in Rachel's tone. "I honestly have no idea what you're going on about," she says. "Did something happen?"

She stares hard at Quinn, looking straight through her. "That happened," she spits, poking Quinn hard where the piece of paper is still lodged against her sternum.

Quinn steps back at the force of Rachel's finger and, before she can get another word out, Rachel has stormed away, leaving Quinn confused and breathless. "What the hell?" she mutters under breath.

Simultaneously rubbing at her hurt flesh, she looks at the piece of paper and feels her heart drop right into her stomach. "Oh, fuck," she says, dropping the piece of paper and immediately rushing out to catch up with Rachel.

For a tiny person, she sure is quick on her feet, and Quinn has to break into a run to catch up to her. She doesn't even bother to call her name until she's within grabbing distance. As gently as she can, Quinn's fingers close around Rachel's shoulder and bring her to a stop in the corridor of their residence building, which is sufficiently full of students who are a little too interested in the confrontation they're certain they're about to witness.

"Rachel," Quinn breathes when the brunette spins to face her, tears in her eyes.

"What do you want, Quinn?" she asks, her voice trembling.

Quinn opens her mouth but the words are stuck in her throat.

"What could you possibly say, anyway?" she says, taking her shoulder back and wiping at her eyes and she tries to get a handle on herself. "Do you know what this is like? I came here to get away from all of that, and now everyone keeps looking at me like – like – " her voice catches on a sob, and Quinn feels it in the very depths of her dead heart. "What could you possibly say?"

"I'm sorry," Quinn says calmly. "I'm sorry this is happening to you; I am, but I didn't run this. I swear I didn't. You have to believe me."

Rachel blinks, unsure what to make of Quinn's tone of voice. "Why should I?"
"Because I don't need to use something like this to win," she says, being truthful.

Rachel recoils slightly. "So, what, you did it to be hurtful?"

"I didn't do it at all," she says through gritted teeth. It's all she can do not to give in to her emotions and yell at the girl in front of her. "Just, come to my room, okay? We can talk. I just – I don't want to make it any worse."

"How could it possibly get any worse?" Rachel asks tiredly, but she does follow when Quinn leads the way back to her bedroom.

For Quinn, everything suddenly feels heavy: her breaths and her footsteps. First, her mother tells her there's a strong chance she won't be seeing much of her parents at all over the summer, and now this.

The hits just keep on coming.

When they get to Quinn's room, the blonde ushers Rachel inside and gently closes the door. She takes a moment to gather herself, trying to stamp down on the flush in her cheeks and the rushing blood in her veins.

The two of them stand awkwardly, unable to look at each other, until Quinn breaks the silence and speaks. "Look, I'm not going to lie and say I didn't know there was possibly something to be used," she confesses; "but I swear I had nothing to do with any of this." She runs a hand over her hair, hiding her nerves and frustration in the simple action. Why does she want Rachel to understand so badly? "Winning like this is wrong, and I – I wouldn't want whatever happened in my past to come out this way. It's – it's not okay, and I'm sorry."

Rachel takes her time meeting Quinn's gaze. "It wasn't you?"

"It wasn't me."

"But you knew?"

She swallows audibly. "Not what it was exactly," she admits, shuddering as she recalls the content of the flyers. "Santana said she did some snooping, but we decided to bury it. I – she – we didn't – " she stops. "All I know is it wasn't us, Rachel. I didn't know what it was but, even then, girls don't do things like this to other girls."

Rachel is silent, looking smaller than Quinn has ever seen her. Since she met her, Rachel's personality has more than made up for her stature, and she's really larger than life. But, right now, she's quiet.

Rachel's not sure what to say, where to look or what to do. She was convinced she would be prepared for people to find out the real reason she transferred schools in the middle of her junior year of high school, but it was never supposed to come out this way. It was never supposed to be used to hurt her.

Rachel takes a tiny step back, deflating. She's never actually been in Quinn's room before, and she's a little bit mystified by how empty it is. It's insanely tidy, everything in its place, as if Quinn is determined to overcorrect this very aspect of her life.

Quinn regards her silence with a touch of apprehension, but she's just glad there are no more tears. She can't handle crying girls. It's probably the reason she and Santana get on so well; they're the same that way: painfully awkward when the tears start rolling down smooth cheeks.
Without giving it much more thought, Quinn scoops up her phone, quickly dials Santana, and barely lets the other girl answer before she speaks. "Come to my room. Now." She hangs up immediately, feeling that same irrepressible urge to hurl her phone across the room. She sets it down before she can do any damage and forces her breathing to stay calm.

"Why are you so determined to prove to me you had nothing to do with this?" Rachel suddenly asks, and Quinn snaps to attention.

In truth, the blonde can't say why she's so hell bent on having Rachel believe in her innocence. She hasn't cared about what people think of her this way before, and it's throwing her for a loop. "Because I didn't," she finally says, deciding.

"That's not really an answer," Rachel points out, turning her body to face Quinn fully. There's something about this mystery of a girl, and she's suddenly determined to know her.

Quinn takes a deep breath and exhales slowly. "I don't know," she confesses quietly. "I just need you to know I didn't do this because that's not who I am. It's obvious you already think a lot of me, but I'm definitely not this. I wouldn't cheat like this; it's beneath me, especially as a Fabray, and I wouldn't stoop to such hurtful levels. I mean, why would I risk being disqualified from the race for something so – so – " she halts. "This is just so wrong on so many levels, Rachel. Nobody has the right to reveal something like this, and definitely not this way. You deserve better than this."

Rachel just stares at her for the longest time, even as Quinn tries to hide her panic at having revealed too much. Why did she say so many words? "You care, don't you?" Rachel asks softly, almost in wonder. "You care about me."

Quinn's eyes widen in alarm, suddenly wishing the ground could open up and swallow her whole. She just wants Rachel to stop looking at her like that. "I don't – no – that's – "

A quick knock at her door saves her from stumbling through more of a rushed explanation, and her bedroom door opens to let Santana slip into the room. "Cryptic bitch," Santana grumbles, and then freezes at the sight of Rachel. "What's this? Are we consorting with the enemy now?"

Quinn rolls her eyes, ignoring her questions. "Did you see the flyers?"

Santana raises her eyebrows in question. "What flyers?"

Quinn steps towards her door and bends to retrieve the yellow piece of paper from the carpet. "Somebody ran this," she says, handing it to Santana.


Quinn glances at Rachel, who looks slightly uncomfortable with Santana's cursing. "Adams?"

"Probably."

Quinn sighs. "Is there anything we can do?"

Santana presses her lips together. "There's little we can do," she eventually says. "The way I see it, Adams laid this out to make it look like we're the ones who did this to Berry, which is going to torpedo both our campaigns. We could get disqualified and Berry could lose votes."

Quinn bites at her bottom lip, visibly thinking, and both Santana and Rachel watch the action with un concealed interest. "I think I have an idea," she eventually says, her eyes casting that flicker of light again. Rachel takes an unconscious step towards her, as if the spark of hazel is drawing her in.
"It's going to involve a bluff and a possible meeting with Mr Schuester."

Santana nods without hesitation, willing to follow Quinn anywhere. For whatever reason, she's just sure the blonde won't lead her astray. "I'm in."

Quinn looks at Rachel. "For it to work, I need to know you believe me."

"I believe you, Quinn," she immediately says, and Quinn lets out a breath she didn't even know she was holding.

"Do you – do you trust me?"

Santana watches with critical eyes as Rachel straightens slightly, her head lifting, as if this question means so much more. "With this, I do," Rachel eventually says, which is all she's able to offer at the moment.

Quinn offers both girls a small, mischievous smile that makes Rachel's heart skip a telling beat and Santana's speed up. "So, this is the plan…"

"Do you think this will actually work?" Rachel whispers to Quinn as the two of them linger in the corridor outside their Headmaster's office. Santana is inside the reception with Brittany Pierce, Rachel's roommate and unofficial campaign manager, and they're attempting to make an appointment to meet with Headmaster Schuester.

Quinn meets Rachel's chestnut eyes, quietly taking in the way the brunette is vibrating. It's obvious to Quinn that she's been a little on edge, shifty and withdrawn. She can't even imagine what it must be like to have everyone know your business the way the school now does. "I think it will, yes," she says, trying to sound as confident as she can. "If it doesn't; we always have our backup plan."

Rachel just nods, involuntarily stepping closer to Quinn. There's just something about the other girl that makes her feel safe, as if Quinn is always going to be able to protect her, no matter the situation. Which, even she has to admit, is utterly ridiculous.

"There he is," Rachel suddenly says, and she puts out her hand for Quinn to shake.

Quinn rolls her eyes at the obvious display, but she's not going to miss out on an opportunity to touch Rachel… which is a thought that should disturb her to some degree, but she's too focused on the softness of the hand in hers and the role she has to play.

Azimio, predictably, comes to a stop when he sees them, his own fight or flight senses piquing when he realises his two opponents are conversing in front of Mr Schuester's office. "Uh, what are you two doing?"

Rachel Berry, ever the actress, fakes a startle and looks to the boy with her own confusion in her eyes. "Azimio, hi," she says. "We're just waiting for our meeting with Mr Schuester. Maybe you'd like to join us, you know? It'd be a show of good spirit to have you in there when we inform him that Quinn and I are going to be running head to head from now on."

Azimio blinks in surprise. "Um, no," he says. "I'm in the race."

It's Quinn's turn to fake confusion, and Rachel is momentarily caught off guard by her acting skills. She's entirely too good at it. "Wait," she says, looking at Rachel. "He doesn't know, does he?"

"I don't know what?"
"I think you should tell him, Quinn," Rachel says. "We owe him that much after what we're about to do."

Azimio tenses. "What are you about to do?"

In a flash, Quinn's face drops all emotion and her eyes turn hard, catching both Rachel and Azimio off guard. "Quite the stunt you pulled with those flyers, hey, Adams," she says coldly, and both Rachel and Azimio feel the chill.

Azimio immediately goes on the defensive. "You can't prove it was me."

Until now, they've been working on the assumption it was Azimio, but this is the clarification they need. Rachel, suddenly feeling breathless, steps closer to Quinn, as if she can soak up something to make this entire thing easier.

"Or, can we…?" Quinn says, keeping her eyes on the boy, even as her hand rises to press her palm against the small of Rachel's back. She doesn't know why she does it, but it feels like the right thing to do in this moment.

Azimio huffs through his panic. "You're bluffing," he says.

"Maybe we are," Quinn says, shrugging. "It's not as if we have the name of the student who sent the document to the printers in the library something like one hundred times. No, none of that."

Rachel continues, gathering herself. "Quinn, isn't your Chemistry partner part of the Computer Club or something?"

Quinn cocks her head to the side. "He is, isn't he?" she says, smirking ever so slightly when Azimio visibly pales. "How convenient for us that he actually owes me a favour from that time he almost burnt off my eyebrows."

Rachel looks at her face, smiling slightly. "You would have looked hilarious without eyebrows."

"They're kind of my distinguishing feature."

"I can see why."

"Hey!" Azimio says, impatiently breaking into their banter. "That proves nothing!"

"Maybe not," Quinn says, sounding conversational. "But it does raise some questions, doesn't it? And, I mean, when we go into Mr Schuester's office and express our concerns as potential Head Students of this school, it's only fitting that he looks into it. I mean, why would we make up something like this?"

Rachel nods in agreement. "It's our duty," she says. "Publishing anything remotely like this about a fellow student – about anyone, really – is against the rules at this school, and I hear the punishment can be rather hefty."

"It can," Quinn agrees.

"If found out, that is," Rachel says. "I assume it would be entirely different circumstances if a student were actually to confess."

Quinn can't help but be a little mesmerised by her, so her next line comes after a lengthy silence. "But, then again, Adams doesn't think we can prove it, so what does it really matter anyway?" She
looks at Azimio. "You shouldn't have any reason to worry – what are the chances Mr Schuester believes us anyway?" She looks at Rachel now. "We should just leave it, shouldn't we?"

Azimio is quick to agree, but Rachel is skeptical, thoroughly enjoying this back and forth. Azimio looks about ready to pass out. "I don't know, Quinn," she says. "I don't think people should be able to get away with stuff like this. It's not right. It's almost a hate crime, you know? We have to try. I mean, I would hate for another student to be subjected to something like this. We should be making an example and setting a precedence."

Quinn pretends to give it some thought, which is visibly agonising for Azimio. "I think you're right," she eventually says. "We've been waiting this entire time anyway, so we may as well. Nobody else should have to deal with what you have. We have to tell Mr Schuester."

"No, you can't!" Azimio rushes out, allowing his panic to show for the first time.

Quinn regards him carefully. "Is something wrong?" she asks, all innocence. "I thought you said we couldn't prove anything, so you have nothing to be worried about, right?"

Rachel borrows Quinn's cold look when her eyes land on Azimio. Normally, she wouldn't be one to enjoy another person's obvious turmoil, but this situation is different. This is the boy who took something so personal about her and used it in such an ugly way. She has zero sympathy for him. "It's no fun seeing your campaign slip through your fingers, is it?"

Azimio squares up to her, but Rachel doesn't shy away. Quinn's hand at her back merely gives her that bit more confidence. "What do you want?" Azimio asks.

"Oh, no," she says, shaking her head. "I want nothing from you. I've always been perfectly fine with talking to Mr Schuester. I think you'll find that I'm rather adept at handling administrations and bureaucracy." She almost smirks at the bewildered expression on his face. "This is going to be a lesson to others, and I've always been about educating the masses."

All Quinn can really do is watch her. Really, she's sure that Rachel didn't even need her here for any of this. She could run the show all by herself.

Rachel looks at Quinn, her eyes lighter and her shoulders less burdened. "Are you ready?"

Quinn nods. "I find I'm actually looking forward to having only one person to beat now."

Rachel rolls her eyes in response, turning to lead the way into their Headmaster's office, only to be met by Santana and Brittany coming back out. "Did you manage to get an appointment?" she asks them.

"All booked up until four o'clock," Santana informs them, loud enough for Azimio to overhear.

Rachel pouts, which may or may not be part of the script. "I suppose we can come back then, or even try for tomorrow," she suggests, which is part of the script.

"We made a booking for ten o'clock tomorrow, anyway," Brittany says.

Santana nods. "We'll see you both then," she says, her eyes lingering on Brittany.

Quinn sees it, but she isn't sure what to make of it because Rachel has her hand on Quinn's forearm now, drawing her attention. "All good?" Quinn asks.

Rachel nibbles at her bottom lip for a moment, trying to find the words. "All good," she finally
"We should get going," Quinn says, wishing for nothing more than to stay right here. Still, somehow, the four of them start walking away from Mr Schuester's office, and away from Azimio, who seems to be caught in two minds.

"Do you think it will work?" Brittany asks, echoing Rachel's original question as they round the corner.

"I suppose we'll find out in the morning," Quinn says. "If he doesn't confess before our meeting tomorrow, he'll definitely face expulsion. He knows that, so we're about to find out just how smart Mr Adams is."

Rachel's spent a few weeks getting to know Quinn Fabray, but the girl is constantly showing her something new every time they interact, and this time is no different. She has to pay attention and catalogue everything she can, even though she refuses to acknowledge the reason why.

When they're sufficiently far enough from Azimio, she tugs on Quinn's jersey to bring her to a stop, which halts all four of them. Santana and Brittany are locked in a quiet conversation ahead of Quinn and Rachel, but neither blonde or brunette is paying attention to the other pair.

"Thank you," Rachel says softly, suddenly unable to meet Quinn's eyes. "I don't even know what I would have done if..." she trails off. "Just, thank you."

"Of course, Rachel," she says kindly.

"We better get back," Rachel says, her voice rising in pitch. "My election isn't going to win itself, and I've got to make sure I pass the year to assume my position."

Quinn can't help her laughter, and it practically bubbles out of her, forcing smiles on all three of them. It's such a foreign, yet pleasant, sound, and Santana is suddenly equal parts jealous and encouraged by the fact that someone can elicit that reaction from her best friend.

"Go on, then," Quinn says. "It's obvious you're going to need all the help you can get."

Before she turns away, Rachel gives Quinn the softest look, her eyes shining with understanding. And then, just like that, she's gone, pulling Brittany along behind her.

All Santana and Quinn can do is watch them go, both of them feeling a little lost.

The next morning sees Headmaster Schuester call for an emergency student assembly during third period.

Just in time, really.

Every student files into the Great Hall in silence and assumes his or her seat. Nobody so much as breathes too loudly as William Schuester moves to stand at the podium on the stage in front of close to four hundred or so pairs of eyes.

Mr Schuester isn't one to beat around the bush, so he greets them curtly and cuts straight to the chase. "It's come to my attention that something very unjust has occurred within this school during the race for Head Student. I can assure you that action has been taken to rectify what's been done, and I can now tell you that we now have only two candidates." He ignores the sudden burst of murmuring. "From this moment, your democratic vote will fall to either, alphabetically named,
Rachel Berry or Quinn Fabray."

There is an unquestionable, united gasp among the congregation. From where Quinn is sitting, she can just make out Rachel's profile. Her mouth is set in a thin line, her face completely expressionless. Despite that, Quinn can tell that her eyes are shining, which just makes Quinn think this entire ordeal must have affected her far more than she originally let on.

Mr Schuester continues. "This school has a very strong code of conduct and will not tolerate what I have now seen as bullying within the walls of this establishment. Consequences for such actions are detrimental to your school careers. I hope you all bear that in mind next time you even think about saying or doing anything hurtful to another student. Having said that, I wish our two candidates the best of luck. I'm sure this race will prove to be very interesting." He takes a breath. "You are dismissed."

And, it does end up being a very interesting race. In fact, it turns out to be one of the closest elections Dalton Academy has ever witnessed, with both candidates splitting votes down the middle in the most recent polls. Voting is scheduled for one week before final exams are scheduled to commence, which Quinn is eternally grateful for. She would really like to get the election out of the way, so she can allow herself to focus fully on her studies.

In a few days, they'll take to the ballots, and then it will be over, and they can all go back to school life as normal.

Only, by now, Quinn should know better than to assume anything could go according to plan.

It happens on a Thursday while Quinn is at her locker exchanging her books for her next class. Jacob Ben Israel, a fellow junior working as a reporter for the school paper practically corners her by shoving a camera in her face and asking a question that changes... everything.

"How do you feel knowing your own camp is going to be voting for Rachel Berry?"

Quinn frowns, utterly perplexed. "What are you talking about?"

"We have your campaign manager, Santana Lopez, quoted as saying she is going to be voting for Rachel Berry in the upcoming Head Student elections. Care to comment on that?"

There's a moment where Quinn considers saying something... cruel. It's something she'll probably regret, and it definitely won't help with her standing in the polls. So, drawing on her Fabray charm, she offers the boy a polite smile and the most diplomatic response she can muster. "Each student is entitled to his or her own vote," she says. With that, she closes her locker, careful not to slam it. "If you'll excuse me; I have to get to class."

Quinn isn't sure how much truth there is to Jacob's questions until she gets to dinner in the dining hall later that night and finds Santana sitting with... Brittany and Rachel. It takes all the composure she can muster to fall into the food line without reacting. She expects the school wants to see a reaction from her, but she isn't going to give them the satisfaction.

Don't they know?

She's a politician's daughter.

That is all this is.
Politics.

It doesn't matter that she's utterly crushed inside.

Nobody will ever see.

Quinn greets students as she passes, and settles at the empty end of a table to eat her dinner. She's not particularly hungry but she forces herself to eat something. After the extended run she took that afternoon, she's going to need the calories, because she knows fainting isn't fun for anybody. When she's eaten all she can muster, she clears her plate and leaves the dining hall with the sole intention of sleeping away this horrible day... after she finishes her homework, of course.

It's when she hears Santana calling her name that Quinn's resolve weakens. The mask on her face is already slipping, and the last thing she wants to do is listen to whatever Santana has to say to her.

So, steeling herself, she just keeps walking.

It's futile, she knows, because Santana catches up easily enough and comes to a stop right in front of her.

"Quinn," Santana says. "Listen, I need - " she suddenly falters, and Quinn visibly bristles, her hackles rising in an attempt to protect herself.

"I don't have time for this, Santana," Quinn says, unable to look the Latina in the eye. "I have a lot of homework to do." She attempts to sidestep the girl, but Santana just blocks her path.

"Why won't you let me explain?" she questions.

"Because I don't need to hear anything you have to say," she says. "It doesn't matter to me. You're allowed to vote for whomever you want to."

"Quinn," Santana whispers. "It's not – you don't – " she stops, unable to get the words out. She absently reaches out to touch Quinn, but the blonde steps back, out of reach.

"Please, just stop," Quinn says, her voice strained as she tries to hold onto her emotions. "I don't even want to know what reason you're trying to come up with right now, because we both know the truth is you're actually a backstabbing bitch."

Santana closes her eyes, which is all Quinn needs to slip past her, only to be stopped by the other girl's hand closing around her wrist. Quinn is hit by a flashback that has her ripping her arm away in an instant, surprising them both.

"Q?" Santana asks, stunned.

Quinn shakes her head. "Don't," she says, her voice catching. "Just, don't. Please."

And, all Santana can do is watch her best friend walk away from her, warring with herself over whether it was worth it to pick one perfectly imperfect blonde over the other.
The final round in the battle for Head Student is the internal debate. It's always been a big event in the Dalton Academy calendar, but the school is especially buzzing with anticipation for this particular one, owing to the behind-the-scenes drama surrounding Quinn and her campaign manager that is no more.

In the buildup to the debate, Quinn doesn't say or do anything to fuel rumours about her ire. She still greets students when they arrive at the dining hall, but it's obvious to anyone who's paying attention that she's grown sullen. There's only so much pretending a girl can do, and she's already used up enough energy getting through the day without actually throwing herself out of her own window.

As expected, Quinn avoids social interaction with Santana or Rachel. Instead, she focuses on her own campaign while maintaining her grades and ensuring she doesn't fall apart. There are only a few weeks left of school, and then she can return to the house in Hartford and attempt to recover from this year.

To her credit, Rachel feels supremely uncomfortable with the circumstances that led to Santana, essentially, joining her campaign, though she's been unwilling to apologise to Quinn or even accept any responsibility for the role she or Brittany may or may not have played in the... end of their friendship. At least, she hopes it's not actually an end, because that would just be sad.

Quinn always looks like she could use a friend.

The debate is held in the Great Hall after classes let out on a Friday afternoon, with the voting scheduled for the following Monday. It's the most well-attended function of the year, and Quinn does her best not to let it affect her. It's just like every other day. She's good at this kind of thing. Even though her parents are... lacking; she's well-versed in what it means to be a Fabray.

She knows how to play the role of politician.

Quinn doesn't enter the Hall until Miss Pillsbury, the teacher responsible for overseeing the event, calls the Hall to attention and introduces the two candidates. Both girls look their best in their uniforms and, even though the general getup is unflattering to their respective figures; it's obvious to all those in attendance that both Quinn and Rachel are dangerously attractive.

The students, however, are here to witness a bloodbath, though Quinn vows to do all she can to avoid it. She can't have it getting back to her parents that she engaged in a verbal battle with a fellow student.

Not that she thinks they'll care.

The debate starts off steadily enough, with both candidates making their opening statements. Rachel wins the coin toss and elects to go first, which Quinn accepts a little too eagerly. Miss Pillsbury, as demure as she is, manages to keep the afternoon rolling smoothly, posing questions to both candidates and allowing them both to explain their plans for the school should they be elected.

It's when she opens the floor to questions that things take a turn. Quinn expects the questions, of course, but she just doesn't expect them to come from Santana.
"Why did you decide to run for Head Student in the first place?"

Quinn stares at her for the longest time, but the Latina remains expressionless. Sensing the consequences of being caught in a lie, Quinn straightens her spine and opens her mouth. "I'll be the first to admit that I didn't initially intend on running at all," she says, her voice even and commanding. "Because Head Student wasn't exactly on my list of things to accomplish this year, for a number of reasons relating to time-management and overextending myself. Regardless of my stance, however, my best friend at the time entered me into the race and managed to convince me I could do this.

"Now, though, I can honestly stand up here and say I'm grateful to her for allowing me this opportunity. I've learned a great deal about myself and many others in this school, and I intend to use how I've grown to make any kind of difference I can, because the games' room definitely needs a new vending machine."

There's a brief moment of silence before the audience both laughs and applauds. There's just something about Quinn - an air of confidence and regality - that gives people pause. It's almost as if she's not made for this Earth, dangerously eloquent and confident that even Rachel is almost sold.

Almost.

The brunette has had a lot of time to evaluate just how she sees Quinn Fabray, and yet the girl still manages to surprise her. She seems like the type to hide herself behind a carefully constructed mask, but Rachel acknowledges that Quinn has a tendency to unleash bursts of uncapped emotion.

The questions go on, allowing each candidate to respond accordingly. Unfortunately for Quinn - or, fortunately, for everyone else - Santana is called upon again, and she just has to ask about the Azimio Adams scandal. Quinn notes that it's almost as if she doesn't want to, but somebody was going to do so eventually.

Like before, Quinn is adamant about telling the truth. As carefully as she can, she sheds light on the entire matter without going into too much detail, assuring the students that she would have done the same thing if she were to have a do-over. It helps assuage her own role in the eventual suspension of Azimio, because several of his friends are convinced it was a witch hunt.

Honestly, they're all neanderthals.

"Look," she says, sounding oddly defeated. "I'm not going to pretend as if I thought Azimio Adams would be the right Head Student for Dalton, but it was never my intention to have it come down to something like this. All I know is I don't want somebody capable of hurting another student that way to have any sort of leadership position in our school. If I wanted to save face myself, then, yes, it may have affected my decision-making, as you've so nicely pointed out, Miss Lopez."

Quinn purses her lips in thought, deciding to keep going. If she shoots herself in the foot; so be it. "I'll also willingly admit that I didn't want to be held responsible for something I surely did not do. I don't think that's out of the realm of what it means to be human. And, whether or not that other student was my opponent or not should not have mattered either, which it surely didn't. What sort of Head Student would I be intending to be if I were to discriminate that way?"

If it's Santana's intention to shine a bad light on Quinn; she's failing miserably.

Once Miss Pillsbury ends the question session, she invites the candidates to make their closing remarks. Rachel's is short and to the point, touching on female empowerment and her intention to
focus on the Arts, while Quinn's is a little more vague. She attempts to be non-biased and open, touching on her determination to make school life as easy as she possibly can for each and every student.

It's when she's wrapping up that she flashes a smile for the first time, bringing out what she knows is a weapon. She's Quinn Fabray, future Head Student of Dalton Academy, and she knows how to work it.

Boys will fall at her feet and girls will... be confused.

It's good enough.

She'll take it.

"I'm not going to subject you to some lame, painful and cheesy slogan," she says pointedly, resisting the urge to roll her eyes at Rachel's Everyone Loves a Berry; "so, I'll leave you with this: my name is Quinn Fabray, and I'm running for Head Student. Please vote for me."

The resulting applause is borderline deafening, and Quinn just smiles that smile. Even if nobody is brave enough to call it; they all know. It might be a close race, but there's going to be only one winner.

At the end of proceedings, Quinn descends the stage and walks into a crowd of students. Rachel remains at her podium, pondering the events of the afternoon. She's unsure what she's supposed to feel because there's a part of her that's... drawn to Quinn, even if her latent fight-or-flight senses ping whenever the girl is around.

Rachel's attention turns towards Brittany, who's bouncing towards her, tugging Santana behind her. Their facial expressions are vastly different, and Rachel imagines hers is the perfect blend of Brittany's happy smile and Santana's confused fury.

"That was great," Brittany says, wrapping Rachel in a hug.

Rachel breathes into her shoulder. "Was it?" she grumbles.

"Of course," Brittany says.

Rachel looks over her shoulder at Santana. "Tell me the truth."

Santana shrugs. "Quinn is going to win."

Rachel sighs, pulling herself out of Brittany's embrace. "Britt, do you think you could please grab my back from backstage?"

"Sure," Brittany says, and the bounces away, giving Rachel the opportunity to address Santana without the blonde within hearing range.

"What were you trying to do?" Rachel asks carefully, frowning slightly. "Were you trying to help me or her with your questions?"

Santana stares at her for a moment. "I just asked questions," she innocently says. "How Quinn answered them was up to her."

Rachel presses her lips together. "I don't get you, Santana," she says, shaking her head. "I mean, she's your best friend - maybe even your only friend - and you just... left her, even though nobody
even knows why. I mean, did you fight? Did Quinn do something so terrible that makes you think she's unworthy of being Head Student? Is that what this is about? Because, you know, the way you asked those questions; it was as if you knew she would knock them out of the park, which just means that you were trying to help her shine, which is just con - "

"Berry," Santana interrupts. "Jesus Christ, woman, take a breath, would you?"

Despite her indignation, Rachel blushes because, yes, it's been some time since she's rambled for so long. "I know I said I wouldn't ask, but I think I deserve to know why you torpedoed your own friendship to join my campaign."

Santana raises her eyebrows. "Easy there, ego-maniac, this has nothing to do with you... or Quinn, for that matter."

It's when Brittany returns with Rachel's bag that she finally clicks. "Oh," she says, absently taking the bag from the blonde. "Oh."

Brittany doesn't latch onto the conversation, instead moving towards the podium and pretending to give a speech of her own.

Santana just watches Rachel's face, trying to gauge her response. It isn't exactly something she tells everyone. It's still pretty new to her, but she's not going to deny what's right in front of her anymore. If Rachel is going to be the first person to know, then so be it.

Rachel surprises them both by smiling widely. "Oh, that's wonderful," she exclaims.

Santana sputters, clearly surprised. "It is?"

Rachel nods. "Well, of course," she says. "It makes so much more sense now. It's a relief to know you're not just heartless."

Santana feels a pang in her chest, and her eyes automatically seek out a mop of blonde hair in the crowd.

Rachel watches the action curiously, and sighs when realisation hits her. "Quinn doesn't know, does she?" she asks knowingly.

Santana sighs. "No, she doesn't," she confesses, feeling both lighter and uncomfortable with talking to anyone about this. "I'm not entirely sure how I'm supposed to tell her."

"Do you think she won't respond well?" she asks seriously, secretly hoping that Santana answers in a very specific way.

"Honestly, I don't know," she says. "Quinn is... special. It's difficult to gauge anything about her, and I'm the one person she's let in the most."

Rachel nods in understanding. She's got that vibe from the blonde. "Maybe she'll surprise you," she offers gently.

"Oh, I'm sure Quinn Fabray is full of surprises."

Rachel isn't sure what that's supposed to mean, but the two of them both end up searching the crowd for a specific blonde head and, as if she can feel their eyes on her, Quinn turns her head. She furrows her brow when she sees them staring at her.
And then she smiles.

Once the votes are cast, Quinn all but disappears into her bedroom under a mountain of books. She needs to ace all her exams because she acknowledges that getting into a good college isn't going to be a walk in the park.

Of course, also, her parents would never accept anything less than excellent, and Quinn uses that pressure and expectation to keep her going.

Something has to.

Quinn is mainly seen only during class and meal times, greeting every student she comes into contact with - save for a few - with easy smiles and good spirit. Sometimes, she has to force herself, but other times are considerably easier. It helps that she has ways of dealing.

Because, when she's not studying, eating or sleeping, Quinn is either running or cycling. With all the sport seasons having come to an end, she has to find other ways to keep herself occupied, and one of her favourite things about Dalton is the landscape, sporting an abundance of uneven terrain and endless trails. There's even an entire forest on the grounds, though it's considered forbidden. Without supervision, that is, because the cross country route runs right through it.

Once exams begin, finding Quinn on one of those trails is a daily occurrence. It's the only indulgence she allows herself during the two week period. So, while other students relax after a tough exam with a swim or a nap; Quinn changes into her workout clothes and heads out into the wilderness.

On this particular day, after she's just completed her second Biology exam, Quinn decides on a cycle. Part of her believes it's a bit more of a workout, given the almost-interval training involved... particularly when she braves the rocky terrain. She suits up, opting against taking her iPod, and fetches her bicycle from the shed behind the Science Block. She slips on her gloves, clasps her helmet and sets off at a blistering pace, disappearing out of sight.

It's on this trail that she meets Rachel Berry on a run of her own. Everything in Quinn is screaming for her to acknowledge the girl with a nod, and then take off without engaging.

But, alas, Rachel takes that option away from her by speeding up slightly and forcing Quinn to slow until they're moving at the same speed.

Between heavy breaths, Rachel is the first one to speak. "Hey," she says, stumbling over her feet.

"Hey," Quinn returns, slowing even more. She presses her lips together, suddenly thoughtful. Rachel sounds as if she's literally dying. "Have you been running for long?" she finds herself asking.

"Way too long," she answers, and then almost collapses in relief when Quinn actually comes to a stop. Rachel steps back slightly to allow the blonde some space to dismount, her eyes desperately wanting to drop down to the strong, pale thighs on display. She forces her gaze to remain skyward as she catches her breath, hands on her hips.

"Hey, Supergirl," Quinn says, smirking slightly at Rachel's pose. "You okay there?"

Rachel chuckles lightly as she finally looks at Quinn's face. "No," she says seriously. "I haven't really been out running in a while, and I am so unfit."

Quinn just smiles as she retrieves her water bottle from its holder on the bicycle. "Here you go," she says, handing it to Rachel. "Drink up before you pass out."

Rachel shoots her a pretend glare, and then unashamedly downs about half the bottle. "Thank you," she says, handing it back.

Quinn does a quick check of her new supply, grins knowingly, and then returns the bottle to its position. She removes her helmet, absently flattening her hair with her one hand, and hangs it off the handlebars. "You okay to walk?" she asks.

"Sure."

Without prompting, they fall into step beside each other, the bicycle between them. Somehow, Quinn feels more settled with an object between them... because Rachel's running outfit is leaving very little to the imagination, and Quinn is both intrigued by and uncomfortable with her spiralling thoughts.

"I haven't really seen you around lately," Rachel says, breaking their silence.

Quinn glances at her, trying to determine how serious she's being. When her expression is open, Quinn feels herself settle slightly. "Exam time is crazy time," she says. "It's imperative I perform well."

Rachel raises her eyebrows at her phrasing. "Why?"

Quinn makes sure not to look at her. What can she say, anyway? How does one explain the pressures of being a Fabray? "College," she eventually answers, which is at least part of the truth. "It's a very competitive market."

"I don't know much, but I think you're a shoe-in anywhere you choose," she says. "You're a very talented individual, Quinn, and you'll probably end up being Head Student."

There's a sincerity to Rachel's tone that catches Quinn off guard, but she manages to recover quickly. "I think you'll win," she says, wondering how truthful she's being. "I voted for you."

Rachel snorts in disbelief, and then soars at the look on Quinn's face. She's being serious. "Uh, would you believe me if I told you I voted for you too?"

Quinn chuckles lightly. "No, I really wouldn't."

"Good," she says; "because I kind of voted for me too."

Quinn offers her a small, genuine smile that makes her stomach twist into a knot. She doesn't know if what she's feeling is guilt or something else entirely, but she just knows she won't be able to leave their... relationship where it is without broaching the topic of... Santana.

"I'm sorry," Rachel suddenly says, and Quinn flinches. "I'm sorry about everything that happened with Santana. I didn't mean to - "

"Berry," Quinn says, cutting her off. Her face has lost all its softness, replaced by something cold, and Rachel almost regrets bringing it up at all. "Don't worry about it," she says carefully. "I'm used to it, okay, so I really don't need you to apologise to me. None of this is on you, anyway. It's definitely not your fault the one person who was supposed to have my back ended up stabbing me in it."
Rachel's mouth snaps shut in surprise. There is no hint of bitterness or anger in her tone, which throws her. It's almost as if she's accepted what she believes was inevitable, and Rachel's heart hurts.

"No," Rachel finds herself saying.

Quinn arches an eyebrow, and curse her if Rachel doesn't find that insanely appealing. "No?"

"You're going to let me apologise," she says, surprising herself with how serious she sounds. "It's not supposed to be this way, you know? Everyone is supposed to have someone they can count on, Quinn."

Quinn resists the urge to laugh humourlessly. She's been counting on herself her entire life. "And, who is it that you count on, Miss Berry?" she asks, her tone bordering on salacious.

Rachel takes a moment to compose herself. "Well, here, I suppose I have Brittany, mainly," she says. "I'm still trying to figure out this whole making new friends thing."

"Oh?"

Rachel traps her bottom lip between her teeth. "I'm not very good at it, you see, and all the stuff that happened to get me here definitely hasn't helped."

Quinn nods in understanding, though she says nothing. If she can help it; the two of them will never discuss the contents of those stupid yellow flyers. Ever.

"I also have my family," Rachel says. "They're very involved in my life," she adds with a roll of her eyes, and Quinn feels a pang in her chest. She can only wish her parents paid enough attention to her to know what her favourite colour is.

Clearing her throat, Quinn steers them in a different direction. "So, before you got to Dalton; did you used to run a lot?"

Rachel's eyes darken slightly, but she shakes it off. "Sort of," she admits. "Usually, only if I was stressed, lazy or had too big a lunch. Just, whenever, really. I didn't have a set schedule for my runs."

Quinn glances at her, noting that she added the 'for my runs' for a specific reason, though Quinn isn't going to question her about it. It helps that Rachel freely gives extra information.

"While I was still living at home, I used to spend an hour on my elliptical every morning," she says. "I can't exactly do that here."

"Have you found it difficult to get used to boarding school?" Quinn asks, oddly curious. It was interesting for her when she first arrived, watching as other students suffered from homesickness. She never felt any of that, which was possibly owed to the fact that she's been in boarding school since she was seven years old.

Dalton Academy is just another stop on the Quinn Fabray school tour.

"Sort of," Rachel admits. "I mean, I miss my family and I miss my bed, but things were rather awful near the end there. I had to leave, and I guess this place isn't so bad."

"No, I suppose it's not," Quinn agrees. There are worse places to be. Clearing her throat again, she switches topics once more. "I don't particularly enjoy running this trail," she says. "It's more fun to
ride it."

Rachel looks at her, clearly skeptical.

"Have you ever tried it?" she asks.

"With what bike, exactly?" Rachel questions, her tone dripping with sarcasm.

Quinn ignores her, and immediately stops walking. "You haven't lived, Rachel Berry."

She rolls her eyes.

Quinn isn't perturbed. "Tell you what," she says; "you're going to ride back down to school. How does that sound?"

"Are you serious?"

"Deathly," she says. "When I say you haven't lived, I mean it." Without prompting, Quinn lowers the seat on the bicycle, carefully adjusts the gears and holds out the helmet for her.

"Quinn," she says, shaking her head; "I don't think this is a good idea."

"Why now?"

"It's bound to end terribly."

Quinn just grins at her, oddly excited about being able to share this experience with her. "That's all part of the adventure," she says, handing her the helmet again. "Just try it, okay? You can tell me how much fun you didn't have when we get back to school."

Grumbling under her breath, Rachel takes the helmet but doesn't put it on.

Quinn arches that same, dangerous eyebrow. "You know how the trail goes, right?" At her nod, Quinn feels obligated to ask: "you do know how to ride a bike, right?"

Rachel shoots her a heated look, and Quinn laughs gloriously. It's probably the first time Rachel has heard her laugh like that and, coupled with that spark in her hazel eyes; she's probably the prettiest girl the brunette has ever met. It's what prompts her to slip on the helmet, clipping it in place.

Quinn's smile practically grows at the sight. "You look ridiculous," she says. "I wish I had my phone to snap a picture."

Rachel's brow furrows. "You don't have your phone?"

Quinn shakes her head no. "Is that a problem?"

Rachel nods vigorously. "Gosh, Quinn, what if something were to happen to you out here? How would you call for help, and how would we even find you?"

Again with that eyebrow. "I'm a very careful person, Berry," she says. "And, what are you going to be doing looking for me?"

Rachel does her best not to blush, even though she swears there's a flirtatious lilt to Quinn's tone. "Careful, you say?" she says instead. "Where does downhill domination fall under 'careful'?" she asks, gesturing at the downslope before them.
Quinn merely shrugs. "You'll thank me later," she says. "Hop on."

Rachel sucks in one last deep breath before mounting the bicycle, Quinn's one hand on her back to help keep her steady, even though she's perfectly capable of balancing herself.

"I'll run just behind you," Quinn says. "And, you know, be careful, okay? I don't want people to think I tried to eliminate more of the competition."

Rachel laughs out loud, her eyes meeting Quinn's. It's just for a moment, but it's enough for her to know she's in so much trouble.

"If you feel as if you're going to tumble, just shout," Quinn says.

"Wait. What? What would you even do?"

"Stop you," she answers, as if it's the simplest thing imaginable.

Rachel chooses not to dwell on it, rather opting for some banter. "You reckon you can keep up with me?"

Quinn chuckles lowly. "Oh, dear, I would smoke you if this were a competition."

There's something about the term of endearment that catches Rachel off guard, and her face splits into a wide smile. "One day, then."

"Sure," Quinn answers easily, as she steps back and bends to retie the laces on her left shoe. It offers Rachel a view for which she's entirely not prepared, and she forces herself to look away, in case she ends up making a sound she'll regret or, worse, passing out.

It also doesn't help any when Quinn straightens and stretches her arms in the air, revealing a sliver of skin at her midriff.

Jesus.

Quinn pats the top of the helmet. "There's a pretty nasty curve near the end of the trail," she casually says; "so, you're going to have to come to stop before then, or you're probably going to end up in a ditch."

"That easy, huh?"

"It's all part of the fun."

Rachel rolls her eyes once more, and then begins to pedal. It's a relatively slow start but, once she gets the hang of it, she barely has to use her legs at all. Quinn recognises the moment she starts to enjoy it from the excited shriek she lets out when she gets a little airborne. It's actually rather spectacular for her to witness the unbridled glee on Rachel's face with every second of their descent... which, she realises belatedly, is too fast.

Rachel realises it too, and the end of the trail is quickly approaching.

Cue the panic.

"Quinn!" Rachel screeches. "Quinn!"

"It's okay," Quinn says, as calm as ever as she too speeds up to run beside the racing bicycle. "Just stay calm, all right? You have to squeeze the brakes steadily, so you slow down gradually." She's
forced to leap over a log, and she stumbles slightly. "Easy!" she yells. "Don't brake too hard!" The last thing either of them want is Rachel flying through the air.

"Quinn!"

Sensing panic of epic proportions, Quinn starts running faster, in order to move into Rachel's line of sight. "Listen to me," she says; "you have to be the one to brake. I can't do it for you without messing with your equilibrium." It would probably result in both of them ending up with broken bones, for all she knows.

But.

"Brake, Rachel," she shouts. "You have to slow down! You're going too fast! Rachel! Dammit, brake!"

Making the decision - which, in hindsight, was completely stupid - Quinn sprints to the end of the trail, at the sharp turn, and stops running. She spins to face Rachel, the deep ditch just behind her, and just stands there.

Rachel realises she's going to ride straight into her far too late. "Quinn!" she shrieks. "Get out of the way!"

There's a moment of absolute stillness, during which their gazes meet. There's determination in Quinn's eyes, and terror in Rachel's, but the brunette has never felt so... safe in her entire life. Quinn is safety. She won't let Rachel get hurt, and the absurdity of that sudden realisation isn't lost on Rachel.

When the world comes rushing back, Rachel screams. Quinn holds out her arms as if she can somehow telepathically stop the bicycle, which is just ridiculous. "Quinn, no," Rachel yells, squeezing her eyes tightly shut, and doing the same with the brakes.

She squeezes as hard as she possibly can and, as predicted, the brakes engage the front wheel only, and Rachel goes flying forwards, slamming right into Quinn and sending them both tumbling down the deep ditch.

It's a while before Quinn's world stops spinning.

Her chest is on fire, but she's reasonably sure nothing is actually broken because she knows what that feels like.

Rachel also comes to the conclusion that she's still - relatively - whole, and forces herself to sit up and remove the helmet. She's covered in dirt, scrapes and bruises but, other than that, she's fine. One look to her right at Quinn's still body has her scrambling across the dirt towards the other girl.

"Quinn," she says, touching her arm and moving into her line of sight. "Hey, Quinn, open your eyes."

Quinn does as instructed, squinting into the sunlight. Her eyes focus on Rachel's face... and then on her hair. "You look terrible," she says.

"Oh, my God," Rachel huffs, rolling away and collapsing onto her back. The two of them just lie there, looking up at the clouds in the blue sky.

Slowly, they both begin to laugh, uncontrollably and hysterically.
"What the hell were you thinking?" Rachel finally asks between giggles.

"Woman, why couldn't you just brake?" Quinn counters, her knees in the air.

They both laugh until they can't anymore, and Quinn is the first to rise to her feet, absently dusting off her body and clothing. Without prompting, she holds out her hands to help Rachel get up as well, and the contact is almost too much for either of them to bear. What is happening?

Rachel manages to recover first. "They're going to think we really did battle out here," she says, unable to resist smirking.

"From the look of things, I definitely won," Quinn returns with a grin of her own. "But, I can honestly say I feel much worse than you do." With that, she clamber up the side of the ditch, doing her best to ignore the ache in her body. She supposes having an entire human girl slam into you at that speed is bound to leave a lasting impression. She just hopes she doesn't end up bruising in visible places.

Quinn recovers the bicycle, checking it for damage, while Rachel makes the ascent herself, huffing as she removes fallen leaves from her hair. It's ridiculously adorable.

When they're both on solid ground, they begin the painful walk back to school.

"Are you going to go to the Nurse?" Rachel asks.

"Probably not," Quinn answers with a shrug. "It'll take too long."

She frowns in response.

"I have a Calculus exam tomorrow," Quinn explains. "I can't afford to waste time."

Every molecule in her body is screaming for Rachel to say something about that, but she just manages to hold her tongue. She doesn't have the right to question Quinn and makes demands of her. "Okay," she relents; "but, if you're feeling terrible later; please get checked out. I won't be held responsible for any internal injuries you may or may not suffer."

"So noted," Quinn says with a nod. Then: "You should probably head there yourself, though. That looks like a pretty nasty cut on your arm."

Rachel glances down at said cut and grimaces. "Well... this'll be a story to tell."

They exchange a significant and telling look.

"You're right," Rachel says after their silent conversation. "Let's never speak of this again."

"Deal."

When they're near the dormitory building, Quinn slows her pace considerably. "I have to return to bike to the shed," she says. "I'll see you later."

Rachel waits only a beat before she calls her back. "Quinn?"

"Yeah?"

"Umm, I just - uh - I wanted to say thank you for, umm, basically saving me from possible broken bones."
Quinn chuckles lightly, choosing not to comment on how awkward the other girl is acting. "It was exhilarating, wasn't it?"

"Oh, gosh, you have no idea."

Quinn's returning smile says that she really does.

The two candidates don't come into contact again as the exams proceed. It's expected that the entire campus turns into a ghost town, with all the students cooped up in their bedrooms in an attempt to cram their work as best they can.

Rachel's last exam is World Geography, and the amount she has to memorise almost drives her to drink. It helps that her roommate is also in that class, and the two of them end up turning their shared room into practically a shrine to the planet Earth.

Quinn's final exam is her second paper for World History, which is probably her most hated exam. It isn't that she doesn't find the subject interesting or highly enriching; it's that she's never really been able to gauge how well she's done just from writing the exam. It's similar to English that way, as it leaves things open to interpretation.

While every other student celebrates the end of exams, Quinn doesn't. She's almost sad the year is over, which means they're three days away from summer and three days away from going home.

Well, she wouldn't go so far as to call it home. It's just a house in which she lives for a select few months of the year. She's sure that, if it were allowed, Quinn would actually spend the entire year away at boarding school.

Her parents would probably love the opportunity to pretend they have any offspring all year round.

Quinn suspects she's probably the only person at Dalton Academy who isn't remotely excited about the upcoming summer vacation... except for Jacob Ben Israel, probably, who is supposed to spend the next few months looking after his sickly grandmother in Ohio.

Still, Quinn thinks she would prefer that, because at least she would be wanted somewhere. That way, she wouldn't have to face the heartache of what is, essentially, physical resentment. It's self-diagnosed, of course, because she doesn't really have anyone to talk to about it. She doesn't trust anyone enough to let them in that far and, after her experience with Santana, she's definitely not going to make that mistake again.

It's okay.

She's okay.

At some point, she's going to have to stop pretending, but today isn't that day.

But, gosh, Quinn can even feel it in her bones... even from so far away.

She feels it everywhere.

On the last day of school, hours before the school's final assembly, Quinn is still packing. She's really extending her stance on not-wanting-to-leave to its very limit. She's contemplated weaselling some way to stay behind, but even she knows that's futile. The grownup in her acknowledges how
ridiculous she's acting, but the little kid deep inside is refusing to give up on hope.

Eventually, with time running out, Quinn has to concede to the inevitable and sets her mind to completing the painful task of packing up her entire room. She'll be moving into a new one when she returns in the Fall, as all the seniors live on the fourth floor of the residential building, each of them in his or her own room.

Quinn packs two boxes of items she isn't taking home and will be staying in one of the school's storage rooms. Everything else of hers fits into two suitcases, a tog bag and a backpack. That's the entirety of her life, and it's actually rather sad if she allows herself to think about it, so she doesn't.

By the time she's finished, her room looks empty and devoid of life, which does wonders for her spiralling mood. Breathing a sigh, she leaves the room and goes walkabout. She's never been very friendly with the other students in her year, but the campaign has really helped her build bridges. As a result, she waves into numerous open doors, casually converses with some students about their summer plans and even helps zip up some suitcases.

She climbs to the fourth floor to bid farewell to some of the older students she's come to know. Today is their last day at Dalton, and Quinn can't figure out if she envies or pities them. It's probably a bit of both. Some of the girls are deeply emotional and Quinn offers up her shoulder for a good sob to a few of them. She can't help thinking what it's going to be like for her one year from now. She can't imagine there will be tears.

Well, really, she's more concerned with actually surviving until then.

Despite her slow start, Quinn's morning flies past. All around her, the corridors grow more chaotic as students rush through finalising their packing. They're all expected in their homerooms at ten thirty, where they'll be led to the Great Hall by this year's batch of prefects for the last time. Come the new year, an entire new set of prefects will be ruling the school... of which Quinn is already a part.

It's generally expected that the new Head Student is pulled from the group of incoming prefects, though Rachel isn't actually a prefect. If she were to be elected, no new prefect would have to be chosen. But, if Quinn were elected as Head Student, another prefect would be appointed to fill her vacated space in the ranks.

Essentially, regardless of which way the election goes, Quinn is probably going to end up working with Rachel Berry in some capacity.

At exactly eleven o'clock, Quinn finds herself being led into the Great Hall for the final time of the school year. She's apprehensive and nervous, a little antsy and fidgety. She knows this final assembly is going to last at least two hours, and she can't decide whether she wants it to go slowly or fly past.

"Quinn?"

The blonde spins on the spot to spy Rachel standing just behind her, her bottom lip trapped between her teeth. "Hey," Quinn says, burying her hands in the pockets of her grey blazer. If the assembly goes the way she expects it to, Quinn will be sporting a blue Academic blazer in the new school year.

"I just wanted to wish you luck," Rachel says, smiling softly.

Quinn can't help her smile. "Do you think I'll need it?"
"Everybody needs a little luck once in a while," she says, sounding more serious than Quinn's teasing requires.

The smile slips off Quinn's face. "I suppose they do," she agrees. "Thank you, Berry, and good luck to you too."

"Oh, I definitely don't need it."

Quinn just chuckles, absentmindedly shaking her head. "You're a special one, aren't you?"

Rachel eyes her for the longest time, scrutinising in an endearing way. "You don't know anything about me, do you?" she eventually asks, her tone conversational.

Quinn quirks her eyebrow. "No, I don't suppose I do," she says. "Is there anything particularly pressing I need to know?"

"Oh, there's plenty."

Before Quinn can even read into that, Mr Schuester is calling for their attention and both girls shuffle along to their seats. Once they're all settled, Mr Schuester invites them to sing the national anthem before he dives into the financial report.

Definitely fly past.

Definitely.

Next, they move onto the farewells to departing staff, and Quinn tries to pay attention. It's just that she can feel eyes on her and it's deeply unsettling.

When the awards begin - academic, sport and cultural - Quinn almost wishes the ground could open and swallow her up whole. As the leading student in all subjects in the junior year, Quinn ends up making an endless number of trips to the stage to receive her certificates and trophies. She's almost embarrassed by the number of times Mr Schuester has to say the name Quinn Fabray, though she hopes he'll be saying one more, very important time.

Rachel's eyes rarely drift away from Quinn as the assembly progresses. As much as she tries to pay attention to their Headmaster, she can't help it when her gaze flicks back to the blonde every few minutes - or seconds? Even before the awards begin, there's something deeply melancholy about Quinn that Rachel can't seem to put her finger on.

It only gets worse every time Quinn has to make her way to the stage. Rachel doesn't understand it. The girl should be proud of her accomplishments. Anyone would. Her family has to be delighted. Quinn practically wipes the floor with their entire grade, raking in every academic award on offer.

After, there's another round of pointless speeches before Mr Schuester calls the year's current Head Student, Jamie Rodgers, to join him up front. It's a Dalton tradition for the leaving Head Student to pass on the distinguished badge to the Headmaster, who then does the honours of clipping it onto the lapel of the incoming Head Student's blazer. It's a little corny, but Dalton Academy is all about tradition.

When Mr Schuester removes an envelope from a folder on the podium, Quinn involuntarily holds her breath and Rachel squeezes the life out of Brittany's hand.

"And, now, the moment I'm sure you've all been waiting for," Mr Schuester says, smirking
slightly. "This has been one of the closest elections we've had in recent years, and I am now pleased to inform you that the new Head Student of Dalton Academy is..."

He pauses for dramatic effect, and Rachel contemplates whether the man would appreciate having a shoe thrown at him.

"Quinn Fabray."
Chapter Three

"Quinn Fabray."

For a moment, Quinn doesn't react at all, but the massive cheer following the announcement is deafening and instantaneous. Someone pinches her hand, and she jolts right out of her seat. It's obvious to anyone watching that the shock isn't faked. She hasn't managed to slip the mask into place in time.

Flushing in embarrassment, Quinn makes her way to the stage, once more. With every step she takes, the smile spreads across her face.

She's won.

This could, very well, be the start of her political career. Oh, won't her father be proud?

Mr Schuester is waiting for her, arm outstretched, and she immediately accepts his congratulatory handshake.

"Well done, Miss Fabray," he says, a warm smile on his usually expressionless face. "I'm looking forward to a very productive year working with you."

It's the first time Quinn's smile falters. It's one thing to win, but now she has to do the work. Quite instantly, the burden of responsibility settles on her shoulders like a heavy weight, and she can practically feel her spine protest.

Mr Schuester doesn't seem to notice as he releases her hand, steps back and retrieves the badge from Jamie. He's still wearing his smile as he pins the badge to Quinn's lapel, absently telling her to wear it proudly.

She's going to try.

As happy as Rachel is convinced she is for Quinn, there's a part of her that can't help feeling disappointed. Mr Schuester might have thought he was doing them a favour by alluding to how close the election was, but he really wasn't. Rachel finds it hurts that bit more knowing she came so close, and still lost.

Despite it all, she's glad for Quinn.

It's just that this is the first time she's actually put herself out there since -

Just, since.

And, as a result, it's a bitter pill to swallow.

Sensing her conflict, Brittany closes her hand around Rachel's fingers, drawing her attention. "Sorry, Superstar," she says lightly. "You know I voted for you, right?"

Rachel manages a weak smile as they begin to shuffle out of the Hall. "I know, B," she says. "It just sucks, is all."
Brittany shrugs. "Maybe she'll be the worst Head Student ever, and they'll be forced to give the job to you," she offers, but they both know it's a near impossibility.

Quinn Fabray?

Bad at anything?

There's just no way.

"I'll be fine," Rachel says with a shrug of her own. It's the truth, anyway. Losing this election definitely isn't the worst thing ever to happen to her, and she somehow managed to survive that.

In contrast, this is nothing.

"Oh, there's Santana," Brittany says brightly, bouncing slightly.

Rachel can't help smiling at the way Brittany's face literally lights up at the sight of the Latina. As far as Rachel is concerned, she doesn't know if the pair's relationship has progressed further than friendship.

Santana likes her, which is actually rather obvious to see now that Rachel knows what to look for, but that's all she knows. She doesn't even know if Brittany swings that way, though Rachel also doesn't see anything about her roommate that would suggest she wouldn't.

The moment Brittany releases her hand, Rachel remembers that said hand was occupied by her diary when she first entered the Great Hall. Dammit.

"I forgot my diary in the Hall," she says; "I'm just going to run and grab it. You go on."

"I'll wait," she counters.

"No, go talk to Santana," Rachel says. "I'll meet you up at the room, all right? You are not allowed to leave without saying goodbye to me, okay?"

"Loud and clear," she says, playfully saluting her with a grin. "See you in a minute."

Rachel returns her smile, spins around and heads back towards the empty Hall. Although, she's surprised when it actually isn't. Quinn is still sitting in her seat, and it looks as if she hasn't moved at all. Rachel contemplates what to do, worrying if an interruption would even be wanted.

She retrieves her diary, steels herself, and then makes her way towards the seemingly-frozen blonde. She's cautious with her approach, unsure if she's subconsciously trying to sneak up on her. She thinks Quinn wouldn't appreciate that, so she shuffles her feet slightly to let Quinn know she's there.

If Quinn hears her, she doesn't react.

"Quinn," Rachel says, ripping her from her musing; "are you okay?"

Startling, Quinn looks up at her, flushing in embarrassment. She frowns in confusion, her eyes crinkling, and Rachel finds that she looks very real in this moment. "Oh, hey," she says, shifting slightly as she searches for composure. "What - "

"Are you okay?" she questions again, suddenly concerned.

Quinn shakes her head as if she's trying to clear it, and slowly rises to her feet. "I'm - I'm fine," she
says slowly, even though they both know it's an untruth. "I'm just - I'm -"

"Quinn?"

"I'm panicking," she says on an exhale. "I'm literally freaking the fuck out."

Rachel blinks in surprise at the honesty in her response. "Why?"

Quinn sucks in a shaky breath. "What if I fail?" she asks quietly, almost directing the question at herself. When she glances at Rachel and sees her curious eyes; she snaps back to herself. What the hell is wrong with her? "You know what, never mind," she suddenly says, automatically straightening her spine.

Avoiding the brunette's gaze, Quinn bends to gather her - many, many - awards, and then starts to move out of the row, but Rachel blocks her path, a gentle hand coming to rest on her forearm.

"Quinn," she says, her tone gentle and soothing. "Are you sure you're okay?"

For a moment, Quinn says and does nothing. She doesn't want to be this weak person, who can barely keep it together enough to convince Rachel Berry that she's fine.

Even when she's very clearly not.

"Quinn," Rachel says again, practically whispering. "Please."

She shakes her head. "I'm fine, Berry."

"No, you're not," Rachel argues, stepping closer and ducking her head to catch Quinn's gaze. "You don't have to be fine all the time, you know."

Almost predictably, Quinn's defences rise, and her face twists into a scowl. "I said I'm fine," she says sternly. "Now, please will you let me past? I have a flight to catch."

Breathing out a defeated sigh, she steps back and to the side.

Quinn doesn't waste a moment to push past her, heading down the aisle towards the back doors in quick steps. It's when she's a few feet away - sufficient distance between them - that she turns back to look at her classmate.

"I'm sorry," she says softly, catching Rachel's attention. "I'm not - I'm not good at this kind of thing." Her eyes close for a moment, in an attempt to gather her thoughts. "Maybe I'm not fine right now, but I will be."

Rachel takes an involuntary step towards her, and Quinn immediately backs up, startled by her own admission.

"Have a great summer, Berry," she says, and then she's gone.

If Rachel is still unsettled by her interaction with Quinn, it disappears the moment she walks into the room she shares with Brittany to find the blonde wrapped around a grinning Latina. They're just hugging, sure, but it lasts a little too long to be anything remotely...friendly.

Rachel clears her throat, and the two of them spring apart as if they've been scolded. Brittany just laughs, refusing to let Santana move too far away from her.
"Hey, Rach," Brittany says.

"Hi, B," she returns coyly, unable to stop her smile. "Thanks for waiting."

"Sure thing."

Rachel looks at Santana, who's doing everything she can to avoid her gaze. It just makes her chuckle, and Santana's eyes snap towards the sound.

"Got something to say, Berry?" Santana challenges.


Brittany glances between them. "What are you two talking about?"

"Nothing," Rachel says, and then strides into the room to fetch her backpack. "Are you two ready to leave? I'm catching one of the first buses to make it in time for my train."

"I'm ready," Brittany declares, shouldering her own backpack. "San?"

"I just need to grab something from my room," she says; "I'll meet you guys downstairs."

As she watches her go, Rachel absently wonders if Santana has any idea what could possibly be sitting on Quinn's brain. As her... former best friend, she must know about some of Quinn's demons. She might even be responsible for some of them.

By the time they do make it downstairs, Rachel's thoughts have drifted on to the fact that she's going home. In just a few hours, she's going to see her family and she's going to get to sleep in her own bed. Gosh, she's going to get to eat home-cooked meals.

She suddenly can't wait.

"Do you know where your luggage is?" Rachel asks Brittany as they emerge from the large building that houses all the students.

"Bus Three."

Rachel nods, realising that she's going to have to make sure her friend gets onto the correct bus. It wouldn't do to arrive in the city and not have your luggage to get home. And, knowing Brittany, the chances of that happening are high.

"Hey," Santana says, coming up behind them. "Either of you on Bus Five?"

"Three," Brittany says.

"Two," Rachel says.

"Damn," Santana grumbles, knowing that she'll be part of the second wave of departures.

"They're just loading up the first bus now," Rachel says. "The first four are leaving at the same time."

Santana rolls her eyes. "You do know I've been here longer than you have, right?"

Rachel just laughs. "I'm going to miss you too, Santana."
Santana just grumbles under her breath before turning her attention towards Brittany.

Rachel uses the opportunity to look out at the buses that are slowly filling up with students. She can't quite decipher what she's feeling about leaving. Sure, she's only been part of this school for a few short months - or long weeks, depending on how you want to look at it - but she finds she's going to miss it.

For whatever reason.

Foreign movement to her right catches her attention and her eyes drift in that direction. She spies a sleek black *Mercedes*, and a suited man holding open one of the back doors for an approaching... Quinn Fabray.

Rachel can't help her frown, which draws Santana's attention and the Latina follows her line of sight, nodding in understanding.

"Quinn never catches the bus into the city," Santana explains. "Her father sends that car specifically for her, and it drives her straight to the private airstrip a couple of miles from here."

Rachel can't take her eyes off the blonde, even as she strides with purpose, and disappears into the car without a second of hesitation. "Private airstrip?" she questions.

"She flies straight to Hartford."

Rachel finally looks at her. "Quinn's from Hartford?"

Santana raises her eyebrows. "Don't you know who she is?" she asks. At Rachel's silence, she chuckles darkly. "Don't you know who her father is?"

Rachel frowns. "Should I?"

"Her surname is literally *Fabray*."

"Is that supposed to mean something to me?"

Santana rolls her eyes. "Are you sure you live in Connecticut?"

"Some of the time."

"What?"

"I don't live here *all the time*."

It's Santana's turn to frown. "Well, where do you live, then?"

"In New York," she says. "With my mother."

Santana regards her for the longest moment, and then presses two fingers to her right temple. "Shit, I just realised I don't know anything about you."

Rachel just hums as her eyes drift back to the departing *Mercedes*.

*Well, Santana's not the only one.*

"Ticket, please?"
Rachel's attention snaps up from her phone's screen and she smiles at the conductor before producing her ticket. She's relieved to be going home, of course, but she's not really a fan of how long it's going to take to get there. Sometimes, she wishes she could just teleport or... Apparate.

Now, that would make life so much easier.

When the conductor moves away, Rachel looks back at her phone, frowning slightly at the Google search that's just popped up. After her little chat with Santana, Rachel just couldn't resist finding out what she meant by 'Fabray,' but now she knows.

Oh.

Quinn is that Fabray.

She doesn't know why she instantly deflates when she realises Quinn is related to Russell Fabray, who, in all intents and purposes, is probably the smarmiest politician she's ever seen. There's just something... dirty about him, though she can't be sure how or why she even thinks that. Just from the look of him, she already knows she doesn't like him, and it makes her uncomfortable that Quinn comes from someone like him.

Because she's a bit fond of the blonde.

In a completely platonic way, of course, because, no.

Just, no.

Still, there's a part of Rachel that can't help but wish things were different. Suddenly, she understands Santana's reluctance to divulge her feelings for Brittany to Quinn, given who her father is. If Quinn carries any of his political and religious views, she must have the same feelings towards gay people as he does.

Rachel doesn't want to believe the stereotype, but it's the only way she thinks she'll be able to put a stamp on her own dangerous thoughts about the blonde.

Obviously, she's worried about Quinn, particularly after their moment in the Great Hall, but the last thing she wants is to spend any second longer of her precious summer vacation thinking about a girl who just... confuses her.

So, Rachel closes the little window, navigates to her 'Travel' playlist and does her best not to think about Quinn Fabray.

Quinn hates travelling. She hates cars and trains and planes and everything else.

In fact, on a good day, she might even admit that she's... terrified of them, and it's taken her years of therapy just to be able to board a plane without completely losing it. Her most recent governess or nanny or something, Victoria Hilton - affectionately nicknamed Tori - likes to joke that she's willing to sedate her if ever they're going on a trip.

Really, it's Quinn's own fault she decided to attend a school out of the county in which she lived. She thinks she did it to escape being Quinn Fabray, but she's never really been sure.

What was she escaping, anyway?

To Quinn, it's no secret that her parents don't... care for her, so she wasn't running from anything
she didn't already know. As far as the great public is concerned, the Fabray couple are the perfect pair, and have one daughter who is always - unfortunately and inconveniently - away at school.

Huh.

Maybe Quinn actually did it for them.

The flight is short.

It usually is, owing to the medication Quinn makes sure to take. She knows, from experience, that she would probably have the urge to claw out her own eyes if she didn't take something for her anxiety and, basically, crippling fear.

Her therapist once mentioned something about the idea of 'loss of control' playing a big part in her disposition, and all Quinn could think was that the woman was being paid way too much money to tell her something she could have read in a Psychology book.

Which, she eventually did.

As an only child with an abundance of free time, Quinn has spent hours upon hours with her nose buried in a book. Her family has been in the public eye for longer than she can remember, her father rising up the political rankings, so Quinn has always had a lonely childhood, forced to find ways to entertain herself.

And, she's found plenty.

Immersing herself in worlds that aren't her own have both helped and hindered her, making her somewhat anti-social as well as providing her with the vocabulary and knowledge to maintain educated conversation.

It's helped win her father's numerous campaigns, which was always something she actually wanted to help with.

But, that was before.

Before she turned seven years old and learned the truth that, as much as she tried, her parents would never love her.

_____________________

For the most part, Rachel is successful in her endeavour to stop thinking about the confusing blonde. She doesn't want to be thinking about Quinn, so she doesn't.

She does, however, have to regale the campaign and election to her family when she arrives home something like five hundred thousand years after she left Dalton's campus.

Her oldest brother, Daniel, fetches her from the train station in Wallingford and drives her the nineteen miles out of the city to the Berry family's estate. Her father, Hiram Berry, once a prominent corporate lawyer in New York City, quit his high end job and packed up his fast-paced life to move to the middle of nowhere.

His colleagues called it an extreme midlife crisis, which was further accepted when he decided to buy a berry farm.

To this day, he remains firm in his belief that it was the best decision he ever made because, if he hadn't, he never would have met his neighbour, a man by the name of LeRoy Holt.
And, as they say, the rest is history.

Except, well, it's not.

It's not every day a straight, hard-assed lawyer type moves to the country and falls in love with another man, who is widowed and has three children of his own.

It remains unsaid that Hiram's ex-wife was a little caught off guard by the new developments, and his own daughter was... confused.

It seems Rachel Berry merely exists in a state of confusion.

"Are they going to throw a 'welcome home' party?" Rachel finds herself asking Daniel, glancing over at him in the driver's seat.

"Probably," he answers, shrugging. "I don't know why you're complaining though. It's food, B. We love food."

Rachel can't help her smile. She's missed him, and his tunnel vision. Daniel's always been a painfully literal, black and white being, with a no nonsense approach to most things. He was the one to break through her little shell when her father brought her to Connecticut for the first time, and he's held a special place in her heart ever since.

"I heard Dad is even making his famous poutine."

Rachel practically bounces in her seat, before she instantly deflates. "No, this is terrible, Daniel," she says with a defeated sigh.

"Why?"

"I can't afford to indulge," she says sadly. "I'm losing muscle tone."

Daniel laughs out loud, tipping his head backwards. "Oh, B, you're my favourite sister."

"I'm your only sister."

"Exactly."

Rachel folds her arms across her chest, sighing again. "I suppose... one indulgence wouldn't hurt."

Daniel side-eyes her, watching the way she bites at her bottom lip in thought. She's been through a lot in the last few months, and he's the kind of proud of her he can barely put into words. "It's just one," he says, noncommittally.

"LeRoy would be so heartbroken if I didn't at least try."

"He really would."

Rachel nods her head once, deciding. "So, you said poutine, huh?"

There is nobody at the Fabray mansion when Quinn arrives in Hartford. Even Tori is suspiciously absent, but the head butler, Samson, informs her that the woman stepped out to purchase a few final items for Quinn's arrival.

The teenager suspects Tori wanted to buy those 'few final items' without anyone in the house
knowing. Quinn hasn't really been allowed to *indulge*, but Tori likes to sneak things to her.

Anything to make a lonely girl happy, she guesses.

Quinn heads straight up to her bedroom, waits for her luggage to be brought up, and then collapses on her bed. The trip has exhausted her, and she's still a little groggy from her medication. Still, there's a tiny part of her that's glad to be back, even if it is to spend practically an entire summer alone at chez Fabray.

She's still sprawled out across her bed when Tori knocks on her door almost half an hour later and enters the dark room.

"Well, this is fitting," the older woman comments. She's ten years Quinn's senior, having come to work for the family straight out of college. She's part of the 'inner circle' with parents almost as rich as Quinn's, and she also has an individual mind that's constantly being stamped on.

They've known each other for longer than the five years they've been nanny and charge, but the last few years have created a bond Quinn *knows* she would probably die without.

Quinn doesn't even move. "I'm dying."

"If I recall correctly, you've been dying since you were twelve years old."

"You don't sound very concerned."

"I'm not."

Quinn opens one eye to watch the woman as she crosses the room and sits carefully on the edge of Quinn's four-poster, queen-sized bed. "Hi, Tori," she says with a grin at the brunette.

"Hello, Sweetheart," Tori immediately replies. "I've missed you."

"Have you?" she asks, propping herself up on her elbows and opening both eyes. "Don't tell me what you think I want to hear."

"I wouldn't," Tori automatically says. "You know I wouldn't. I haven't done that in years."

At that, Quinn sits up fully. "Well, I've missed you, too."

"Have you, really?"

"No."

They share a small laugh, which tapers off as the reality of their summer comes to mind. Quinn, while not physically restrained, is essentially a prisoner here, and Tori is her unofficial warden. She has been since she came into Quinn's life as her 'nanny.'

It's no secret to either of them that any indiscretions will be reported back to her parents, and neither of them wants that.

Quinn clears her throat, forcing the thoughts away. "So, I've been thinking about starting up painting again."

"Oh?"

She quirks an eyebrow, smirking. "Care to be my model?"
Rachel is showered left, right and centre in hugs and kisses when she arrives at the estate. She practically sprints into the large house when Daniel pulls up, leaving him to bring in her luggage while she greets her fathers, brothers and grandparents.

Hiram is always first on the list whenever Rachel returns to New Haven County. Even though they suffered a disjoint in their father/daughter relationship following the divorce, they've never been closer than they are, right now.

Trauma tends to do that.

Next is LeRoy, who lifts Rachel right off the ground and spins her in the air. Even though she's now seventeen years old, she still squeals like the little girl she was when she first met him. Back then, she was terrified of him. He's always been so large, and he still towers over her, but now she knows he's just a softie.

Well, most of the time.

Rachel moves on to her grandparents next, LeRoy's parents, Grandpa and Grandma Holt. As far as accepting their son's new family goes, the old couple have been wonderful. Everything was a bit of an adjustment for them all, and it's still a wonder they've managed to reach this point.

Rachel gets wrapped in twin hugs from her other two brothers, Levi and Eric, who, in all intents and purposes, are similar, though they're not twins. They've spent years clarifying that to people who continually confuse them for non-identical twins, but they're actually nineteen months apart. They like to tease LeRoy about how it's obvious he couldn't wait to get restarted after Levi's birth.

Which is especially funny now that he's gay.

Rachel's asked him about it. She's always wondered if there was a part of him that always knew, but could never quite admit it to himself. He claims that wasn't the case - though, he does admit to being curious - because he loved his wife. Rachel's never known how to reassure him that finding love in another man would never negate his feelings for his late wife. As a once-practicing physician, he has to know that already - logically, at least.

Emily-Anne, Daniel's wife, is last on the list, but that reunion lasts the longest. Rachel wants to know everything that's happened since the woman found out she's expecting the couple's first child. Everyone is excited about LeRoy and Hiram's first grandchild but Rachel is probably the most ecstatic. She loves babies. She can't wait to meet the newcomer and she's constantly devastated whenever she remembers she's probably going to be at school when the baby is born.

Emily-Anne grabs hold of Rachel's hand as soon as she's done the rounds and drags her upstairs to the teenager's bedroom. They have things to talk about.

"Okay," Emily-Anne says, pulling Rachel onto the bed with her. "Tell me about school."

"So, tell me about school."

Quinn looks up from the canvas on the easel before her, her eyes sliding towards Tori, who's sprawled across her bed. "I'd rather not," she says curtly, her attention back on her own paintbrush.

She's no stranger to the art of painting - she's tried nearly everything in her days of relative solitude - but she's finding it difficult to concentrate on anything other than the naked woman in her bed.
Tori sits up, holding the sheet against her bare chest. "Did something happen?"

Quinn's jaw clenches. "I don't want to talk about it, T," she says.

"Well, if you're going to be sitting all the way over there, then all I'm going to do is want to talk."

Quinn arches an eyebrow. "Is that so?"

"Oh, baby girl, you really are too far away."

Quinn chuckles, immediately abandoning her attempt at painting, and rises from her stool, her silk robe falling open. She stalks towards the woman in her bed, a predatory look on her face.

"Quinn?"

"Tori?" the blonde returns, crawling onto the bed. "Something on your mind?"

"Always," she says, falling back against the pillows.

"I'm here now, so you can stop talking."

Laughing lightly, Tori reaches out for Quinn, any and all words she intends to say dying on her lips.

"You keep mentioning this Quinn girl."

Rachel blinks in surprise, stopping mid-sentence. "What?"

"Quinn," Emily-Anne says, raising her eyebrows in question. "Who is she?"

"Uh, she's the... Head Student."

"Is that all?"

Rachel huffs. "Emily."

"Rachel."

"She's the Head Student," she says. "That's all."

Emily-Anne doesn't look convinced but she doesn't question it further. "So, you've made friends, then?"

Rachel nods, and then gasps. "That reminds me," she suddenly says; "I have to text Britt to make sure she got home okay."

"Britt is Brittany, your roommate?" Emily-Anne clarifies, watching as Rachel climbs off the bed to retrieve her phone from her backpack.

"Yip," Rachel says, looking at her phone's screen and frowning.

"What?" Emily-Anne asks, noticing her facial expression.

Rachel startles slightly, frowning that bit more. "It's just - "

"What?"
"Someone saw me at the station," she finally says, deflating as she sits on the edge of the bed. "I've been home barely three hours and it's already starting."

Emily-Anne immediately snatches the phone from her hand and looks at the screen, her face twisting into a scowl. "What the fuck?"

Rachel shakes her head, forcing away all the debilitating thoughts.

"I thought you changed your number."

"I did."

Emily-Anne immediately deletes the message, forcing the words from her mind. It's moot, though, because the words are already burned in her brain.

Rachel clears her throat. "It's fine," she says. "They're just words, and they mean nothing." She lifts her chin ever so slightly. "Also, I really don't appreciate your swearing in front of my niece/nephew."

Emily-Anne just stares at her in disbelief and... awe. She's always been strong and resilient - one has to be when you have divorced parents and gay fathers in this society - but she's constantly displayed something else entirely these last few months. "You amaze me," is all she says.

Rachel blushes, waving a hand dismissively.

"I'm just saying."

Before Rachel can respond, there's a knock on the door and Daniel pokes his head inside when Rachel beckons him inside. "Hey, pretty ladies," he says, grinning at them. "Party's starting."

"You know we can't do this anymore." Quinn is exhausted, already half-asleep when Tori tries that whole talking thing again. "We can't?"

"No, we really can't," Tori says, reaching out with her right hand to touch Quinn's cheek.

"Okay."

"Okay?"

Quinn hums, content and thoroughly sated.

"Don't you want to know why?"

Quinn turns her head slightly, her eyes opening. "I imagine it has something to do with the fact your probably not wanting to go to jail for statutory rape."

Tori gasps in surprise at her candidness, and then laughs nervously. The age difference is something they've never really spoken about, and she wonders if it's something they should have discussed before they fell into bed the first time.

"While I admit that's a worry, it's not the reason," Tori says, which is true. Quinn has always been able to get under her skin, convincing her she's more mature than her age suggests. It's true, Tori knows, and she probably should never have given in, but -
"Quinn."

"I'm getting married," Tori says, and Quinn snaps to attention, sitting up immediately.

"What?"

"Tom proposed," Tori explains, also sitting up and immediately missing the contact. "I said yes."

"Oh."

"Quinn, we both know this was never going to be anything," she starts. "It was always going to - "

"Don't," Quinn says, raising a hand. "Don't say anything that makes this less, okay? I can handle stopping, whatever, but I won't be able to handle your claiming it's meant nothing."

"I wasn't going to say that."

"Then, what were you going to say?"

For a moment, Tori says nothing, thinking it over. Then: "It was always going to end, Sweetheart."

"I know that," Quinn murmurs, turning away from her. "I just didn't expect it to happen like this."

"Like what?"

Quinn rises to her feet, bends to retrieve her robe and slips it on. "Why didn't you tell me before we took a tumble in my bed?" she asks, somewhat harshly.

"I missed you."

She growls in frustration, turning around and glaring at the brunette still in her bed. "That means nothing," she hisses. "You've known this entire time. You've known you were ending this and you still had your fucking fingers inside me!"

Tori automatically rises from the bed and approaches the girl slowly. "Quinn, please."

"Please what?" she snaps, moving away. "Don't be hurt? Don't be fucking angry that you're ending things because you've finally convinced yourself to bend to your family's wishes and marry a man you can't even stand?"

"Stop it," Tori says. "Stop acting as if this isn't something you've known for years, Quinn. We both know it was only a matter of time before I was going to give in. Girls like us, there's only one life mapped out for us. I mean, what were you expecting, huh? Did you actually expect us to be able to be together?"

Quinn whips around, a cold glare on her face. "I'm not stupid, T," she says coldly. "I'm also not a naive little girl who doesn't understand." She pinches the bridge of her nose. "That doesn't mean I have to like that it has to happen. I guess I liked to think that if you could escape it, then maybe I could as well. But, if you're being forced down this path, then there's nothing to stop my parents from ensuring I do too."

Tori's face twists into a look of sympathy. "Oh, Quinn."

"No," she says. "I get it."

"I wish you didn't have to."
Quinn turns away again, suddenly wishing she were still four years old and able to crawl into her father's lap and just be held. She just wants comfort, and she knows she can no longer find it in Tori.

She's ruined that.

Tori approaches slowly. "You're going to be fine," she says, her hand reaching out to touch Quinn's shoulder.

Quinn steps away, out of reach. "I already know that," she says, unable to keep the hurt and confusion and anger out of her voice. "I don't need you to tell me what I already know."

"Quinn?"

She shakes her head. "Please just go."

"Quinn, no."

"It's fine," she says. "I get it. You can go. Be with him and be... happy."

"Quinn?"

"Tori, please," she practically begs. "I'll be fine."

Once Tori gathers her things and escapes from the room, Quinn finally lets herself fall back on her bed and let out a shuddering breath.

She's not going to cry, because how can she?

What right does she have?

She's going to be fine.

For the first time since she arrived home, Quinn thinks about Rachel. She told the brunette she would be fine, and she's determined to prove it.

To Rachel - which is just an insane thought - and to herself.

"There she is!" Levi yells when Rachel emerges from the house, having changed out of her school uniform and into a pretty, yellow summer dress and ballet flats. They're having a barbecue, apparently, out in the backyard, and there are far more people in attendance than Rachel would have expected.

Emily-Anne slips her hand into Rachel's and urges her forward into the masses. Okay, not really masses, but still a considerable amount of people... including her best friends, Tina Cohen-Chang and Noah Puckerman. Once again, Rachel gets buried in two separate hugs, and one large group one.

Also in attendance are LeRoy's younger siblings, Jared Holt and Patrick Holt, and their respective families. Rachel is amazed that Patrick, his wife, Stacey, and their two kids, Julian and Declan, made the trip from New Haven specifically to see her. Her other cousins, Robert, Dennis and Tyler live in Wallingford, so she gets to see them more often.

Rachel sometimes worries that they've suffered from being somewhat related to her. They've assured her they'll endure it all for her. She is the only granddaughter in the family, which
automatically makes her special, even if there's no actual blood relation.

And then there are her other... friends.

She lost a lot of them when she moved schools, so it's a bit of a surprise to see Finn Hudson, Mike Chang and Mercedes Jones in attendance. She greets the last two quickly and warmly, and then gives Finn her full attention. He's always had her full attention, and she suspects he's always known it.

"Hey, Finn," Rachel says, suddenly irritated with how small her voice sounds.

"Hi, Rach," the tall boy replies, offering her a easy smile. "It's great to have you home."

"It feels pretty good to be home."

Finn stuffs his hands in the pockets of his jeans, looking awkward. "I'm - I'm sorry I haven't really been in touch," he says, smiling sheepishly. "Things have been busy with school and football and the garage."

Rachel merely nods, as if she accepts the explanation. It's probably true, for all she knows, but she can't admit to him that, without him there; she didn't really think about him at all. "That's okay, Finn," she says, and she's surprised by her own sincerity. "It is good to see you, though."

"Yeah?"

She nods.

He grins happily. "Can I get you a drink?"

"Answer your phone," Tori says, entering Quinn's room without bothering to knock. "Your mother has been calling me trying to get a hold of you."

Quinn rolls her eyes. "What does she want?"

"How would I know?"

"I thought you knew everything."

"I don't," she concedes, shrugging. "Are you still mad at me?"

Quinn glares at her. "Seriously? It's been exactly one hour."

"You always could hold a grudge."

"I think this is a little different," Quinn grumbles, her eyes snapping to her bedside table when her phone begins to vibrate again. She's tempted to ignore it again, but Tori physically hands it to her, so she really has no excuse. Muttering a curse under her breath, she answers the call. "Hello, Mother."

Tori giggles at Quinn's false cheer, listening to the blonde hum and sigh as her mother practically lectures her. It's when Quinn's shoulders suddenly slump that Tori pays attention but Quinn's side of the conversation gives nothing away.

"Of course," Quinn says into the phone. "I will. I won't. When have I ever? No, I'm sorry. You're right. Of course." A deep, painful sigh. "Goodbye, Mother." She hangs up, sets the phone back
down, and throws herself back against her pillows in a huff.

"What did she want?" Tori asks, unable to stop herself.

Quinn looks at her. "As if you don't already know," she scoffs.

"What?"

"Engagement party... ring a bell?"

Tori recoils slightly, suddenly remembering. "Oh."

"Oh, all right," she says, sighing. "Apparently, Biff McIntosh is going to be there, and I am to make a good impression and not embarrass the family."

Tori visibly grimaces, and then sighs as well, risking the act of sitting on the edge of Quinn's bed. When the blonde doesn't complain, she relaxes slightly. "I suppose you could do a lot worse," she says, trying to placate the blonde. "He comes from a good family and he's not completely repulsive to look at."

Quinn raises her eyebrows. "Who are you trying to convince here, T?" she asks. "Nothing about him is remotely appealing to me, you know? He has a penis."

"And a trust fund."

Quinn rolls her eyes. "I do, too."

"Quinn, be serious."

She shakes her head. "Maybe you're resigned to this life, but I'm not," she says. "I have one more year to endure before I can get out of this place."

"Oh, Quinn," she says sympathetically. "It's cute how you think you could ever escape this."

Emily-Anne's sudden laugh startles Rachel out of her musings, and she looks across her bed at the older woman. Much to Daniel's distaste, Emily-Anne decided to spend the night with Rachel, just catching up, though his complaints were mainly to tease his wife for loving his sister more than she loves him.

"What?" Rachel asks, frowning at her sister-in-law's behaviour. "What are you laughing at?"

Emily-Anne places a hand on her stomach, her laughter tapering off. "I don't even know why I'm laughing. It isn't even funny."

"What?"

She waves a hand. "It's just, well, Finn," she says, giggling.

"What about Finn?"

"His name," she says. "It literally rhymes with Quinn."

Rachel frowns. "Is that supposed to mean something to me?"

"I don't know, Rach," she says with a disinterested shrug. "Why don't you tell me?"
"Are you still mad at me?"

Quinn sighs heavily, just wishing Tori would leave her alone so she can get some sleep. "I'm not mad at you," she speaks into the darkness. "I'm disappointed."

Even though Quinn can't see it, Tori visibly flinches. Disappointment is probably worse than anger. "In me?" she asks, her voice small.

"Partly, yes," she says honestly. "In the situation and circumstances, as well. It shouldn't have to be this way. It's supposed to be better."

"Quinn, your parents don't even know you like girls," she points out.

"And, what would they do if they did?"

They both already know the answer to that question, so neither of them bothers to answer it.

Though, whatever the response they possibly come up with to finding out their Christian daughter prefers to lie with women would probably put a dampener on all the eventual plans for Russell Fabray to run for the presidency. Especially when he maintains little to no support for the LGBT community.

It's basically a scandal just waiting to happen.

They could bury it, of course. They've managed to do that with everything else. Maybe they'll send her away to one of those special boarding schools where they'll try to fix her.

Maybe they'll bring her home and lock her away for the duration of his term. Who knows?

Tori clears her throat. "I'm leaving next week to spend the summer in Palm Beach with Tom and our friends from college," she says.

"Next week, huh?"

"Quinn."

The blonde props herself up on her elbow. "Today is today and next week is next week," she says, almost conversationally. "And, I kind of didn't know it was the last time while it was the last time."

Despite her decision to end things, Tori can't help the wave of arousal that washes over her just at the blonde's words. Or, is it her tone?

It's definitely something.

Quinn doesn't even wait for a response as she rolls closer to the other woman, thoroughly believing that one last time surely won't hurt.

It remains to reason that she's wrong.

"Are you asleep?"

Rachel giggles softly. "I don't understand how you're not passed out right now," she whispers into the dark of her room. "You're literally fuelling two bodies, and one of them is actually, physically growing."
"I guess I'm just excited to have you back," Emily-Anne says, shrugging slightly. "I've missed you."

"Are you just saying that because you've been surrounded by so much testosterone in this place?"

"Maybe."

Rachel laughs into her hand. "Oh, I see how it is, then."

"But, we really do all miss you," she says. "I have to spend as much time with you as possible before you jet off to the Big Apple."

"I'm here for at least another three weeks," Rachel reminds her.

"It's not enough time."

Rachel sighs, before whispering to herself: "It never is, and it never will be."

"Your new governess is Martha Holmes," Tori says, still not allowing Quinn to sleep. She knows, the second she does, it's going to be over. They may have a week, but this is their last night. "She's sixty-three years old."

Quinn chuckles. "Is she hot?"

Tori makes a sound of disapproval. "She's no-nonsense and very strict."

"That's redundant."

"Jesus, I forget how stupidly annoying you can be when you get cranky."

"Just admit it," Quinn teases. "You're going to miss me."

The mood soberes quite instantly, and Tori reaches for Quinn's hands in the darkness. "I love you, Quinn Fabray," she whispers.

"As I you, Victoria Hilton," she says softly, whispering the words into the darkness. "Though, I hate you a little bit right now for leaving me alone all summer."

"You'll have Martha."

"And you'll be lucky if you don't leave this place without some vicious rash somewhere truly uncomfortable."

"Got it."

"I'm glad we understand each other."

Tori sighs. "We've always understood each other."

That part's never been their problem.

It's the middle of the night, Rachel awakes, practically jolting her into a seated person as if there's something hovering above her. Which is just insane.

Either way, now that she's up, the least she can do is close the window. Even for summer, there's a
certain chill in the air, and it unsettles her. She's supposed to be having a good, easy, happy summer without a worry or care.

Once again, Quinn Fabray comes to the forefront of her mind.

Dammit.

And she was doing so well.

Rachel stands by her window, looking out at the moon high in the sky. Without thinking, she raises her thumb and closes one eye.

Perfect fit.

Almost like magic.

Quinn lowers her thumb and opens her left eye, sighing. The rustle of moving sheets behind her catches her attention and she glances over her shoulder.

"Come back to bed," Tori says sleepily. "We don't have time to waste."

Quinn chuckles to herself, casting one last look at the moon, before she crosses back to the bed.

No, they really don't have time to waste.

Nobody does.
Chapter Four

As expected - and requested - Quinn is the first student to arrive back at Dalton Academy after the long summer months. She usually arrives earlier than the others in her own year, anyway, her flight landing early and her drive to the campus made quickly and in private.

Of course, though, after the flight she just had, she's a little groggy and a bit snappy. She texts Tori, Martha and her mother that she's arrived when the car pulls up in front of the large main building of Dalton and the driver brings it to a stop. Quinn waits another five minutes as he climbs out, unloads her luggage and carries her items into the front courtyard.

When he opens the back door for her, she dutifully climbs out, carrying her own backpack. As expected, she made the trip in her school uniform, representing her school in all the best ways. She looks fresh and clean and determined.

It's something her Headmaster notices the moment he greets his new Head Student in the reception area of his office. Admittedly, he was a bit worried after seeing the almost meek response to her appointment at the end of the previous semester, but the girl who strides forward with her hand outstretched is an entirely different person.

Quinn greets Mr Schuester and his secretary, Ms Regina Gold, before she follows the man into his office. She suffers momentary panic when he gently closes the door, but she manages to keep it off her face.

She's fine.

William Schuester is a good man.

She hasn't met many.

"I'm sure you'd like to go up to your room and get settled in, so I'll make this quick," he says, inviting her to sit as he walks around his desk and settles into his own chair. "We just have a few things to discuss before the prefects' orientation tonight."

Quinn merely nods, absently opening her *Moleskine* notebook and dating the first empty page. Her handwriting is neat in the corner, and she even draws a tiny bee beneath it.

"The orientation won't take too long," he explains. "It's merely a formality, really, and Miss Pillsbury will be running it. But, before we get to that, there are a few difficult decisions to make."

She gives him her full attention.

"First, though, I would just like to congratulate you again," he says, smiling warmly. "I believe the school has chosen wisely, Miss Fabray. I have always held you in high regard, and I look forward to a smooth year."

Quinn licks her lips slowly, doing her best not to react to the words. Her first response is panic, but she manages to stamp it down. It's okay. She's okay. "Thank you, Sir, and I hope I don't disappoint in that regard."

He gives her one last, closed-lipped smile before he gets down to business. They quickly discuss
the upcoming evening, the next day's expected freshman orientation and the arrival of the rest of the students the same evening. It's all a little overwhelming, but Quinn takes notes and breathes a sigh of relief when Mr Schuester slides a detailed programme across his desk.

"As you know, the elected prefects will officially begin their tenure tomorrow morning when the new students and their parents arrive," Mr Schuester says. "But, as I'm sure you also know, the complement of prefects is not full."

Quinn nods her understanding. She's known this for a while. Her election has seen to that and, if the Deputy Head Students are to come out of the pool of prefects like she did; the group would be down three of them.

That's less than ideal, given that the prefects are responsible for policing almost four hundred students. She doesn't yet know if the Deputies would come from that group, though, because Mr Schuester has given her no indication that it would even be required.

The Deputies are usually decided the moment the Head Student is.

"We are, however, afforded a truly unusual position, Miss Fabray," he says. "The demotion of Mr Adams requires an extra position be filled."

Quinn nods once more. She failed to remember that, which she doesn't think is the worst thing. Zero time spent thinking about Azimio Adams is time well spent.

"The prefects are your responsibility," he says. "You are, essentially, their keeper, which means that it's important you learn to work with the students at your disposal. I understand there has been some... strife in the halls."

Quinn raises her eyebrows in question.

"Miss Lopez is a prefect," he says calmly, and Quinn is forced to acknowledge what she's tried so hard to forget. Right. Of course.

"I can assure you, Sir, there won't be any trouble."

Even if Mr Schuester doesn't believe her, she seems to believe herself, so he lets it drop. "Duties, of course, will be assigned this evening, and you'll have to ensure everyone is happy and working."

Quinn can't help thinking that's quite a tall order when she can't even ensure she's happy, but she still jots it down. She can at least try.

It wouldn't hurt, would it?

When they get to discussing the vacant positions, Quinn tenses. "Traditionally, the runners-up to the election form the two Deputies," Mr Schuester explains, unnecessarily reminding her of what she's witnessed in the years she's been here. "Without Mr Adams, that would leave only Miss Berry to act as your Deputy."

Quinn almost chuckles to herself because, if the roles were reversed, she would positively hate that. She imagines Rachel Berry won't be a fan of it either.

"As for the second Deputy, the board and I discussed it, and we feel it will be unnecessary to hold another election. If needs be, we can appoint one from the pool of prefects if the work becomes too much for the two of you."
Quinn just nods.

"As Miss Berry was not initially elected as a prefect, it still leaves us with two empty spots to fill," he says. "Based on the votes accumulated, I've drawn up a list of potential names."

Quinn isn't surprised by the list. They seem to match the students who are on the edge of popularity in this extremely strange school, and it doesn't take them all that long to finalise the list.

"I'll pass this along to Miss Pillsbury for this evening," he says. "These students won't be arriving until tomorrow evening, though, so you're going to have to get by without them until then."

Quinn nods, a question on the tip of her tongue.

"Miss Berry was informed of her position," Mr Schuester says, as if he can read her mind. "She is expected to arrive with the rest of the prefects on this evening's Bus."

Quinn isn't sure what to do with her feelings on that particular piece of information, or even that Mr Schuester decided it was something she wanted to know at all. She's a little irritated with herself for being so transparent.

"Should I be expecting problems there as well?" he finds himself asking.

Quinn can't help her chuckle. "Oh, plenty."

"I thought as much."

"And you actually said yes?" Santana asks, incredulous.

Rachel is unfazed by her reaction. The Latina has been in a constant state of shock and disbelief ever since Rachel stepped onto the bus chartered to take the returning prefects to Dalton from the city. She even screamed what are you doing here?, which was embarrassing for both of them.

"Why would you say yes?" Santana questions, scratching the spot between her eyebrows with her forefinger.

Rachel rolls her eyes. "When your Headmaster personally calls you in the middle of your summer vacation, you usually do what he asks," she says casually. "I couldn't say no, Santana. It's a prestigious position."

Santana shakes her head. "You do know you have to work closely with Quinn, right?"

Rachel meets her gaze. "Is there something wrong with Quinn?"

"Oh, there are a lot of things wrong with Quinn," she says sarcastically. "The two of you are never going to get along, you realise that, right?"

"Why do you say that?"

Santana just chuckles dryly, leaning back in her seat. "This is definitely going to be an interesting year."

There's an undeniable buzz in the air as the prefects shuffle into the large boardroom, each of them with their own notebook and pen. It's doubtful they'll need them, though, because each seat at the table has a leadership training booklet, bottle of water, a Dalton Academy writing pad and a pen.
"I feel so special," Santana quips to Rachel as they enter behind a group of girls, all of whom the Latina does not like. At all.

"Because they're giving you stationery?"

"It has the school's coat of arms on it," she argues, pouting slightly. "It's special, and so am I."

"Keep telling yourself that," Rachel drawls, as she makes her way towards the head of the table. The Deputy's seat is beside Quinn's, though she's still not sure why, when all they're doing is learning how to... lead.

Anyway.

Santana sits in the chair beside her, and immediately starts looking through the programme. Rachel sits perfectly still, suddenly feeling nervous. She hasn't seen Quinn since the last day of school and, as much as she's tried not to think about the blonde over the summer, she has. It helps that she's not yet here, but Rachel is getting more anxious as the seconds tick by.

She's unsure which Quinn Fabray she's going to meet today, and she desperately hopes it's not the one from the Great Hall. That one was haunted by something, and Rachel doesn't want that for her.

It's five minutes later, exactly on time, that Quinn and Miss Emma Pillsbury walk into the boardroom, engaged in what looks to be an important conversation. Rachel's eyes are immediately drawn to the blonde, studying her face and body for anything. In all honesty, Rachel isn't sure what to expect, but this isn't it.

Quinn looks... tense, sure, but there's an obvious confident air about her that wasn't there the last time they spoke. It's as if she's come to accept the role she's supposed to play, and she's going to do it well. It's a relief to Rachel, of course, but there's a part of her that's still unsettled by it. Which is the real Quinn? Is either one even who the blonde truly is?

A certain hush falls over the room as Quinn and Miss Pillsbury move towards the head of the table, both of them saying polite hellos to the accumulated prefects. Rachel even gets a tight-lipped smile, which is bucketloads better than the indifference Santana receives. Rachel knows Santana acts as if it doesn't hurt her, but even Rachel can feel the chill.

When Quinn takes her seat beside Rachel, and left to Miss Pillsbury at the head of the table, she produces a notebook from somewhere. Rachel can't help staring at the printed front, engraved as it is in sea turtles and flowers that resemble gardenias. It's obviously a custom Moleskine, and Rachel wonders what other things she's going to learn about this girl during their tenure.

"All right then," Miss Pillsbury says, getting their attention. "Good evening, everyone, and welcome to Leadership Training 2011/2012." She offers them a beaming smile, and Santana scoffs at Rachel's side. "Today's programme will consist of five sessions, with a break for refreshments after the first two," she explains. "We're mainly going to deal with what leadership is, the role of teamwork, what is expected of you and your duties." She claps her hands once. "So, let's begin! Tell me, what does leadership mean to you?"

Quinn tries to pay attention. She truly does.

It's just that Rachel is sitting right beside her, her spine straight and her focus solely on Miss Pillsbury. Quinn has the almost unstoppable urge to lean into the girl and ask about her summer. She curbs that desire, squashing it down in a way she's become very good at, and forces herself to look at the redheaded teacher with the tiny voice.
Quinn, admittedly, feels a little awkward. She almost feels like a fraud, sitting up here and being looked to. She's supposed to lead these leaders, and it's terrifying.

"Be authentic," Miss Pillsbury says. "Know yourself."

Quinn scribbles down a few words in the training booklet, wondering from where she's going to manufacture the trust in herself to pull this off.

"You are the image of this school," Miss Pillsbury goes on. "Set the standard, be the example and be aware of your influence. I understand it's a lot of pressure to put on seventeen-year-olds, but I have great faith in your abilities. Stand by your own choices, and be accountable. This is a great honour, so embrace it."

Quinn is hearing the words but she's sure they aren't registering. People have said a lot of things to her in the past, and look where she is now. It doesn't feel as if anything has changed... on the inside and on the outside.

She's still alone.

When they move onto the second session - this time with an emphasis on teamwork - Santana is about ready to claw out her own eyes. She keeps sighing, and Rachel keeps having to pinch her thigh to stop her from making a spectacle of them both.

Though, even she has to admit this is all a little redundant. Nobody needs to be told: 'TEAMWORK is THE ESSENCE of LIFE.' Particularly not anyone in this room because, honestly, Santana isn't the only one who's dying of boredom.

Only Quinn seems to be taking diligent notes and, because she's curious, Rachel glances over to look at the open page of the blonde's notebook. She expects to see lines and lines of notes, but she comes across something else entirely. It takes Rachel a moment to register that Quinn is, in fact, drawing. It's not a doodle, but rather a detailed, near-perfect picture of the New York skyline.

Rachel sucks in a breath, surprised and awed.

Quinn flinches at the sound and glances to her left, but Rachel's gaze has dropped to her lap. She wrings her fingers together until she can no longer feel Quinn's gaze on her, and then looks back up at the blonde, her eyes roving over her strong profile.

This girl continually surprises her.

She's also insanely talented, if Rachel knows anything. Quinn seems to be drawing the picture from memory, which is just insane. Nobody should be able to get that much detail. Rachel could probably be looking straight at the real skyline and still not see what Quinn is depicting. Rachel desperately wants to ask her about it and, when Miss Pillsbury finally calls for their break, the words are already out of her mouth.

"I didn't know you could draw."

Quinn visibly tenses and turns her head to look at the brunette. "I think you'll find there are a lot of things you don't know about me, Berry."

Rachel swallows audibly, suddenly feeling as if she's four years old. "It's very good," she says.

Quinn falters slightly, her eyes softening. "Thank you," she says softly. Then: "you should
probably get some tea and sandwiches. It looks as if Santana is waiting for you."

Before Rachel can respond, Quinn has risen to her feet and disappeared out of the boardroom. Rachel wonders which Quinn she's going to encounter when she returns. It's barely been an hour, and she's already exhausted.

Santana grumbles as she studies the table on the page before her. "I think, right now, I'm a begrudging follower," she says, eyeing the column of 'TYPE OF TEAMMATE.'

"I'd have to agree," Rachel quips, grinning at her friend.

"Well, excuse me, Miss 'Team Achiever.'"

Rachel giggles. "Oh, don't get snippy," she teases. "At least you're not a non-follower."

"The night is still young, Berry."

"You're going to be challenged in many different ways," Miss Pillsbury says, and Quinn is convinced the woman must love the sound of her own voice. "It's all about how you approach them. You attitude is very important."

Okay.

Quinn is inclined to agree with that. It's just, well, sometimes your attitude can't be helped. If you've been burned enough times, you kind of develop a knee-jerk response.

Quinn would know. It's the reason she's halfway across the state, right now, away from the lives her parents and Tori are determined to live.

A life she doesn't want for herself.

A life at all.

When they discuss the prefects' Mission Statement, Quinn doesn't look at anyone. They'll be saying the words in front of the entire school and their own parents during the induction service this coming Friday, and Quinn just knows she won't have any support in attendance. Her parents wouldn't dare make the trip, Tori is... away, and Martha is a dinosaur.

Quinn wouldn't want any of them there anyway.

"Are your parents coming to this thing?" Rachel whispers to Santana.

"Yeah, yours?"

Rachel presses her lips together. "I haven't yet decided."

If it's a cryptic response, Santana doesn't mention it. She's good at that. She's been keeping secrets about parents for a very long time.

"And, now, to the part I'm sure you've all been waiting for," Miss Pillsbury says, smiling knowingly. She's thoroughly undeterred by the lack lustre response she receives. She's had to deal
with nearly everything in her years here, working as Head Counsellor and Head of Student Affairs. "We're going to discuss your class assignments and portfolios."

Rachel does perk up at the sound of that.

"All but the Head Students will be assigned a class, which will be your responsibility," the teacher explains. "You'll have to visit their homeroom at least once a week, direct them to the chapel, act as a liaison to your fellow prefects and keep them informed," she explains.

While she does that, Rachel studies Quinn again. The drawing has been abandoned in favour of the leadership training booklet, where she's taking note of which prefects are being assigned to which grades. There's a slight crease in her brow, and Rachel has to pinch herself to stop herself from reaching out to smooth it away with the pad of her thumb.

"Now, for the portfolios," Miss Pillsbury says. "These will, fortunately, be decided amongst yourselves. Some of them will require more than one prefect, and those have been noted in the table." She slowly rises to her feet. "As far as my role in tonight's proceedings goes, this is where I bid you goodnight. Quinn will take over now to discuss the portfolios and inform you on what is happening tomorrow."

Quinn, dutifully, does wait for the teacher to leave before she addresses them. She doesn't stand or move to the head of the table, which Rachel appreciates even if she has to strain her neck to face the blonde.

"I don't think it would be fair to make decisions on portfolios without having the final two prefects here," Quinn says, which receives a collective nod. "If there is a specific portfolio you're interested in, just drop me an email and I'll make note of it." She removes a printed sheet of paper from the back of her notebook. "If you could all just fill in this table while we proceed, that would be great."

Rachel receives the paper first, and automatically smiles at what Quinn is asking for: phone number, date of birth and favourite colour. She quickly fills it in and passes it on to Santana before returning her attention to the speaking blonde.

"As is tradition, the freshmen will be arriving with their parents at ten o'clock tomorrow morning," she explains. "We'll be responsible for ushering them into the Great Hall for the welcome and information session. After that, the parents will be invited to enjoy refreshments in the main courtyard, and we'll take the children on group tours around the school grounds. I've printed out maps and routes for that, each group ending in a different classroom with two prefects. It's then that we'll have the opportunity answer any of their questions, attempt to alleviate their worries and try to make them feel welcome and less uneasy and nervous about their first day of school.

"The entire thing should be over by one o'clock," she says. "We'll return the children to their parents for the final goodbye, and then help them get situated in their rooms. Miss Pillsbury and I anticipate quite a few tears."

There are a few chuckles, and Quinn smiles lightly.

"I'm sure you all remember what it was like that first night," she adds, sobering slightly. "I just need you to be on hand to offer encouraging words and, perhaps, a shoulder to cry on. Let's not forget the added chaos we're going to have to endure when the buses with the other students start rolling in at four o'clock." She runs a hand over her hair, which Santana knows is one of her nervous ticks.

Quinn doesn't have many, but the ones she does are extremely telling.
"I've drawn up the necessary schedules to deal with their arrival." At this, she hands out a sheet of paper to each of them. "We know the drill," she says. "Get them inside the Great Hall to fetch their room assignments, and then send them on their way. Caretaker Henry is going to handle getting the luggage into the front courtyard for inspection, and then it's our job to make sure everyone can find his or her pieces. I'm sure nobody wants another Sylvester incident."

There's another round of chuckling, and Rachel turns confused eyes on Santana.

"I'll tell you later," the Latina assures her.

Quinn clears her throat, her gaze lowered to the pages on the table in front of her. "This is all new to all of us," she says, almost timidly. "I can't make any promises that it's all going to be smooth sailing, but I can promise I'm going to try my level best to keep it that way. This is a thank you in advance for putting your trust in me, and I'll work hard not to let you down." Her voice drops off at the end, and she frowns slightly before dutifully schooling her features. "I think that's all for tonight. We'll meet in the foyer of the Great Hall tomorrow at nine-thirty. Thank you. Have a good night."

When Quinn gets to her feet, the other prefects begin to pack up their own things.

"Remember," Quinn adds as the first group of students is leaving. "Breakfast is at eight o'clock in the dining hall."

Rachel almost rolls her eyes. As if they don't already know. Food is important to the students of Dalton Academy, she's quickly come to learn. It's almost synonymous.

"Let's get out of here," Santana says, and Rachel is all too willing to follow.

But a voice stops them both. "Berry?"

Rachel turns to look at Quinn expectantly.

"Rachel, I mean," she says, somewhat sheepishly. "Do you think we could have a quick talk?"

Quinn is aware she hasn't spoken in exactly two minutes and fifteen seconds. Rather, she's staring hard at the cover of her notebook on the table, her eyes practically boring holes into the print.

Rachel shifts slightly, and Quinn catches the movement, forcing her to sigh.

"I want this to work," Quinn finally says.

If Rachel's surprised by her words, she doesn't show it.

"I can't even begin to imagine what this must be like for you," she says. "I think I would have told Mr Schuester no, if I were you."

"I considered it," Rachel confesses, which elicits a tiny smile from Quinn.

"Normally, there would be a second Deputy," she explains; "but I think we're both a little relieved Adams is no longer a prefect."

Rachel visibly shudders.

"Look, I'm - I'm not the easiest person to get along with," Quinn says, cringing slightly. If that isn't an understatement, then she doesn't know what is. "I'm willing to try if you are, because I want this
to work." She *needs* this to work because, truly, she doesn't need the added stress to what is already looking to be a stressful year.

"I want this to work too, Quinn."

She breathes out a sigh of relief. "That's good to hear."

Rachel smiles warmly. "It's good to see that you are, in fact, fine."

For a moment, Quinn frowns in confusion, before she remembers and actually *blushes*. "Oh. Right. Well, I'm sorry about that," she says. "It seems you caught me at a vulnerable moment."

"I wouldn't call it that."

"What would you call it?"

Rachel hums in thought for a moment before meeting Quinn's gaze. "I would call it a *real* moment." And, with that, she spins and leaves the boardroom, leaving Quinn to her own thoughts.

Vulnerable and real as they are.

"What did Quinn want?" Santana asks as soon as she spots Rachel emerge from one of the elevators on the fourth floor. "I don't see any scratches, so the claws stayed hidden, then."

Rachel scowls slightly, feeling oddly defensive of Quinn. "She just wanted to talk," she explains; "make sure we're on the same page about this whole thing?"

"Which is?"

"We want this to work."

"And, do you?"

Rachel skips a step. "What kind of question is that?"

"I mean, it wouldn't be the first coup to happen at Dalton."

Rachel gasps in surprise. "Oh my God, Santana!" she hisses; "this isn't some 'keep your friends close and enemies closer' thing." She shakes her head. "And, plus, Quinn and I aren't enemies."

"Are you sure about that?"

Rachel comes to a stop in the middle of the corridor, turning to face the Latina. "Just because you left her; doesn't mean the rest of us are going to," she says coldly, realising that she has to put a stop to this immediately. "Whatever happened between you two, that's whatever, but I won't have you twisting my intentions to fit some narrative that paints either Quinn or myself in a bad light. Do I make myself clear?"

Santana just stares at her for a long moment, her jaw slack.

"Do I?" Rachel presses.

"Crystal."

"Good," she says with a slight bounce. "Goodnight, Santana." And, with that, she spins once more
and makes the short walk to her bedroom. As a senior, she now has her own bedroom, which is one of the two Deputy rooms located opposite the Head Student's room, which she's loathe to acknowledge has its own bathroom. It's the one perk she was almost desperate for but now she, once again, has to share four toilet cubicles and six showers with twenty other girls.

Between arriving at Dalton, getting her luggage up to her room and making it in time for the prefects' meeting; Rachel hasn't had much time to get settled in. Santana did help her make her bed - which was always going to be her number one priority - so she's not too stressed. She suspects it'll take some time to get everything unpacked and in their rightful places.

Rachel does scrimp through her one suitcase for her pyjamas. After the long day of travelling, she thinks a shower is in order. It's her first night back at Dalton and, as daunting as it feels, she's glad she's here and not back in... Wallingford.

Really, if she had it her way, she would probably move her entire family out of that place. Well, in her dreams, she would, because she never would take them up on their offer. It matters very little now. What happened, happened, and Rachel has only one more year before she's off to college.

She can hold out for that long.

With the change in environment, Quinn makes sure to take the two necessary hits of her purple asthma pump before she crawls into bed. It's been a long day of travel and practiced control. She's exhausted, but sleep doesn't come easily. She twists and turns and, when her alarm eventually goes off at six o'clock, she's already awake.

Muttering under her breath, Quinn rolls out of bed and changes into her running gear. She's back at school now, which changes very little about her morning routine. Going for a run every day is one way to ensure she doesn't commit a murder.

Or, something else.

It's still dark when Quinn exits the building, a neon green hoodie on over her running top. There's a chill in the air, but she ignores it and does her stretches. When she's ready, she starts out with a jog to warm up, and gradually speeds up.

The run helps clear her head but, by the time she arrives back on the fourth floor, it's as if nothing has changed. She's feeling anxious and flighty, and maybe a lot of apprehension.

It also doesn't help that she sees Santana coming out what she knows is Rachel's bedroom. The two of them barely look at each other, which is fine, Quinn supposes. It's weird, though, because the Latina was supposed to be one of the ones who understood. Quinn realises, now, that people who stay in her life are usually paid.

But, when she thinks of Tori, she throws that theory out the window.

Nobody stays.

Breakfast is a small affair. With only the prefects in attendance, the meal goes quickly. Rachel and Santana sit together, the Latina constantly fiddling with her tie. Rachel is staring at her phone, noting the WhatsApp notification that she's been added to the group 'Prefects 2011/2012' by, well, Quinn Fabray.

Rachel didn't have her number saved in her phone until this morning and, for some reason, it feels
"Leave it," Rachel reprimands Santana gently, swatting at her hand. "And, really, how you've gone all this time without learning to do your own tie is beyond me."

Santana rolls her eyes. "I just don't take out the knot," she explains; "but my uniform was thoroughly washed when I was home. And plus, uh, Quinn usually does it for me."

Rachel merely hums in understanding, her eyes drifting to said blonde, who's seated at another table, beside a boy named Kurt Hummel. They seem to be having a conversation about something Quinn looks truly interested in, and it's a look Rachel hasn't seen before. It's a good look on her.

Rachel clears her throat. "You're just lucky I was awake," she says. "What were you doing up so early, anyway?"

Santana isn't sure how to answer that. How does she explain to her fellow brunette that waking up early to make sure Quinn gets back from her daily run is something she's been doing at Dalton since she first learned there's a darker reason for the blonde's fondness of exercise?

"Habit," the Latina comments instead.

"How...? We were just on vacation!"

"I think I overcompensated," she says, shrugging noncommittally.

Rachel perks up. "Were you... excited?" she asks teasingly.

"Sure," Santana says, rolling her eyes. "We'll go with that."

In terms of the success and failure of Quinn's first official foray into being Head Student, she does rather well. Her detailed schedules help, and the rest of the prefects are eager to please on their first day as well.

For the tour, Quinn is paired with Kurt Hummel, who she finds is probably the only person in the world who is actively fighting against the barriers of their school uniforms. The world would definitely get a shock if ever he were given free reign to design any part of their school uniform.

It does help that he's knowledgable about all things Dalton related. She learns he's been a member of the Student Representative Committee, and she takes note of it for when they inevitably meet up on Friday to discuss their respective portfolios.

Across campus, Rachel continually has to reel in Santana Lopez because the Latina is determined to frighten the incoming freshmen with tales of haunted classrooms and teachers to avoid.

"Oh, that reminds me," Rachel says once they're leading the students back towards the courtyard to meet their parents. "You never did tell me that story about... Sylvester."

"Do you know her?" Santana asks, glancing over her shoulder to make sure the miscreants are following.

"She teaches Biology, right?"

"Scariest woman I've ever met," she says, nodding her head. "She hates when students leave their bags in the corridors, citing that it's a fire hazard, so she has a real conniption when suitcases and
trunks get left out overnight. She's so crazy, Berry, she actually moves them into the teachers' lounge, so you can't get them without asking her. Sometimes, she makes you write a request letter, or even agree to sign up for Litter Duty for weeks just to get your belongings back."

"Damn."

"She's a bitch, really," she says; "which is why she's Quinn's favourite teacher."

Rachel can't stop herself from laughing at that, even though she knows she shouldn't. "Who's your favourite teacher?"

"Mullan," she answers immediately. "Physics."

"I always forget you're a gigantic nerd."

Santana rolls her eyes. "I like Physics."


"Stop that."

"Stop what?"

"Stop trying to steal another brownie."

Santana pouts. "But they taste so good."

"I don't doubt that," Rachel says; "but you've already had four and you're going to end up spoiling your lunch."

"Whatever, Mom."

Rachel chuckles. "You really are the baby of your family, aren't you?"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

Rachel casually rolls a shoulder. "Nothing."

"I'm on to you, Berry."

"Congratulations on a successful day," Mr Schuester says to Quinn as the two of them wave off the last of the incoming parents. "It ran smoothly, and the parents were all complimentary."

"Thank you, Sir," Quinn says, turning her body to face him. "I suspect we'll have some teething to endure but they're a good group."

"Indeed."

Quinn waits a beat before stepping back. "I should probably go and make sure the freshers are settling in all right."

He nods once, stepping back as well. "Oh, Quinn?"

"Sir?"
"Delegate," he says.

She frowns for a moment, and then nods in understanding. "Of course."

"If I have to tell one more person that, yes, they have to share a bathroom, I'm going to eat my own hair," Santana complains as she strides through Rachel's open door. "How can this be so surprising for them? It's a boarding school, not a fucking hotel."

Rachel glances up from the book she's reading. "Someone's in a mood," she says casually. "What time is Britt getting here?"

Santana's eyes snap towards her. "My mood has nothing to do with Brittany," she says hotly.

"That isn't an answer to the question I asked," Rachel says, returning her eyes to her book and resisting the urge to smile. Gosh, a flustered Santana Lopez is all kinds of hilarious.

"She's on Bus Nine, so that's around five o'clock," Santana finally says, moving to sit on the edge of Rachel's bed. "It's - I'm - " she halts, unsure what she's trying to say. "I haven't seen her all summer," she finally gets out. "What if - what if everything has changed? Or, nothing at all?"

Deciding to give her friend her full attention, Rachel closes her book and sets it aside. "Has she given you any indication that something would have changed?"

Santana sighs. "I don't know," she confesses. "It's Brittany, so how can I know?"

"It's going to be okay, you know?" she says. "It is Brittany, so of course it's going to be okay. You'll see her and everything will make sense and, before you know it, you'll be married with seven children."

Santana's eyes widen, even as she chokes on her laughter. "Seven, huh?"

"Maybe six," she concedes. "Seven seems a bit much."

"Do you want a big family?"

Rachel presses her lips together. "Definitely more than one," she eventually says. "It can get lonely."

Santana frowns. "I thought you had brothers."

"I do."

"I'm so confused."

"Wait until Britt gets here, and I promise you all the love songs in the world will start making sense once more."

Quinn's eyes are trained on the clipboard in her hands when she feels a presence on her right side. Frowning slightly, she looks up at the intruder to find Rachel looking out at the Great Hall with keen interest.

"I like the setup," the brunette says, barely looking at Quinn. "It seems to be getting them through the registration process rather quickly."
Quinn merely hums in acknowledgment.

"I suppose it also helps that the buses arrive in staggered waves," she says. "I imagine the Caretakers are happy with that."

"It's been mentioned a few times, yes."

Rachel turns to look at her, their eyes meeting. "Is there a reason we all get searched for contraband?"

The corners of Quinn's lips tilt upwards. "Oh, I don't think there's enough time in the world to tell all those stories," she says, a teasing lilt to her tone that catches them both off guard. Quinn clears her throat. "We're a high school in America. It's practically a part of the Constitution to strip search us."

"Who said anything about stripping?"

Quinn arches an eyebrow. "Who didn't?"

For the longest time, the two of them just stare at each other. Quinn can't be sure what all this is, and Rachel is equally as lost. Though, she reasons she would rather take this awkwardness than actually butting heads.

"I don't know if we'll manage to get them all signed in by the time dinner starts," a voice says, interrupting them, and Quinn turns towards Kurt as he approaches the pair.

"Hmm?"

"Is it just me or are there way more students this year?" he asks, sounding half-serious.

"It's just you," Quinn says, smiling slightly.

"They all look like little ants," Kurt says as the three of them stand on the raised balcony of the Hall. "Look at them go."

Quinn shakes her head, and Rachel giggles. It's the sound that draws Quinn's attention, and the two of them exchange another long look. There are so many silent words being exchanged because neither of them know them enough to voice them.

It's weird, Quinn thinks.

This entire thing is just weird.

"What do you know about Kurt Hummel?" Rachel finds herself asking Santana later at dinner. The excitement from seeing Brittany has worn off for Rachel, but Santana can't keep her eyes off the blonde, who is sitting next to Artie Abrams at the end of the table and discussing God knows what.

Santana drags her eyes away. "What?"

"Kurt Hummel," she says. "Is he... nice?"

Santana raises her eyebrows. "Why are we talking about Lady Hummel?"

"Lady Hummel?"
She sighs, her own eyes drifting across the dining hall to where Quinn and Kurt are, once again, sitting together. She frowns slightly because, yeah, that's an unlikely combination. "I don't know him very well," Santana finally says; "but I do know he's gay."

"Is that why you call him 'Lady Hummel?'" Rachel asks, trying and failing to keep the distaste out of her voice.

"Everybody does," Santana weakly defends.

"I would really appreciate it if you wouldn't," she says.

Santana looks at her face, noting the setting of her jaw and the harshness in her eyes. "Okay," she says, choosing not to fight this battle. There's something painfully severe in Rachel's gaze, and she's reminded again that there's so much about this little diva she doesn't know. "But... why are you asking about him?"

Rachel presses her lips together for a moment. "He - he won't hurt her, will he?"

She almost laughs out loud, but she's able to stop it when she hears the sincere concern in Rachel's voice. "No," she says seriously. "He won't hurt her."

"Good," Rachel says, absently turning her attention back to her still-untouched food. "She just seems as if she's been hurt enough."

It doesn't occur to her that she doesn't know the half of it.

Quinn Fabray: Congratulations on a job well done today! Thank you all for your hard work and patience - Mr Schuester was pleased with our performance. Remember, we're meeting during lunch on Friday in the boardroom. I'll send another message to remind you closer to the time. Keep thinking about the portfolios you want to be a part of and read through the Mission Statement a few more times before Friday's induction. Good luck for the first day back! Xx

Rachel reads the message three times, feeling a certain warmth spread across her chest. It isn't even a message to her, but to the prefect group, and she still feels a little giddy.

Gosh, she's pathetic.

A few of the other prefects start to reply to Quinn's message but Rachel isn't sure what to say.

Thank you?

You did wonderfully on your first day too?

Nothing seems right, and she's still debating the right words when there's a knock on her bedroom door.

"Come in," she calls out, still frowning at her phone.

The door opens to reveal Quinn Fabray, casually dressed in her pyjamas of blood red silk pants and a loose-fitting Snow Patrol t-shirt. She stands awkwardly in the doorway, before she slips fully inside and closes the door. She doesn't come any closer.

Rachel just stares at her. It isn't as if she hasn't seen Quinn in her sleepwear before, but she's never had it up close and in her bedroom. Rachel automatically straightens, recovering from her shock.
"Quinn, hey."

Quinn leans against the door, her hands on the doorknob behind her. "Hey," she says.

"Is everything okay?"

It's a loaded question, and she doesn't comment when Quinn doesn't actually answer it. "Thank you for all your help today," she says instead. "It's not going to be easy being the only Deputy, but I think we can make it work."

"Definitely."

"Mr Schuester mentioned that I should delegate more, which is what I intend to do," she explains, un-moving from her position against the door. It's almost as if she doesn't want to get any closer. "I just worry I might delegate too much or get so far in my head that I won't see what I'm doing."

Rachel isn't sure where she's going with this, but she waits patiently.

"Which is where you come in," she says. "I - I need a favour from you."

Anything, her mind screams, but her voice says, "Sure."

"Do you think you'd be able to keep me in line?" she asks, sounding uncharacteristically nervous. "Just, you know, put me in my place if I overload people or get unusually catty and snippy. It's been known to happen." She shrugs. "Before, it - it was Santana, but that's..." she trails off. "I would have asked Kurt, but he's a little soft for this kind of thing, and I think it would be strange to have someone who's not my Deputy challenging me in front of the other prefects. So, would you be able to do that for me?"

Rachel swallows audibly as she slowly rises to her feet, her phone abandoned.

"It'd really be in everyone's interest," Quinn adds, starting to ramble. "I mean, I can get a little intense sometimes, and it's all fine and dandy for just me, but now I'm supposed to be - "

"Okay," she says, cutting into Quinn's painfully adorable rant.

Quinn's eyes widen. "Okay?"

"Okay. I'll do it."


"Sure."

They stand in silence for a long minute before Quinn relaxes slightly. Her gaze moves away from Rachel's face to take in the room before her. She's never been inside, and she's slightly overwhelmed by it.

"That's a lot of posters," she comments, oddly intrigued as she pushes off the door and steps further into the room. "Are you a fan of Broadway?"

Rachel watches her carefully, tracking her movement towards the wall of posters, playbills, cards and photographs. "I am, yes."

"I assume you've seen shows, then?"
"I'm a little bit obsessed, actually."

Quinn glances at her over her shoulder. "Is it a dream of yours?"

"Partly."

Quinn's brow furrows but she doesn't question her on the cryptic response. "I saw Wicked in London," she says, pointing at one of the playbills. "And The Addams' Family in New York. I don't know if that show's anything special, but I was quite young and I may or may not have fallen asleep."

Rachel giggles softly, and Quinn looks at her once more.

"My parents are fans of the opera," Quinn explains. "I suppose I am too, though the... fanciness of actually going can be off-putting."

"Does that mean you're in New York often?"

"Not recently."

"Oh."

Quinn smiles to herself, and begins her retreat. "I should let you get some sleep," she says softly. "Big day tomorrow and all."

"Yeah."

"Goodnight, Rachel."

"Goodnight, Quinn."

And then she's gone, and Rachel isn't any closer to wording her response to Quinn's initial text.
Chapter Five

Rachel hasn't experienced an actual first day of school at Dalton Academy, and it's both what she imagined and decidedly not.

Predictably, Santana doesn't come knocking at her door to do her tie and, at six thirty, she meets the Latina in the dining Hall for breakfast. A select few of the prefects are expected to eat meals with the lower grades - the freshmen and sophomores - just to keep an eye on them, and the higher grades can supervise themselves at seven o'clock.

Or, well, they'll have the teachers with which to deal.

Of course, Quinn is already in the dining hall when the two of them enter. She's hopping from table to table, greeting students and checking their uniforms before they get to inspection during homeroom. Predictably, Quinn's uniform is impeccable, not a single thing out of place, and Rachel can't help but stare.

Santana nudges her forward to find seats. After a sophomore says Grace, they get into line for food and, yeah, a part of Rachel has missed Dalton's food. She's had to abandon her vegan life for school, which isn't the biggest sacrifice. She still maintains some form of vegetarianism when she's in New York with her mother, and she's sporadic about it on the estate - LeRoy's poutine is to die for: those fries and crispy meat pieces and gravy - but all bets are off here.

That isn't to say that Dalton's food is actually nice. They're the best at breakfast and brunch, providing a decent selection of cereals, yoghurts and fruits, as well as hot foods that usually consist of eggs, a type of gravy and some form of poultry. This morning is scrambled eggs, baked beans and bacon. It's a 'Welcome Back' kind of breakfast.

Rachel settles for some fruit salad and a side of yoghurt. Santana fills her plate with hot foods and her bowl with cold ones. Rachel doesn't mean to look but she does, and she sees Quinn eating what looks like half a grapefruit and... is that a protein shake?

"What time does assembly start again?" Santana grumbles around a forkful of eggs.

Rachel ceases staring - no, she's merely observing the girl - and turns to her friend. "We have homeroom from seven-thirty until ten past eight, and then assembly from quarter past until... whenever it's done, I guess." Then she chuckles. "I thought you were the one who's been here longer than I have."

"Which means I'm old, you know," she says. "Memory problems."

She just laughs in response, her eyes automatically sliding back to Quinn. It's turning into a problem, really, and it doesn't take Rachel all that long to figure out that her eyes are constantly searching for Quinn. The reason, she won't allow herself to say out loud, so she tries to catch herself every time. It does help that they're not in the same homeroom and she has to sit right beside her on stage for every assembly.

Okay, maybe that last part doesn't actually help at all.

Quinn is warm sitting beside her, and Rachel has to stay focused and not turn her head to stare. It's really important not to, because everyone in the Great Hall can see them.
Everyone.

So, Rachel sits perfectly still and listens to Mr Schuester address the students with practiced ease. He really is a little too good at it, and she absently wonders how it is he managed to find himself as the Headmaster of such a prestigious school. She doubts she would ever find out from him, but she supposes she could ask around. Santana would probably know a thing or two. That girl knows a lot of random things.

Mr Schuester's speaking voice is... oddly mesmerising. Even when he's discussing the school's Code of Conduct and his expectations for the upcoming year. There's an odd lilt in his voice that Rachel's never heard before, and it's both settling and overwhelming.

She feels... the pressure.

When Mr Schuester begins to address the new leadership positions, Rachel straightens. She shifts slightly, her knee brushing against Quinn's - no, don't you dare react - and pays closer attention.

According to their Headmaster, the new prefects are a Blaine Anderson and Lauren Zizes. They are vastly dissimilar people, and Rachel can't help smiling at their obvious shock. This is their moment, and she claps right along with Quinn, whose eyes are shining with something.

Sure, okay, so maybe Rachel is staring.

No, she's observing.

"They look so happy," she finds herself saying, and only Quinn can hear her over the applause.

"They do," the blonde agrees, her gaze remaining forward. It's all she says, but Rachel finds herself craving more in a truly dangerous way. She thinks she's been here before, sort of, so she should know how to handle whatever is happening inside of her, but she's failing. All she knows is this is going to end badly.

Hell, it's going to start badly.

If it even starts at all.

As far as first days go, Quinn's goes quickly and extremely slowly all at the same time. She can't wait to get back into the thick of things: schoolwork and extracurriculars. She's looking forward to being so busy that she practically crawls into bed exhausted and manages to pass out without overthinking her entire existence or having nightmares.

It's all about the small mercies.

The entire day, Quinn has to direct freshmen to their correct classes. They're adorable in their confusion, wearing ill-fitting uniforms they have yet to grow into and asking endless questions. Quinn likes that they're not shy about that because, well, when she first arrived; she was somebody completely different. It's something she's always done. She reinvents herself at each new school.

Maybe, that way, her parents will finally love her.

Quinn's classes aren't taxing because most of the teachers are doing quick revision and outlining their plans for the semester. She's taking a full complement of subjects, majority of them Advanced Programme, which is dangerous and expected.
She's Quinn Fabray - there's a lot expected of her to accomplish.

It's while she's sitting in her double French lesson that Quinn feels herself relax for the first time. There's something to be found in immersing herself in her schoolwork. It's the one thing she can be sure of and in control. It's up to her, now, and she's able to find solace in that.

Goodness only knows she's been unable to find it anything else.

Rachel tells herself she's not disappointed when she gets to the second last period of her day, and she hasn't seen a sniff of Quinn. They didn't even cross paths during their first break or even during lunch. As far as Rachel knows, Quinn wasn't even in the dining hall. She would have known.

The thing is, Rachel knows it's unlikely she and Quinn will share any classes. They're in different homerooms and Quinn's focus is in the Sciences, while hers is in the Arts. There's very little room for overlap.

Which is why she's wholly surprised and borderline ecstatic when she walks into her AP English Literature class and spies a head of blonde hair sitting in the second row, already scribbling something in her notebook.

Rachel practically freezes, and the student behind her walks right into her back and then grumbles something. It catches Quinn's attention, and she looks up at Rachel and... smiles.

Rachel smiles right back.

Quinn glances nervously to her right side, the empty seat glaringly obvious to both of them. As popular as Quinn is, nobody is willing to approach unless she lets them. So, when she shifts her bag off the empty desk as invitation, Rachel isn't going to say no. She practically lurches forward, which, to her dismay, makes Quinn giggle.

Okay, so, maybe not dismay.

But, something.

"Are you okay?" Quinn asks when Rachel hasn't said anything for a moment, living through her mortification.

"Just peachy."

Quinn angles her body to face her. "Rough first day?"

Rachel forces herself to take a deep breath because Quinn is actually engaging her in conversation. Why is she acting like a petulant child? "One could say that," she says; "how's yours been?"

Quinn shrugs. "It's just a day," she says. "I was a little nervous this morning, though. I was convinced I was going to trip over my own feet when we led onto the stage."

Rachel lets out a small laugh, her eyes sliding up to look at Quinn's face. There's a guarded look about her, but it's obvious she's trying. "You did well this morning."

"I didn't even do anything."

"Because you didn't have to, which really means that you did your job already."

She looks thoughtful. "I suppose that's one way to look at it."
"It's the best way to look at it," she says brightly.

At this, Quinn rolls her eyes. "Sure thing, Berry."

It's in the middle of Mrs Tobias' explanation of why she chose the play *A Streetcar Named Desire* for them to study first that Rachel starts fidgeting. She can't be sure what's gotten over her, but her fingers tap lightly on the desk and her knee bounces. It starts to irritate her rather quickly, so, when Quinn clears her throat, she raises her hand and requests to go to the bathroom. She doesn't actually need it, but she needs a moment.

Once in the bathroom, she stares at herself in the mirror. For so long, she hadn't been able to recognise herself and, now, once again, her reflection looks foreign to her. It's disturbing because *why is this happening right now?*

She's been fine all summer - okay, not really - and Dalton is supposed to be an escape from it all. It's supposed to be her safe place, away from *all of it.*

Rachel spends an obscenely long time trying to convince herself she's okay, which she's definitely not. She's probably going to have to call her father, or even her mother.

Maybe she'll have to call her therapist.

When she returns to class, Quinn sends her a worried look but doesn't ask her anything. Instead, she slides across a sheet of paper that must have been handed out while she was trying not to have a nervous breakdown. The blonde even took notes for her in the margins, and she smiles gratefully.

It's when she spies the little doodled bee in the top right corner that she feels the rumbling inside of her settle.

Slightly.

But, enough.

Owing to there being no extracurriculars running during the first week back, the second Quinn gets out of class, she retires to her room and spends fifteen minutes lying on her carpeted floor and staring at the ceiling. It's been a long day, and she's predictably exhausted. Her brain hasn't had to work that hard since she heard 'Pens Down' at the end of her last exam before the summer.

It feels good, but she's also getting a headache.

Grumbling something inaudible, she rises to her feet once more, changes into workout gear, and goes for a ride. *Anything* to keep her busy, really. Maybe, if she's lucky, she'll run into some other students on the trail.

Even as she thinks it, she realises she doesn't want that at all.

She doesn't want to see *anyone.*

Well, okay, even she can't ignore the fact there *is* one person she wouldn't mind coming across.

First days are just *that.*

First.
Rachel's second day is the same, but also different. As sad as it is, the highlight of her day is getting to sit next to Quinn for a double English lesson. It's one hundred minutes of shared body heat and tiny sighs. Quinn even gets asked to read out loud, and Rachel hangs off every word.

She has... a problem.

A really, really big one.

By Thursday, Rachel knows the problem isn't going to go away by itself. She has to do something. She's actually really irritated with herself because she spent her entire summer actively not thinking about Quinn Fabray and that haunted look in her eyes and, now, just a few days into the new school year, she can barely go a few minutes without wondering which version of herself Quinn is sharing today.

After classes let out, Rachel dumps her things in her room, and then walks down the corridor towards Brittany's room. Without living together, Rachel's sure she's going to be seeing less and less of her blonde friend. They don't share any classes and they're both so busy. Which is why she's not surprised to find Brittany spread out on her floor, stretching. Rachel marches into the room as if it's her own and throws herself onto the bed.

Brittany quirks an eyebrow. "What's eating you?"

Rachel doesn't even know how to respond to that, so she says nothing. Just lies there and takes in the familiarity of her first friend at Dalton. She might be spending more and more time with Santana these days, but Brittany will always be special to her.

Brittany's room is bright, in the shield your eyes sense and Rachel spent a lot of her time squinting whenever she looked across their shared room last year. This year is no different. Brittany's duvet cover is bright pink and orange, swirls and stripes and just very busy. She's a fan of those colours, neon too, and all of her workout gear is an eyesore. Rachel loves her, definitely, but she sometimes gets a headache just from being in Brittany's room.

"Do you mind if I just sit here?" Rachel eventually asks.

"Whatever you want."

They don't talk to each other as Brittany continues with her stretches and works on conditioning. Rachel has seen her abdominal muscles and good God, it should be impossible. Illegal.

Though, she's certain Santana isn't complaining.

She can't stop herself from wondering about Quinn's body. And then she groans because no. She's not doing this to herself. She can't.

Brittany sits up. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Definitely not."

"Do you want to dance about it?"

"Too exhausted."

"Then sing about it."

Rachel giggles softly, appreciating her friend's attempts to help. "In a minute," she says.
Brittany just shrugs, returning to her exercises and leaving her be. She's just going to sit here and not think. Again, she considers calling home and talk to one of her fathers. Or Emily-Anne. She would know how to handle all of this, right?

Somebody has to.

It's when she sees Quinn stalking down the corridor from her position on Brittany's bed that she jumps up, surprising them both. "I'll be right back," she quips before rushing after Quinn. She doesn't even know why she wants to talk to her, but she's not thinking about that as she calls out for the blonde.

"Quinn?"

Her steps faltering, Quinn glances over her shoulder. "Hey," she says quickly, shifting slightly. "Everything okay?"

Rachel blinks. "I was - umm - do you think we could talk?"

Quinn presses her lips together. "Is it important?" she asks, transferring her weight from her left foot to her right.

Rachel frowns, sensing something off. "Are - are you okay?"

Quinn chuckles lightly. "I'm fine," she says. "I just really need to use the toilet."

"Oh," she says, smiling. "Right. Oh, that explains your awkward dancing."

Quinn shakes her head in amusement, her smile in place. There's a beat of silence before she reaches forward and closes her fingers around Rachel's upper forearm, sending her heart into overdrive. "Come to my room," she says casually, as she tugs on Rachel's arm. "We can talk after I've relieved my traitorous bladder."

Rachel merely nods, allowing Quinn to drag her a few feet, and she almost whimpers when the girl releases her hold when she realises Rachel can manage on her own.

Only, she can't, though she can't exactly say that, can she?

When they reach Quinn's room, the blonde barely acknowledges her as she throws open the door and rushes through the room towards her bathroom. Suddenly feeling awkward, Rachel pauses in the doorway. This is the first time she's seen Quinn's room - let alone been inside it.

Breathing deeply, she steps further into the space, trying to take it all in. It's a standard room, really. It's almost... boring. Her bed is neatly made, her duvet cover white with a green patterned embroidery. Her desk is neat, every book and pen in place, and her shelves are stocked with notebooks, work files and novels. They're almost spilling over, and she takes a moment to study the titles of the recreational books.

That is until her eyes settle on the pin-board above Quinn's bed. For the large part, it's empty. As far as she can tell, there's only the blonde's class schedule and... a single picture. Subconsciously, Rachel steps closer to get a better look. It's obviously an old picture, a little faded around the edges, and she absently wonders why it's not being protected by a picture frame.

The picture itself portrays a blonde girl with a toothless smile, perched on a leather couch with an uncomfortable-looking baby sitting in her lap. The girl isn't even looking at the camera, her eyes solely on the baby's face. She's smiling, that much Rachel can tell, and it's obvious she's just taken
with the bundle in her arms.

Rachel can't tell which one, if any, is actually Quinn, but she likes to imagine Quinn was once looked at that way, or that she had enough love to look at someone else that way.

And then her dangerous mind forces her to think she wouldn't mind having Quinn look at her like that.

Rachel nearly jumps out of her skin when the bathroom door opens and Quinn steps out. A slow smirk spreads across her face at the brunette's reaction, but then disappears entirely when she sees what Rachel has been looking at.

Rachel clears her throat. "It's a cute picture," she says.

Quinn just steps towards her desk. "You said you wanted to talk."

If she's a little thrown by Quinn's formality, she doesn't show it. "I just - I was wondering how you were feeling about tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"The Induction Service."

"Oh." Quinn turns around and leans against her desk. "Fine, I guess," she says. "Is there something I'm supposed to feel?"

"I don't know."

God, this is so awkward.

Quinn sighs. "What about you?" she asks. "How are you... feeling?"

"Honestly?"

Quinn nods.

"I'm a little nervous."

"Why?"

"I know it doesn't look that way but I'm a little uncomfortable with... attention, at the moment."

Quinn chuckles in disbelief. "Says the girl who ran for Head Student."

Rachel flushes instantly. "That's... different. Those were my teachers and my peers, but these are parents."

Quinn can hear something very specific in her tone of voice, but she wouldn't be able to figure out what is for the life of her, so she's not going to bother. It's doubtful she would explain if she were to ask, anyway. "Are your parents coming?" she asks.

Rachel hesitates. "Uh, no," she says, forcing calm. "They can't make it."

Quinn eyes her carefully, realising there's an untruth somewhere. "Neither can mine," she says, joining the lie. "We can be each other's parents," she says before she immediately backtracks because that's totally weird, Fabray. "I mean - we can - umm - "
Rachel lets out a laugh that seems to settle them both. This entire conversation feels uncomfortable and forced, as if they're both trying to be people they're not. It would help if they actually did know who they were.

"You know what I mean," Quinn grumbles, rolling her eyes.

"I do," she says, smiling. "We'll support each other."

"Like true Head Students."

Rachel sighs, deflating instantly. "Exactly."

"Britt says something's up with you," Santana says when they walk into the dining hall for breakfast the next morning. Admittedly, Rachel is antsy, but it has very little to do with Quinn, right this moment. It's a miracle, really.

"What?"

"She says you've been acting mopey."

"Mopey?"

"It's her word."

"I'm fine," she lies. When Santana shoots her a disbelieving look, she sighs. "It's nothing, really," she says. "I just kind of picked a fight with my dad because I didn't want him to come to tonight's service, and now I feel like the worst daughter in the world."

Santana smiles in sympathy as they find their seats to say Grace. "Is there a reason you don't want them - umm, him - here?"

Rachel nods, but doesn't elaborate.

Santana sighs. "I still know nothing about you."

Rachel just shrugs, offering nothing.

"Look, I'm sure you have your reasons, whatever, so the guilt will eventually go away, okay?" she says. "It's not the end of the world. It's just a stupid Service anyway. I'm sure lots of parents aren't coming."

If the words are supposed to make her feel better, they don't. She doesn't say so, though, and just gets on with breakfast without thinking too hard about how her fathers reacted to her words. They'll forgive her eventually. They'll forgive her whenever she figures out how to explain herself properly. They love her.

She hates being this person. She hates that there's a part of her that's ashamed. She despises it with every fibre of her being.

And yet.

Santana, thankfully, moves them along once they're settled with their food. Though, where she does move the conversation onto is less than ideal.

"So, random guy with sex hair is eyeing you," she murmurs, sidling up beside Rachel. "Four
"Five bucks says he asks you out before the end of the day," Santana says.

Rachel rolls her eyes. "He is not going to ask me out."

"He so is, and five bucks says it's happening today."

She sighs. "Well, he's going to be disappointed."

"He is?"

"Well, yes," Rachel says, shooting her friend a slightly incredulous look. "You don't actually think I would agree to go out with him if he were ask me, do you?"

Santana shrugs. "Why not?"

Rachel blinks. It's a good question. "I'm - there's - I don't - "

Santana studies her face. "Is it to do with you, or is it to do with him?"

She frowns. "I don't know what that means."

"You look so uncomfortable with the idea of him asking you out," she points out, noting the flush in her friend's cheeks. "Girls would kill for a Jake Gyllenhaal lookalike to leer at them like that."

"Even you?" she asks, raising an eyebrow.

"I'm a special case," she immediately says. "I appreciate both the male and female form and, right now, I'm very into a very specific one."

Rachel giggles in response. "When are you going to ask her out?"

Santana bristles. "We're not here to talk about me. We're talking about you. Why wouldn't you even give the poor boy a chance?"

Rachel licks her lips. "Because I'm not interested."

"Why?"

"I'm just not," she repeats, her voice catching slightly.

Santana's eyes narrow. "Berry, are you not interested in him because you're interested in... someone else?"

Quite suddenly, Rachel can barely catch her breath. "What? Where did you get that from?"

"I'm good at reading people," she answers. "What is it? Has someone else caught your eye?"

Rachel does all she can not to look in Quinn's direction. It would just be... awful to do that because, no, Rachel is not interested in anyone else. She clears her throat. "I just - I - " she struggles before she practically blurts out: "there's someone back home."
Santana gives her friend her full attention. "Is there?"

Rachel swallows nervously, dropping the volume of her voice. She hasn't brought this up to anybody at Dalton - not even Brittany - and she's a little wary of doing so to Santana. It's not as if she thinks the other girl will judge her or anything, but her private life is something she wants to keep as private as possible.

As far as she's concerned, her life outside of Dalton doesn't exist within these walls. It's one of the reasons she decided not to have any of her family come to tonight's induction service.

Rachel doesn't know how she's supposed to explain... Finn. *She* doesn't even understand what they are or whom he is to her. They spent a lot of time together over the summer, but then she went to New York and he didn't bother to contact her.

Again, she finds it difficult to blame him - there's a part of her that believes it's what she deserves for what she put him through - so she really doesn't know where they stand. How is she supposed to tell Santana any of that?

"There is," Rachel finally says. "We dated... *before*, and then we broke up. Obviously."

"Why obviously?" Santana practically growls.

Rachel sighs. "I was in no state to be in a relationship," she says slowly, feeling both defensive and guilty over Finn. He didn't do anything wrong - not really - and she wants to clear that up, but those words don't come out. Because, if she's being completely honest with her self, he *did* do something wrong. Lots of things, actually.

"So, you're not together?" Santana asks, frowning in confusion.

"We are," she hurries to say. "Sort of. I think." It's her turn to frown. "We kind of started something up again when I went home, but we never really defined it. It's... complicated."

Santana nods in thought, and Rachel can only imagine what's going through her head. "It *does* sound complicated."

Really, Santana has no idea.

Quinn feels awkward and out of place at the head of the table in the boardroom. She's rehearsed what she wants to say several times, and yet she still feels unprepared. All she can hope now is that it'll get easier the more time passes.

She clears her throat to get their attention. "Good afternoon, everyone," she says, ignoring the plate of food just to her left. It's wrapped in clingfilm, looking as appetising as leading this meeting makes her feel. "Welcome to our first meeting of the year."

Thankfully, she gets a tableful of answering grins, and it helps settle a few of her traitorous nerves.

The first thing she does is verbally congratulate them on the work they've been doing. She appreciates the updates they send to the *WhatsApp* group, which she knows will dwindle in frequency as the year progresses. They discuss the upcoming induction service, confirming times and venues.

And then they finally discuss the portfolios. Quinn and Rachel won't belong to any specific one, but they will be overseeing all of them. It sounds like a lot of work but Quinn has plans to make it...
as easy and pain-free for all of them as possible.

"So, I did receive a few emails these past few days regarding chosen portfolios, and I was able to make assignments accordingly," Quinn says. "I'm hoping there won't be any disputes because I did say to let me know if you have preferences, so, at the moment, the portfolios that are complete are Spirit, Birthdays, Farewells and Community Service." She looks down at the page in front of her. "I thought maybe we could just go through the list, and you can throw your name in when you want to." It's a suggestion that receives collective nodding.

The group learns that Kurt is already part of the Spirit portfolio with Blaine, and he's also part of three members working on Community Service, namely Artie Abrams and Suzy Pepper. Blaine also takes on the role of Cultural Liaison, and Quinn doesn't miss the narrowing of Rachel's eyes when that's decided. She has to hide her smile, because she's just coming to learn that Rachel Berry is heavily involved in the Arts.

Unsurprisingly, Santana opts to be on the Discipline portfolio with David Karofsky and Robert Cresswell. Joe Hart raises his hand to spearhead the Litter portfolio with a girl, Tracey Smith. The Tuckshop will be handled by Lauren and Matt Rutherford, who will also act as the Sport Liaison. Shane Tinsley and Rick Nelson will deal mainly with Lost Property and Farewell. Candice Lewis and Kimberley Lavigne are in charge of the Environmental and the Health Awareness portfolios, and Christopher Lin will act as the Senior Year Liaison.

By the end of the meeting, Quinn is the only one who hasn't eaten her lunch, so, when she dismisses them, she hangs back.

So does Rachel.

It's a little uncomfortable in the beginning because it's obvious Quinn doesn't really know what Rachel is doing there. Well, they're in the same boat, at least. As expected, it's the brunette who breaks the silence, talking to ease her own discomfort.

"That went well, didn't it?" Rachel questions, smiling encouragingly.

"It did," Quinn agrees after she's swallowed a mouthful of food. "I actually wanted to discuss something with you."

"Oh?"

"So, now that the portfolios are done, we can hand out the written expectations of each portfolio. I was thinking we could make each prefect a special, umm, book with their names and portfolios and expectations all inside. It can also serve as their prefect notebook for all these meetings, you know."

Rachel nods, believing she's following. "I think that's a great idea."

"Are you just saying that?"

"Oh, Quinn," she murmurs. "I think you'll come to find that I very rarely just say things."

"Dad, I'd like you to meet Quinn Fabray," Kurt says, guiding Quinn towards a man without actually touching her. Just in the short time she's allowed him to get to know her; he's learned that she's not much of a fan of being touched, so he's being careful. "She's our Head Student."

Burt Hummel, quite predictably, smiles widely and sticks out his hand. "Burt," he says.
Quinn can't resist returning his smile. "It's nice to meet you, Sir," she says, shaking his hand. "Kurt's told me a lot about you."

"Has he, now?" Burt questions, eyeing his son, who's starting to blush. "What's he been saying, huh?"

Before Quinn can respond, Rachel taps her on the shoulder and she spins to face the brunette, startling. "Sorry," Rachel says, eyes widening at Quinn's startled expression; "but they want us inside."

Quinn merely nods, waiting a moment for her heart to stop beating so quickly. "We'll be right there," she says, and then smiles politely at Burt. "It's about to start, so we should probably find our seats."

"Of course," Burt says, placing a hand on his son's shoulder. "I'll see you after, okay?"

"Clap really loudly," Kurt teases, and then follows after Quinn. He manages to fall into step beside her, and he immediately senses her tension. She carries a lot of it in her shoulders and neck, and he wonders if she manages to get any sleep at all.

Still, he's not going to say anything because he knows it'll just make it worse. Even though they've just started this unlikely friendship, he can tell she's been on edge all day. Earlier, he suspected it was nerves, but he knows it's something else now.

When they reach their pew, Quinn halts and allows him to enter. She and Rachel are going to be sitting on the end, closest to the aisle, in order to be the two prefects closest to the podium when they lead out. Quinn even has to give a short speech and an 'I will' before they read out the Mission Statement.

Whoever said Dalton wasn't about tradition… lied.

When Rachel slips into the pew, she gives Quinn a beaming smile that the blonde can barely return. It makes Rachel frown and, once Quinn is seated beside her, she leans into her and drops the volume of her voice. "Are you okay?"

There's an unwelcome fluttering in her stomach, but Quinn still manages to nod. "Just a little nervous," she answers.

"Are you panicking?"

"No," she snaps, which makes them both flinch. "Sorry," she immediately says, hanging her head. "But, really, I'm not panicking. I'm fine."

Rachel doesn't look convinced but she doesn't question her further. Instead, as carefully as she can, she touches the backs of her fingers to Quinn's hand resting on her own thigh, and she doesn't mistake the sharp intake of breath from the blonde. It's the first time Rachel's actually initiated touching her skin and it sets her beating heart into overdrive.

As shocking as it is to both of them, it's enough. Because, when Quinn rises and steps into position, she feels... strong and confident.

Until she looks out into the pews and sees a pair of faces that completely throws her. She stumbles over her feet before she stumbles over her words, the panic rising from deep within her abdomen. Why are they here? It can only be something bad.
Somehow, by some miracle, she survives the service, managing to force out her speech, her 'I will,' and her Mission Statement. The applause at the end should bring her a sense of relief, but all she's feeling is dread. Her palms are clammy and her heart is racing.

Why?

Why are her parents here?

---

Just when Rachel thinks she's managed to settle Quinn, the blonde gets infinitely worse. She practically trips over herself, which is so unlike her, and she's trembling as she stands there and says words. Rachel tries to shield her as best she can; tries to give her some form of support.

Whether Rachel helps or not, Quinn gets through it. They all do.

And then Quinn practically disappears.

Rachel isn't afforded much time to dwell on the missing blonde because Santana drags her into the courtyard to indulge in refreshments and to introduce her to her parents. Of course, she's deathly nervous about it because she's come to assume that everyone just knows her history.

But, no. Maribel and Julio Lopez are all happy smiles and complimentary words. Apparently, Santana told them quite a bit about her over the summer, and Rachel finds it amusing that the Latina blushes.

And then she practically turns into a tomato when Brittany joins them.

They chat and mingle and eat and drink, and when Santana freezes; they all notice. Rachel follows her line of sight to where Quinn has just entered the courtyard, looking stiff and passive. It's a new look, and Rachel knows she doesn't like it.

"Oh, _fuck_," Santana suddenly says, and her mother immediately admonishes her, though she's not paying attention. "No, no, no."

Rachel watches Quinn as she walks towards Mr Schuester, with a man and woman trailing behind her. A man and woman who, combined, probably produced Quinn Fabray. Her parents.

Russell Fabray is tall and broad, a hard look in his eyes, as if he's loved and lost in all the worst ways. The woman, his wife Judy, looks exhausted. It's a look Rachel has seen on Quinn before. They're both smartly dressed, heads held high and Rachel instantly hates them.

Santana's nails dig into Rachel's forearm. "What are they doing here?" she asks nobody in particular.

Rachel clears her throat. "She mentioned they _weren't_ coming."

Santana's eyes snap towards her. "They just showed up?"

"It looks that way."

Santana grows pale. "Fuck."

"Santana!" her mother hisses, and she's, once again, ignored.

Somehow, by some miracle, they manage to get back to conversation, but it's obvious Santana is still on edge and, frankly, so is Rachel. From the looks of things, Quinn is quiet and timid,
speaking only when spoken to. It's unsettling to see because this isn't Quinn. It's not.

When Quinn's parents leave, she walks them out and doesn't return. Rachel can practically feel the tension rolling off the Latina, and the worry she feels is almost palpable. She can practically taste it.

"Go," Santana suddenly says.

"What?"

"You have to go," Santana says, meeting Rachel's gaze. "Please, Berry. Go after her. Now."

There's a certain desperation in Santana's voice that has Rachel nodding dumbly, already stepping back. After a beat, she spins and rushes from the courtyard, knowing that she needs to find Quinn immediately. Her own panic sets in and she feels something dark settle over her as she forces herself to run.

She has to find Quinn.

Now.

Rachel almost bursts out laughing - or crying - when she gets to Quinn's room and finds the blonde sitting on the edge of her bed, her skirt lifted to reveal her pale thighs and her fingernails digging harshly into her smooth skin.

She's marking herself, leaving angry red lines.

She's drawing blood.

It looks like it hurts, and Rachel realises belatedly that that's the point.

Still, Rachel rushes forward and drops to her knees in front of her, though she doesn't even seem to notice Rachel's presence. "Quinn?" she says. "Quinn? Stop it. You have to stop. You're hurting yourself."

The blonde practically snaps to attention, her fingers stopping their rough path along what is perfection to the brunette. "Rachel," she says, sounding strangled.

"Quinn," she breathes, seeing the utter devastation on the girl's face.

"I keep doing everything wrong," she says, and she sounds broken. "Even when I do it right, it's still wrong. I just - I can't get it right."

Rachel has no idea what to say to her, her mind spinning and her heart aching for this lost, little girl.

For the longest time, Quinn just stares at her, slowly coming back to herself. It's sudden when it happens, and she straightens immediately, making Rachel flinch. She covers her thighs, hiding the evidence of her... Anger, turmoil, anguish, something.

She smooths out her skirt and slowly rises to her feet.

When Rachel sees her walk towards her closet and start removing her running gear, Rachel frowns. It's almost ten o'clock. "What are you doing?" she asks, somewhat unnecessarily.

Quinn suddenly bristles at Rachel's tone, a scowl on her face. "What does it look like I'm doing,
"genius?"

She frowns. "What's wrong?"

Quinn's eyes flash dangerously. "Nothing is wrong."

"That's a lie."

"I don't care."

Rachel sighs. "Quinn," she murmurs. "Let me help."

Quinn just laughs humourlessly. "Don't you see, Berry?" she says darkly. "You can't help me. Nobody can."

There's a moment, Rachel has realised, when life kind of just loses its sparkle. If she's being entirely honest with herself, she would say it happened for her a long time ago. There's only so much a person can endure before the world loses its colour.

If Rachel can go the rest of her life without having to see that haunted look in Quinn's eyes again; she would live a great one.

When Quinn leaves on her run, Rachel doesn't bother to return to the courtyard, and she figures the evening is over when she hears sounds and movement in the corridors. She's not surprised when Santana comes to her room, leaves the door open and sits beside her on her bed. The two of them just sit, staring determinedly at the only door they can see from their positions.

Rachel has so many questions, but she holds her tongue. They're waiting for Quinn in silence.

"We'll give her another fifteen minutes," Santana says quietly.

Quinn moves into view thirteen minutes later, her chest heaving and her eyes withdrawn. If she notices the two brunettes in Rachel's bedroom, she gives no indication to it. Instead, she slips into her room and closes the door, and Rachel feels the tension in her body relax minutely.

"What was that?" Rachel asks in whispered disbelief.

Santana swallows audibly. "That, Berry, was Quinn Fabray."
Chapter Six

If Rachel expects anything to be different about Quinn following the confusion that was Friday night; she's severely mistaken. Maybe Quinn is a better actor than Rachel initially gives her credit for, but it's as if nothing is wrong.

Unless, well, you're looking close enough.

There's something in the way Quinn won't meet her gaze or even talk directly to her. Quinn refuses to be alone with her, as if she's afraid Rachel is going to bring it up. Which, in hindsight, she definitely will. Rachel just has a bit more tact than questioning the haunted girl amongst their peers. There was a time when she probably would have just gone for it, but she's grown a lot since then.

She was forced to.

They clash a lot.

Quinn says things, and Rachel says other things.

Rachel isn't sure why she pushes so hard. She acknowledges that Quinn asked her to; to keep challenging her and to ensure she's doing a good job. The thing is that Quinn is doing a brilliant job. It's almost sickening how good she is at being Head Student, and Rachel hates her a little bit for it because she knows Quinn isn't okay.

She knows, and the girl is refusing to talk to her about it. It irritates and infuriates her, and that's why she thinks she needles and pokes as much as she does.

Rachel wants to get a rise out of Quinn. She wants them to fight and attack and talk. It's not healthy, what Quinn's doing, and Rachel isn't sure how she's supposed to help her when Quinn blatantly avoids helping herself. Rachel can barely discuss it with Santana because both girls, like Quinn, are actively not bringing it up to each other. It's just poor form to bring something like this into normal conversation, and Rachel won't do it, but she needs Santana to.

The Latina doesn't.

It's the third week of school when Rachel gets any insight into what's actually going on with Quinn. It comes in the form of Kurt, who Quinn has taken to despite her desire to keep everyone at arm's length.

Rachel has just arrived at her bedroom door after popping out to the bathroom when she hears Kurt knocking on Quinn's. Predictably, Quinn doesn't answer the door because, well, she's not in. Rachel knows this because, whether consciously or not, she's learned Quinn's schedule.

So, breathing a sigh, she crosses the large corridor towards him. "She's out on a run," she tells him, and he startles, spinning around. "She won't be back for at least another twenty minutes."

"Oh," he says, glancing down at his phone in his hand. "No wonder she's not picking up."
Rachel presses her lips together. "Well, she doesn't actually take her phone out with her," she says, unable to keep her irritation out of her voice. He definitely notices, and raises his eyebrows in question. "Topic of contention between us."

"There seems to be a lot of those," he mutters, and the sides of her mouth tilt upwards. "Twenty minutes, you said?"

"Around about," she replies with a smile. "Is it a Head Student thing? Perhaps I could help?"

Kurt shakes his head, sighing. "It's more of an 'I'm-freaking-out-about-my-Calculus-test-tomorrow' thing," he says.

She grimaces in understanding. She's writing the same test first thing in the morning, and she's spent more time freaking out about it than actually preparing. Anything to do with Math has never been her strong point, but Kurt just looks dejected. "I - I could still help," she offers. "I mean, I'm nowhere as good as Quinn - " because, let's face it, nobody is " - but I do have practice questions and answers I managed to get from last year."

Kurt lets out a breath of relief. "Would you?"

She nods.

"Sure," she says. "We can work in, umm - "

"The library," he offers, knowing that she can't offer up her own room.

For whatever convoluted reason, boys aren't allowed to enter girls' rooms, but the reverse doesn't apply. It's incredibly sexist, and the Rachel of old definitely would have put up a fight, but not anymore.

She doesn't particularly want boys in her bedroom, even ones as seemingly harmful as Kurt Hummel.

"Rec Room?" he continues. "My room?"

"Perhaps your room is best," she says, keeping her voice steady. Kurt is kind, she knows that. "That way, when Quinn returns, she'll easily find us."

He nods. "Sounds like a plan," he says, as he shoots off a text to Quinn, probably telling her of their plans. Rachel uses the opportunity to go back to her room and gather her own books for the impromptu study session. The only people she's studied with at Dalton are Brittany and Santana. Rachel doesn't really like groups, but she does find comfort in sitting beside someone else who is studying as intensely as she is.

Kurt waits outside and, when she's ready, he leads her to his room, absently discussing how much he actually hates Calculus because, seriously, what is he supposed to do with it in his future career. It's the first time she realises she doesn't know all that much about him. She thinks Dalton keeps them so busy to stop them from getting up to mischief, but it also makes it rather difficult to get to know one another.

Well, she's going to try.

"What do you want to do?" she asks once they reach his room. He holds off on a response as he opens the door and, from the look of the room, she's suddenly sure she asked a stupid question. "Oh."
"This is amazing," she finds herself saying.

Kurt blushes slightly, and then closes the door behind him. Rachel feels a flare of panic, but she manages to squash it down when he doesn't move towards her. Instead, he walks to his desk and lifts his Calculus textbook into his arms. "Share the desk, or the floor?"

There's something to be said about the fact he doesn't suggest the bed, and she appreciates it, even if it makes her feel wary. Can he tell she's uncomfortable?

Breathing a sigh, she points to the floor.

Kurt chuckles.

"What?"

"Quinn prefers the floor as well," he says, shaking his head in amusement. "I swear, the number of times I've found her sprawled out on the carpet; you'd think she lived there."

There's a part of Rachel that both hates and loves hearing about Quinn. Of course, she wants to learn all she can about the blonde, but she just wishes she could learn from the source herself. She wishes desperately that Quinn would just speak to her, confide in her, let her help. "The carpet is comfortable," she eventually says as she finds an empty spot and settles down.

Kurt agrees. "It's even better when they turn on the underfloor heating," he says. "I swear, I've been known to drag my duvet off my bed and just sleep on the floor."

Rachel giggles.

"I'll suffer through a stiff back for warmth any day," he adds as he too settles on the floor opposite her. He's facing her, his body open to her to show he means no harm. Whether it's conscious or not, she appreciates it.

It's the first time she accepts that she could become really good friends with him.

"You have no idea what you're doing, do you?"

Rachel hums, her forehead creased in a thoughtful frown. "I'm going to figure it out," she declares. She's lying on her stomach now, propped up on her elbows with her feet swinging through the air. They're working on a past paper and they're... struggling.

"I thought you said you were good at Calculus," he grumbles.

"I distinctly remember not saying that," she counters. "I said I could help, and I intend to do so."

He sighs, leaning back and resting his weight on his palms as he stretches his legs out in front of him. He expects Quinn to come find them soon so he's less irritated with his own inability to figure out the problem than he should be. Quinn will know what to do, and she'll know exactly how to explain it to him in a way he'll immediately understand. She's good at that, being patient and
careful with her words.

Well, when she's not.

"You two had another fight today, didn't you?" Kurt suddenly says, startling Rachel.

She looks at him, immediately knowing about whom he's talking, but she still fakes not understanding. "Excuse me?"

He resists the urge to roll his eyes. "You and Quinn," he says. "You fought."

"We did."

"Why?"

"It was stupid," she dismisses.

"Oh, I'm sure of that," he says, chuckling. "Most of your fights generally are."

Rachel doesn't respond because she gets the feeling there's something else more important that he wants to discuss with her, so she waits, and she's not disappointed.

"Does - does she talk to you?" he asks, his voice quiet, as if he's worried Quinn will somehow hear him.

"What do you mean?"

Kurt straightens his spine, bringing his legs towards him and clutching his knees against his chest. "I know you know what I'm talking about, Rachel," he says. "There's something she's constantly fighting, and she never talks to me about it. All she does is discuss school and other students. She goes on runs all the time, and - " his voice catches. "It's in her eyes, isn't it?"

Rachel's feet stop swinging, and her breathing slows. "It is, yeah."

"She's deeply unhappy."

"She is, yeah."

Kurt breathes out slowly. "But, when you two fight, she comes alive."

Rachel chuckles darkly. "We do what we have to."

"All I want to do is help her," he says. "I want to make it better but I don't know how to do that when she won't even talk to me."

"She will," Rachel says. "I don't know when or how or why, but she will."

"I just hate to think about what might have to happen for her to resort to that."

And, well, he's not the only one.

When the knock on the door comes, Rachel instantly tenses, and then relaxes when Quinn opens the door without waiting for a response. If she's surprised to see Rachel on Kurt's floor, she doesn't show it. In fact, she grins at them both as she moves into the room, her hair slightly damp and her body hidden by Dalton sweatpants and a pale blue t-shirt.
"Well, aren't you two a sight?" she says, dropping onto the carpet on Rachel's left side. "Panicking about tomorrow?"

Kurt shoots her a glare. "Not all of us are AP geniuses," he grumbles, and Quinn's grin grows. "Stop that."

Quinn chuckles because she can't help it. "What can I do to help?" she asks, though her eyes remain on Kurt. She doesn't trust herself to look at Rachel, even if she desperately wants to.

Kurt shifts closer but not close enough to make her uncomfortable. How he ended up in a study session with two girls who clearly have proximity issues, he'll never know. At least, he sort of understands Rachel's - anyone who saw those flyers would - but Quinn is still a mystery to him. He's convinced she always will be, and maybe that's okay.

As expected, Quinn figures out the problem easily and the three of them settle in to complete the paper. Quinn ends up borrowing one of Rachel's mechanical pencils and she keeps it tucked behind her ear whenever she's not using it, hidden in blonde locks. Rachel finds herself staring at it a little too often, and she's just glad Quinn and Kurt are too preoccupied with the work they're doing to notice. She wouldn't even know how to explain her observation of the perfect curve of Quinn's ear.

Rachel forces herself to snap out of it.

Seriously.

You have a test to study for.

When Quinn lets out her first yawn, Rachel has to force herself not to stupidly blurt out how adorable she is. She bites her tongue as the blonde stretches, her arms high in the air and her sock-covered toes curling. Rachel could probably stare at her forever.

"Time for bed?" Kurt questions.

Quinn's eyes are slightly glassy when she nods her head. It's doubtful she's going to get much sleep, but she's still going to try. "I think so. Any last questions?"

"Just one," Rachel says, sliding her exercise book towards Quinn.

Quinn leans forward, absently resting her elbows on the tops of her thighs... and winces. It's a minimal reaction but Rachel sees it. She sees it and she just knows. Quinn's eyes widen and she shifts awkwardly.

Rachel takes her book back. "Actually, you know what, it's okay," she says. "It's getting late, anyway. If I don't know it by now, it's unlikely I'll figure it out anyway."

Quinn chuckles nervously. "Yeah," she says, rising to her feet. "Good luck tomorrow, guys. Goodnight."

"Quinn!" Rachel suddenly calls out. "Wait, will you? Let me walk you back to your room."

There isn't even a hint of a question in her voice, and Quinn just isn't in the mood to fight with her. Not over this, whatever it is, and particularly not in front of Kurt.

So, instead, she lingers while Rachel packs up her things and also gets up. They both say another goodnight to Kurt and then make the short walk through the corridors towards their rooms in
silence. Quinn's fingers fidget as she waits for the inquisition that's surely to come.

Quinn is able to get to her room, open the door and actually get inside by the time Rachel says something.

Well, she *does* something.

Before Quinn can even say goodnight, Rachel is charging into her room after her and closing the door behind them. She keeps moving, forcing Quinn to step back with every stride forward. When the backs of her legs hit her bed, Quinn drops down, and Rachel immediately gets onto her knees in front of her.

"Are you going to show me, or am I going to have to see for myself?"


"Show me."

"No."

Rachel sighs. "Quinn, please."

She shakes her head. "I can't do that. I can't."

"You can," she presses. "It's just me, okay? Let me see. Please."

Quinn closes her eyes as she bites the inside of her cheek until she draws blood. She doesn't give a verbal response; just nods.

Rachel takes the cue and reaches for the waistband of Quinn's sweatpants. A tiny part of her brain registers how sexual this *could* be, but her eyes are laser-focused on seeing what she *knows* is there. Slowly, she pulls down, and Quinn lifts herself up to allow her to slide the pants down.

Even though Rachel knows what's coming, she can't help the gasp she lets out at the sight of darkly bruised skin and ugly red streaks marring the perfect flesh of the uppermost part of her thighs. "Oh, Quinn," she chokes out.

Quinn keeps her eyes closed, refusing to acknowledge anything about this moment.

With the gentlest fingers, Rachel traces the lines. "I'm sorry," she whispers, unsure what she's even apologising for. "I'm so sorry you hurt the way you do." All she wants to do is make it better, but she doesn't know how. "Don't move," she says, and then gets up. She walks dazedly across the large corridor to her own bedroom to get her personal first aid kit and a stress ball. She's unsure if the latter is for her or Quinn.

When she gets back to the room, Quinn is curled into a ball on her side, her body trembling, and Rachel chokes back a sob. "Quinn," she immediately says. "Stretch out for me, okay? I need to make sure these are clean. Can you do that?"

It takes a bit of coaxing but Quinn eventually relents, and Rachel places the stress ball in her hand. As carefully as she can, Rachel wets a cotton ball with disinfectant and carefully wipes at the marks on Quinn's thighs.

And on her stomach.

It's an accident that she sees them at all, Quinn's t-shirt riding up, and she lets out another gasp at
the sight of the bruises. She imagines Quinn must pinch and punch herself, and she's still too terrified to attempt to figure out why.

When she's finished, Rachel redresses her and covers her in a light blanket. She stays kneeling at the edge of the bed as Quinn stares at her with those same haunted eyes that have been giving her nightmares. "You have to stop," she says.

"I know."

"I know you know," she murmurs. "You need to stop."

"I'm trying."

Rachel closes her eyes, her hand automatically reaching out to touch Quinn's cheek. "Get some sleep," she says. "We'll talk more in the morning."

They don't.

It isn't as if Rachel doesn't try.

She does.

Every day.

It's a feat in itself to get Quinn alone and, even then, the blonde acts aloof and guarded. She makes it very clear to Rachel that she doesn't want to talk about it.

At all.

And Rachel would do well to accept that.

She doesn't.

She can't.

She's determined to talk to Quinn, and the blonde is determined not to.

So, they fight.

Endlessly.

It goes on and on, Rachel pushing and Quinn pushing right back.

Both of them hurting.

"Why do you look like you haven't slept in five hundred days?" Santana asks, dropping into the seat beside her friend at breakfast in the dining hall.

Rachel rubs her eyes of sleep, her heart jumping. "Probably because I haven't."

"What's up with you?"
"Oh, so many things," she mutters, her eyes automatically flicking Quinn's way. She can't even be mad at her because, frankly, Rachel believes she too would have shut down the 'conversation' the way Quinn has been able to do so effectively. Then: "Do I actually have to drag you to choir practice today or are you going to come willingly?"

Santana scoffs. "I still don't know why you signed me up for that shit," she says, showing her irritation. "I can't even sing."

"Liar," she accuses. "Just come to one practice, okay? It's fun."

"I highly doubt that."

"Please," she says, bat[ting her tired eyelashes. "If you don't like it, you can quit."

She groans, as if this is a huge self-sacrifice. "If I must," she says; "and don't think I'm going to forget you said that."

"I won't," she says.

"Why the sudden interest in the choir anyway?" Santana asks. "If I recall correctly, you weren't in it last year."

Rachel presses her lips together, trying to determine the best way to explain herself. "I stopped singing," she eventually says. "After... everything that happened, I stopped singing, and I spent part of the summer trying to get back to it. It's something I love, and I hated that it was something else that was taken away from me."

Santana merely nods.

"I love to sing," she says. "And dance. I've always loved it, and I'm allowing myself to enjoy it again. Dalton has a great Cultural program, and I have great, great plans."

Santana eyes her thoughtfully. "You got really menacing there, for a second," she says, hit, once more, by the feeling that she doesn't know Rachel at all.

"Plans, Santana," she almost sings. "I have so many plans."

In terms of extracurriculars, Rachel's are heavily culturally-based. At Dalton, however, she has to participate in at least two sessions of physical activity a week, which she easily does by signing up for a modern dance class. It's one of the perks she was never afforded at her school in Wallingford, and also one of the reasons she even picked this one.

She doesn't really think about any of the other reasons.

On Mondays, Rachel sings with the large school choir. It consists of both boys and girls, all their voices blending together at the hands of their choir director, Jesse St James. He's young and obviously talented, and it's no secret to any of them that he likes Rachel's voice. It's big and bold and smooth and caressing, and it's easy to fall in love with it.

It's one of the reasons she's fast-tracked to join the school's elite show choir, The ConChords. It's a relatively small group of only eighteen students, consisting of the best singers in the school. And, now that Rachel has finally let herself accept her talent and actually sing again, she's an integral part of Jesse's plans for National Show Choir domination.
It just so happens he's a part of hers, as well.

Quinn is also in the choir. She joined as a freshman, back when she was still wet behind the ears and she was convinced she understood the world. It was fun for her, and a way for her to meet the school's cultural requirements without having to do too much. She's just a voice in the background, blending and harmonising.

Choir is choir, and she's obligated to attend the practices every Monday after school.

That's what it is.

An obligation.

Until, Rachel Berry, that is.

Quinn knows for a fact the girl wasn't in the choir last year. In fact, she's sure Rachel did everything she could to stay under the radar until she made the decision to run for Head Student. Quinn didn't even know she could sing, so, when Jesse invites her to sing the solo for the ensemble piece they're working on; Quinn is convinced she dies a little.

Rachel's voice steals something from her.

That's what she is.

Rachel Berry is a thief, just taking and taking: her breath, her thoughts, and now a piece of her soul.

While Rachel moves onto ConChords' practice after Jesse dismisses the large choir, Quinn ducks into the music centre for her piano lesson with her teacher, Dr Baron. The woman is old and charismatic, constantly pushing Quinn to be better and talking about her granddaughter on a loop.

Quinn genuinely likes the woman because Dr Baron makes it easy. She's easy-going, open and true, and it's a combination that's always made Quinn wary. In the type of life she lives, it's difficult to take anyone at face value, but Dr Baron is different. She doesn't know Quinn, and the blonde suspects that makes all the difference in the world.

"Quinn?"

She freezes mid-step, schools her features and turns to look at Rachel. "Hey," she says; "what's up?"

Without spooking the blonde, she takes a slow step forward. "I just wanted to say thank you."

Quinn frowns. "For what?"

"All your help for that Calculus test," she says. "I got my mark back. Apparently, I'm not as hopeless as I initially feared."

At the sound of that, Quinn's mouth tilts upwards into an easy smile. "I'm glad to hear that," she says, relaxing slightly. "And, you're welcome. I'm glad I could help."

"You're actually a really good tutor."

Quinn arches an eyebrow. "Try not to sound so surprised," she comments.
Rachel instantly flushes. "No, I just mean - uh - I don't even know what I mean." She sighs. "You're just good at it," she finishes lamely.

"Thank you."

Rachel knows she shouldn't push. They're having their first, easy conversation since that night a little over two weeks ago, and she would do well to enjoy this moment. But, alas, Rachel is Rachel and she doesn't heed her own warning.

All she has to say is 'Quinn' in that voice, and the ease of Quinn's demeanor instantly vanishes. She tenses, her face twisting into something passive, and she begins her escape

"I should go," Quinn immediately says, and Rachel wants to kick herself.

Rachel steps forward. "Okay," she says; "I know you don't want to talk about it, and I'm definitely not going to force you, but answer me this: have you stopped?"

Quinn's eyes narrow, growing noticeably harder.

"Tell me you've stopped," Rachel forces out, her hands twitching at her sides to stop herself from reaching out. Now that she knows what Quinn's skin feels like under her fingertips, close proximity is exponentially more dangerous, because all she wants to do is touch. "Please."

Quinn falters at the sincerity in her voice. "I have stopped," she says, almost conspiratorially.

Rachel can see the truth in her eyes, but there's something else there, as well. She might have stopped this, but that isn't to say she hasn't found other ways to hurt herself.

Sometimes, people are entirely too good at that.

Rachel would know and, for some reason, she just knows Quinn is an expert.

"Why do you care so much?" Quinn suddenly asks, surprising them both.

"I just do."

"But, why?"

Rachel sighs. "I don't know what to tell you," she confesses, somewhat truthfully. "It's for any number of reasons that you may or may not believe, but I do care, Quinn, and I don't want to see you in pain."

Quinn swallows audibly. "Who are you?"

"Still don't know anything about me, do you?"

"I'm trying," she replies, which they both know isn't a response to Rachel's question.

And, the thing is, she definitely is trying, and Rachel can't help feeling slightly smug that maybe, somehow, in her little fantasy, that, one day, Quinn won't have to try so hard anymore.

Quinn and Rachel's biggest fight occurs a little over a week before the Halloween dance. It happens during a class meeting while they're discussing the general theme for the event, and the suggestions are Zombie Apocalypse, Ancient Egypt and Frankenstein's Lair. If Quinn is being honest, she's not keen on any of them. She thinks the same part of her that gets nauseous on planes
makes her queasy in front of body parts and general gore, even if she knows it's all fake.

They're just supposed to pick a theme and finalise the members of the committee, so they can get started on preparations. If she can help it, she'll be involved as little as possible, just acting in the capacity of overseer.

Rachel stands next to Quinn, just a step behind her, as she addresses their peers in the auditorium. It's the end of a long day, and she's irritable and exhausted. It's a heady combination, and she can feel something sparking as she stands and listens to Quinn run this meeting in that infuriatingly efficient way she always does. She's always so put together, hiding who she is, and it annoys Rachel to no end.

Rachel doesn't know how or why it even starts, but it does. She thinks she makes a comment about Quinn's controlling nature under her breath that Quinn must hear because she stops speaking mid-word. Her eyes flick Rachel's way for a moment, before she clears her throat and continues to go over the themes. They're planning on putting it to a vote.

In the end, they decide on Zombie Apocalypse, which the class seems excited about. Quinn will bear it all, as long she can get the committee of ten people on board. The list fills up quickly, and she's forced to add extra slots to the team, because how much can it hurt to have more people involved? Kurt and Blaine, as part of the Spirit portfolio, are taking point, and she hands over the meeting to them, stepping back.

Closer to Rachel.

For a moment, Quinn isn't sure what to say. She thinks it would do them well to ignore the comment about control completely, but it's just hanging in the air between them and Quinn feels off-balance.

"Do you know we have a bunker on our property in case there is a Zombie Apocalypse?" Rachel suddenly says, and Quinn turns incredulous eyes on her. "Oh, we're very prepared."

Quinn's eyes narrow. "And you call me the anal one," she says, letting her irritation show.

Rachel sighs. "Yeah, about that," she says, intending to apologise... and then just not doing it. She knows Quinn overcorrects to make up for some insecurity she has based on who she is, and Rachel, well, she pushes.

And, true to form, Quinn pushes right back, saying hurtful words she won't even remember saying... right in front of their entire grade.

Neither of them seems to care and it quickly explodes into something ugly; something neither of them is particularly proud of. They're quick, well-placed jabs that end with Rachel calling Quinn a heartless, stuck-up bitch who has too many control issues to have any real friends. It's a low blow and Quinn looks particularly stricken by the words, and the guilt immediately slams into Rachel.

The brunette blinks rapidly, the apology on the tip of her tongue.

Quinn steps back, schooling her features. She ignores the gaping mouths and wide eyes of her peers and focuses, instead, on Kurt. "Can you handle this?" she asks, her tone clipped.

Swallowing audibly, he just nods.

And then Quinn walks out, her head high. It's not that she's fleeing or escaping. She's merely walking out, and then all eyes are on Rachel. She sighs.
Well, of course.

She waits patiently as Kurt sees out the rest of the meeting, and then she flees. Her mind is spinning and she's exhausted. They've never fought that way before. She's never attacked Quinn like that, and she wants to kick herself for losing patience and her cool like that.

It's the kind of fight that, when it finally catches up to Rachel and she gets to the safety of her room, makes her burst into tears.

It's just... everything.

She hasn't been getting enough sleep. Between her extracurriculars and schoolwork and the nightmares, she's running on minimal amount of rest, and she's sure Quinn isn't faring any better if the dark circles under her eyes are anything to go by.

Still.

This fight hurts in ways the others never have because, this time, it wasn't even a little bit about the challenge or pushing her to be better. No, it's none of that at all. In fact, it probably isn't even about Quinn in any way.

It's about Rachel.

"Miss Fabray, please come in."

Quinn swallows nervously, her heart stuttering in her chest. "You wanted to see me, Sir."

Mr Schuester looks up from the document in front of him and offers her a warm smile as she settles into a chair opposite him. "I believe we have a little something to discuss," he says, his voice gentle.

Almost as if it's a habit, Quinn glances over her shoulder at the door to his office... that is still open. Okay. She's fine. "Are you referring to the disagreement I had with Rachel?" she asks carefully.

"I am."

Quinn deflates slightly. "I know I assured you everything would be... fine," she says. "And, I suppose, for the most part, it is. We just caught each other on a rough day. I'm sorry it manifested in such an ugly way. I promise it won't happen again."

"It probably will."

"No, Sir," she argues softly. "We'll definitely fight, sure, because we're both stubborn and determined and hotblooded, but it will never be like that again."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because," she says. "For all I've ever done in my life, I've never wanted to hurt, and I intend never to do that to Rachel ever again."

It's not the response he's expecting and, for the longest time, he's not sure what to make of it. "Well, okay," he finally says. "That should be all."

Slowly, Quinn rises to her feet. "Thank you, Sir," she says, and then starts to walk out. She's almost to the door when he calls out for her and she spins to face him. "Sir?"
"Do you hurt?" he asks, his gaze meeting hers.

Quinn smiles sadly. "All the time."

"Something is wrong with me," Rachel declares, flinging open Brittany's door and stepping inside. She closes it behind her but makes no move any further into the room. She spies her blonde friend sitting at her own desk, working on something on her laptop.

"And you've just now figured that out," Brittany teases, barely looking away from her screen.

" Shut up," she mutters. "I need your help."

At this, Brittany does look up, her blue eyes searching. "What's wrong?" she asks.

"Quinn isn't talking to me."

Brittany frowns. "I thought she never talked to you, anyway."

"No, she used to talk to me, sort of," she explains. "It wasn't anything profound and it was mainly to do with the prefects or schoolwork, but it's different now. Now, she says nothing. Nothing, Britt. Not even a hello, how are you. Zilch. Nada. Zip. I may as well not even exist."

"Well, can you blame her?" Brittany says, offering no sympathy. "You did say some pretty nasty things."

Rachel bristles. "She did too."

"As a response to feeling attacked," she clarifies. "We both know she was always going to do that."

"So, what is she doing now, oh ye God of Quinn Fabray?"

Brittany rolls her eyes in a very Santana-like way. "She's protecting herself," she says, as if it's the simplest thing in the world. "She's doing it the only way she knows how."

Rachel lets out a long-suffering groan. "But I haven't talked to her in days. Surely, she's forgiven me by now."

"Have you even said you're sorry?"

Rachel drops her gaze.

Brittany chuckles. "Something is wrong with you."

Rachel shakes her head. "That isn't meant to be funny," she says. "I honestly do feel as if something is wrong with me. I feel sick and unsettled and why isn't she talking to me?" She sounds miserable, and Brittany's eyebrows rise in quiet understanding.

Oh.

Rachel looks at her with questions in her eyes. "Why does she continually do this to me?" she asks, her voice catching.

Maybe it's meant to be a rhetorical question, but Brittany still answers, saying the one thing to send Rachel into even more of a tailspin.
"Maybe she likes you."

It's absurd, of course, because no.

Just, no.

There's no way.

Rachel presses her lips together, refusing to admit to anyone that she's definitely thought about it. "Britt, you have to stop saying things like that," she says, pressing her palms against the door. "Quinn does not like me. Neither does Brett, Jessica, Greg or that other boy you're convinced was ogling me during lunch the other day."

"Harry."

Rachel sighs. "You've been wrong about all of them, and you're wrong about this too."

Brittany twists in her chair to look at Rachel with knowing, insightful eyes. It's terrifying, and Rachel feels as if she's two feet tall. "Maybe I am," she finally says, relenting. "But, I will tell you this, Rach: there's a reason you get under her skin the way you do."

"Well, obviously," she scoffs. "I'm the only one who dares to challenge her."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why are you the only one to challenge her?" Brittany questions, sounding entirely too calm about this entire thing.

"Because she asked me to," she immediately says.

"Oh, come now, we both know that's not it."

Rachel shakes her head. "It can't be anything else," she argues. "I do it because she asked. It's not as if I actually enjoy doing it."

"Tisk, tisk, Rachel," Brittany says, giving her a skeptical look. "Let's not start lying now."

The air in her lungs escapes her and she sags against the door. "Okay, so, maybe I do enjoy it a little," she confesses quietly. "I like the challenge. I've always liked the challenge."

"So, this is about the challenge, and not about Quinn?"

"Exactly."

"Okay."

Rachel does a double take. "Okay?"

"Was there something else?"

Rachel growls in annoyance as she pushes off the door and moves towards her friend. "You're supposed to be helping me," she says. "Why aren't you helping me?"

"There's only so much I can do when you're refusing to help yourself," she says. "I don't know
Rachel throws herself on Brittany's bed, her forearm coming to rest over her eyes. "I miss her," she confesses, whispering the words into the air. "I don't even know what I could possibly even miss about her, but I do. I miss all of her."

Brittany looks on with sympathy. "Then I suggest you talk to her," she says. "Say you're sorry, talk it out, and maybe you'll both come out better for it."

Rachel groans. "What if she hates me?" she asks. "I mean, I literally called her a heartless bitch in front of our entire grade. That kid, Jacob, even wrote an article about our discourse in the school paper."

"All the more reason to talk to Quinn."

"Santana said Mr Schuester even called Quinn into his office about our fight," she says. "What if I get fired?"

Brittany chuckles. "Has anyone ever told you that you're dramatic?"

Rachel peeks at her from under her arm. "All the time."

"Just talk to her."

"Is that all you have for me?"

"Short of suggesting that you're the one who probably likes her, yeah, that's all I have."

Rachel freezes, suddenly grateful her face is half-hidden by her arm. Did she - did she just say that? Rachel isn't even sure how she's supposed to recover from that... accusation. Does Brittany expect a response? Because, honestly, Rachel doesn't think she has one.

Still, she attempts to gather herself, sits up and looks at her friend. She's just about to speak when Brittany raises her hand to silence her.

"Don't," she warns. "Don't call it absurd or ridiculous. Whatever your thoughts on the matter, don't insult us both by denying it."

Rachel's shoulders slump. "When did you get so smart?"

"I've always been smart," she says easily; "you just weren't paying attention."

Rachel loses patience with herself - and Quinn - the night before the Halloween dance. She's all bravado as she exits her own bedroom, but she's a shaking mess by the time she's crossed the corridor to Quinn's room. Her hands are clammy and her heart is thundering in her chest. She calls on all her courage to lift her hand and knock on the door.

"Come in."

Rachel sighs. She was kind of hoping that Quinn would actually answer the door. Maybe if she just waits out here for a while, Quinn will be forced to -

The door opens.

Rachel's breath catches.
Quinn looks equally taken aback. "Rachel," she breathes in surprise before she clears her throat. "Are you - umm - is everything okay?"

She takes a deep breath and exhales slowly. "No, Quinn," she says, all of it just coming tumbling out. "Everything is not okay, because we haven't spoken in a while and I hate it, and I'm sorry, okay? I know I'm mainly to blame for, well, everything, and I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Quinn instantly deflates. "Oh, Rachel," she murmurs. "I'm sorry, too."

"I was convinced you must hate me, and just the idea of never talking to you again is..." she trails off.

"Yeah," Quinn quietly agrees. "It's been a strange couple of days. I didn't realise how much time we actually spend together."

"I'm your Deputy," she says easily. "It's my job."

Her faces pinches, as if she doesn't like what she's hearing. "Yeah."

Rachel feels the melancholy roll off the blonde, and she risks a step forward. All she wants to do is reach out and touch her; reassure her in some way. "I don't want to fight like that ever again."

"Ditto," Quinn says, sucking in a breath. "We won't."

"No, we won't."

Quinn manages a small smile. "The dance looks like it's coming along nicely," she says. "I just got back from the Great Hall, and they're just finishing up with the final touches."

There's something in her voice that forces Rachel to take yet another step forward. "Are you not going?"

Quinn ducks her head slightly. "Honestly?"

"Always."

"I was hoping I would be able to skip it," she confesses; "but I don't think the Head Student not showing up would be very school pride, you know?"

"Probably not," she agrees, "Why wouldn't you want to go?"

Quinn nibbles at her bottom lip, visibly thinking about her response. "I think it's the idea of wearing a costume," she finally says; "the entire idea of disguising your identity and hiding behind a mask."

Rachel remains silent, her eyes never straying from Quinn's perfect face.

"I guess I do that enough in real life; I don't need a special holiday," she adds with a shrug, as if she's revealed nothing remotely profound.

"I get that," Rachel finds herself saying.

Quinn hums. "I think you do."

They stare at each other for the longest time and, the moment Rachel reaches out for her; Quinn flinches. It's nothing to do with the brunette, they're both sure, but it doesn't make the hurt or guilt
any less.

"I'm sorry," Rachel says, automatic and true.

"No," Quinn says. "I'm sorry."

Rachel shakes her head. "I think this conversation has had enough apologies."

"I agree," she mumbles. Then: "I assume you're going to the dance?"

She rolls her eyes. "Santana and Brittany are dragging me," she says. "I've been forced to relinquish power over my costume to them."

"That sounds terrifying."

"I'm completely freaked out of my mind."

Quinn laughs lightly, the light reaching her eyes in a way that steals Rachel's breath. If Quinn is going to keep smiling at her that way, she's going to end up doing everything she possibly can to make sure it stays. "It should be interesting for the rest of us, then," she teases gently, and it takes everything Rachel has not to reach out again.

Instead, her hands twitch at her sides. "It should," she agrees.

It's definitely going to be interesting.

When Rachel finally escapes the hurricane of emotions she's feeling in Quinn's presence, she doesn't return to her own room. Instead, she makes her way to Brittany's, needing the insight only her surprising blonde friend can offer.

Rachel knocks once, opens the door and slips inside to find both Brittany and Santana sprawled out on the bed. Santana is fiddling with something on her phone and Brittany is threading her fingers through the brunette's hair. It's a picture of ease, and Rachel loves it.

"You were right," Rachel suddenly says, her eyes on Brittany. "But, you were also wrong."

"Oh?"

"It's more than that," she whispers, as if the confession is too profound to say in a normal voice. It might be, for all she knows, because she should not be feeling more than 'like' for a girl she can never have.

And, when she realises that, her face crumples.

Her body follows a beat later.
"Why?"

Rachel's fully aware her voice has taken on a whiny quality but she's far from caring, at this point. She wants to know why her two friends would think dressing her up as Baby from *Dirty Dancing* was ever going to be a good idea.

Technically, they're all dressed as dancers, but Rachel feels the most exposed, even if she is wearing stockings and a sleeveless, striped cropped top. They leave absolutely nothing to the imagination.

"Why would you do this to me?"

Santana rolls her eyes. "You have to show off those legs, Berry," she says. "It'd be illegal if you didn't."

Still, Rachel feels uncomfortable in her skin, and she imagines that everyone is looking at her. It's not wildly off-base, but she studiously avoids looking anybody in the eye as she allows Brittany to drag her further into the Ballroom. The lighting is dim and the smoke machine has turned the air hazy. It's heady and she's already starting to regret ever coming.

Also, her teased hair keeps getting in her eyes and it's annoying the crap out of her.

"Fabray, two o'clock," Santana says, and Rachel's eyes snap to her right. The second her gaze lands on Quinn, clad in a Grace Kelly getup, her heart practically leaps out of her chest. She's managed to get some semblance of control of herself, and she's avoided the blonde like the plague since, well, she slid down Brittany's door and burst into tears at the injustice of liking a girl she can never have.

Rachel's still ignoring Brittany's theory that Quinn may like her back. At the moment, the devastation is a little easier to handle than the *hope*.

Rachel would know.

Brittany tugs on her arm again. "Let's get some punch, and then you and I are going dancing."

The protest dies on Rachel's lips when Quinn suddenly looks her way and they lock eyes. It's one of those cliched moments, really: two people, gazes connecting across a crowded room, and just *knowing*.

Because Rachel *does* know.

This thing, whatever it is, is going to ruin her. It's practically written out in all the marks on Quinn's body.

Brittany tugs again, and the spell is broken.

This time, Rachel goes willingly.

After the third time she has to decline an offer to dance, Quinn is ready to pull out her own hair. She knows, of course, that she could have attended the dance with any number of people as her
date, but she just wasn't interested. She's treating this entire evening as part of her Head Student responsibilities, which means there's no time for... enjoyment. She wouldn't even know how to do that if she tried.

Really, what she would like to do now is sneak out the back of the Ballroom and go up to her bedroom, lie on her carpet and try to erase the image of Rachel Berry's toned abdomen from her mind.

Also, it's unfair, really, that a human being that size can have legs that long.

Or, a face that pretty.

"Quinn?"

Her gaze snaps up to look at a sophomore boy, smiling at her with all the hope in his eyes. "Hello, Peter," she says easily, smiling at his Spider-Man costume.

"Would you like to dance?" he asks, his earnest eyes tugging at what's left of her cold dead heart. "Pretty please?"

She chuckles lightly, says, "Sure," and lets him lead her to the dance floor.

"Oh, stop moping," Santana says, bumping Rachel with her hip. "Someone told you that you looked cute when you pout."

"I'm pretty sure that was you," she grumbles back, refusing to take her eyes off Quinn, who has been dancing with some pubescent kid for three whole songs. Logically, she knows she has no claim to Quinn or even any right to be jealous, but she can't help it. She wants Quinn to be looking at her; to be dancing with her.

It's never going to happen.

"She's just dancing with him because he's safe," Santana says. "It doesn't mean anything."

Even if it doesn't, it doesn't make it hurt any less. "Will it always feel like this?" she asks.

"Probably."

"You're lucky."

"Am I?"

"The girl you like actually likes you back."

Santana can't stop her grin at the mention of Brittany, but she quickly schools her features. "That may be so, Berry, but the girl I like also knows."

Quinn lets out an unexpected giggle when Peter spins her and, for the first time all week, her smile is open and genuine. So, predictably, it floors the boy, and he stumbles slightly, which makes them both laugh.

"I thought for sure you would be a terrible dancer," Quinn finds herself saying.

Peter pretends to look insulted. "Why? Why would you say such a thing?"
She laughs now, stepping forward and then back again. "You're really tall," she says.

He shrugs. "It does make me a little uncoordinated," he admits sheepishly. "I'm still growing into these pesky limbs."

"But you're not terrible," she clarifies.

"You're actually very good," he comments.

"Surprising, isn't it?"

He nods his head, his expression one of awe and something very serious. "I think there are many things surprising about you."

Quinn places a gentle hand on his shoulder, suddenly knowing he's too young and good and pure for all the darkness living inside of her.

"Are you ever going to let one of these idiots dance with you?" Santana asks, coming up next to Rachel and handing her a cup of punch.

"Probably not," she admits truthfully.

"Why not?" the Latina questions. "Maybe it'll make Quinn jealous."

At the mention of Quinn, Rachel's eyes drift to where the blonde and Kurt are happily bouncing in the middle of the dance floor. She looks at ease, happy in this one way she's allowing herself to feel and show.

"They're going to start thinking you're a stiff, you know," she says, and it's an offhanded comment that puts Rachel on edge.

"I don't care what they think," she says, and the edge has managed to creep into her voice.

Santana looks at her, mystified. "Okay...?"

"If I don't want to dance with a boy and feel his hands all over my body, I'm not going to," she adds tightly, and Santana immediately understands.

"Of course," she agrees. Then: "does that mean you won't dance with me?"

Rachel lets out a long breath, relieved that Santana isn't questioning her further. She downs her drink, drops the cup onto a table and allows Santana to lead her towards the dance floor where Brittany is dancing against Shane.

Santana merely slides an arm around the blonde's waist and drags her back. The squeal she lets out brings a smile to Rachel's face, and the three of them settle into a simple rhythm.

Somehow, their little group gets larger, and Rachel feels Quinn's presence before she sees her. At first, Rachel ignores her, forcing herself not to react to the girl just across the circle of dancing students, but that hope falls away immediately because Quinn is staring at her. It's not even a little bit in the realm of 'observing.' It's blatant and Rachel's cheeks flush under her scrutiny.

Santana leans into her at some point, her mouth close to Rachel's ear. "Your eye-sex is downright filthy," she says, and heat shoots right down and back up Rachel's entire body.
Rachel lets out a surprised laugh, shaking her head but keeping her eyes on Quinn. Eye-sex, huh? Don't you need two to tango?

After the third song, the group starts to dissipate again, and Santana and Brittany gravitate towards each other. Rachel seeks out Quinn with her eyes, but the blonde's attention is caught between Kurt and Blaine as they dance in a huddle. Rachel can't help thinking she looks good like this, light and a little carefree.

Breathing a sigh, Rachel turns to leave the dance floor... and comes face to face with a smirking Azimio Adams. She gasps because, yes, she's managed to forget this boy actually exists. Compartmentalisation has always been a strong suit when it comes to the subject of those flyers.

"Why why, Miss Berry," he slurs, and her eyes widen. It's obvious he's drunk. "Where are you running off to so soon?" he asks. "Spare a dance for a bastard like me?"

Rachel frowns, but still manages to shake her head. "No, thank you," she says, making to move past him.

He steps to the side to block her path. "Oh, come now," he says. "Just one dance?"

"No!" she repeats, using the word with enough force that it shakes her entire body. He startles slightly, and she uses the opportunity to shove past him. She doesn't stop walking until she's out of the Ballroom, just needing some fresh air. She trudges to the left, towards the stairs leading to the storage rooms below the Ballroom, and leans against the railing.

Rachel's hands are trembling and her heart is beating rapidly. She hates this. She hates that everything still affects her. Memories and words and sounds and smells. She shuts her eyes tightly, trying to force it all away. Not tonight.

Please, just not tonight.

Just when she thinks she's got a handle on it all, a sound rips her from her reverie, and Azimio is standing right in front of her, chuckling darkly, with a sinister look in his eyes. She steps back in surprise, but the railing digs into her back.

"You know," he says, stepping forward and placing his hands on the railing on either side of her. "I just don't understand you." His breath smells of alcohol and Rachel is frozen in another place in her mind. "Why would you dress up so fucking slutty and then have the nerve to say no to me?"

Rachel has enough sense to register her own anger and disbelief but, the moment his hands move to her waist, she screams. It's loud, raw and aching, but Azimio just laughs menacingly.

"Nobody can hear you," he says, eyes alight with mischief. His grip tightens and she does all she can to shove him away, but he's so much stronger than her, and she's not in the right frame of mind to fight back.

She hates this.

She hates feeling weak and helpless, and she beats at his chest. His smile just grows as he steps closer, practically pinning her against the railing as he leans in to kiss her.

There's a moment. Rachel knows this moment well, when you can choose to keep fighting with all your might, or you can give in and let it happen because it will hurt less.

Thankfully, the decision is taken away from her when Azimio is violently tugged back and thrown...
onto his back. Before Rachel can even register what's happening, Quinn is right in front of her, decidedly not touching her. How she knows Rachel doesn't want to be touched, she'll never ask.

The blonde doesn't say anything as her eyes travel over Rachel's body, searching for something, anything, out of place. When she deems the girl relatively unhurt, she spins around to face Azimio, who's just getting back to his feet.

"Get lost!" Quinn snarls at him, her body shielding Rachel's.

Stupid or drunk, Azimio steps towards the girls.

Quinn tenses at the whimper Rachel lets out but she doesn't turn around. "I'm going to count to three, Adams," she coldly says. "Walk away, right now, and I'll make sure this incident results in only a suspension."

His eyes narrow. "Oh, you're doing me favours now, huh?" he spits out. "Of course, you're going to tell, because you're a fucking snitch!"

Quinn's features harden. "What I am is the Head Student," she says; "who just interrupted what looked like an assault. So, I would tread carefully if I were you."

"Good thing you're not, huh?"

Quinn doesn't respond, and the glare she sends him is enough to make him second guess his next move.

Azimio eventually huffs. "Whatever. She's not even worth it."

Quinn holds her tongue as she watches him shuffle backwards, and then turn and walk - stumble - away. She waits until he's out of sight before she turns back to Rachel, her eyes once again searching.

"Hi," Quinn whispers, keeping her distance.

"Hi," Rachel manages to say.

"You're shaking."

"Am I?"

"Cold?"

"Freezing."

Immediately, Quinn shrugs out of the red blazer she's wearing and, as carefully as she can, drapes it over Rachel's shoulders, making sure she doesn't make contact with any skin. "Better?" she asks carefully.

"A little."

Quinn tilts her head to the side. "Do you want me to get you some water? Maybe some punch, for electrolytes?" The second she makes a move to leave, Rachel grabs for her wrist, but Quinn doesn't flinch. She's come to expect contact from Rachel. "Okay," she says. "I'm staying."

Rachel steadies her breathing. "What are you doing out here?"
Quinn instantly blushes. "Umm."

"Were you looking for me?"

She shrugs. "Maybe."

Rachel's grip slides down from Quinn's wrist until she can link their fingers together between their bodies. It feels like everything and nothing, and her heart is beating much faster. Quinn's hands are so soft and warm and the tingles are spreading right through Rachel's body. This entire night has been crazy.

"Quinn," she whispers, wanting nothing more than to bring the blonde closer and wrap her in a tight embrace, but she thinks that's too much for one night.

Hazel eyes lock on chestnut brown. "Rachel," she breathes.

The air is charged and heavy but, before it can spark, there's a sound. Quinn spins around, immediately on the defensive. It's a good thing, too, because Azimio is back.

Only, this time, he's not alone.

"I changed my mind," Azimio says, clearly very stupid and very drunk. "She is worth it. In fact, you both are."

There's a moment.

"Stop crying," Santana hisses. "God, will you just stop fucking crying!"

Brittany shoots the Latina a heated look of disapproval and slides her arms around Rachel's trembling form. "It's okay, Rach," she whispers into Rachel's hair. "It's okay. She's okay. You're okay."

Rachel's sobs intensify, forcing a scoff from Santana.

Brittany's eyes snap towards her. "If you're not going to be helpful, you can leave," she barks, and the Latina looks suitably chastised. Brittany turns her attention back to Rachel.

They're in the Deputy's room, Rachel and Brittany sitting on the edge of the bed and Santana pacing the length of the room. It's just after two o'clock in the morning, and they've heard no news about Quinn since she was taken to the hospital.

When Rachel's sobs start to subside, Brittany pulls back slightly. "We should get you cleaned up," she says, because now Rachel can get clean. She's had to sit through questions a plenty as Mr Schuester, Miss Pillsbury and an External Enforcer tried to get to the bottom of what exactly happened.

Because it is Dalton Academy, everything will be handled internally, which is a good thing. The name 'Rachel Berry' has already been ruined in New Haven County. She would do well to try to stay anonymous here.

Brittany grabs Rachel's things and then walks her across the corridor to Quinn's room, so they can use the private bathroom. She helps her undress and guides her into the shower to wash away the dirt and grime and makeup and... blood.
There's blood on her hands, and skin under her nails.

In the moment, under the right circumstances, Rachel now knows how to fight.

And, given the choice, she would do it again and again.

Rachel can't get to sleep.

It's unsurprising, of course, but the exhaustion finally catches up with her and she tumbles into a restless slumber.

She dreams of Quinn eyes, dark and distrustful.

She dreams of Quinn's screams and tears, loud and frightening.

She dreams of Quinn's pain, ringing on a loop in her ears.

She dreams of Quinn's blood.

At the first sign of dawn, Rachel crawls out of bed and calls her father. She knows he'll be awake because he's determined to be the best kind of farmer, even if he's rather hopeless at it.

As soon as she hears his voice, she bursts into tears.

Before she can even start explaining, he's saying, "I'm coming, baby. I'm coming to get you."

"No," she howls. "Don't. No. Don't come here."

His mouth snaps shut with an audible clack of his teeth. "Sweetheart, what's going on?" he asks as calmly as he can.

So, she tells him.

She tells him everything from the fight with Quinn to making up with Quinn to realising she might be in a lot of like with Quinn to going to the dance with Santana and Brittany to Azimio Adams to Quinn saving her. She pauses.

"Sweetheart," he presses, hearing her hesitance.

"They were going to hurt her," she whispers brokenly. "They were going to hurt her."

"It's okay," he assures her. "It's okay."

"She already hurts so much," Rachel says. "I couldn't let them hurt her any more."

"What happened?"

She sucks in a breath before she explains that Azimio returned with two of his friends from the football team, Tim Armstrong and Ian Gallagher, with the intention of -

She chokes back a sob.

*It seems we're just going to have to take what we want.*

Her heart beats faster. "There was a fight. She's quick, but there were three of them and two of us. I
don't - I tried - they - *Daddy.*"

"I'm right here," he says. "I'm right here."

"There were stairs, and Quinn was too close, and then one of them pushed her and she fell and - " she cries out. "She was knocked unconscious, and I - "

"Baby, what did you do?"

"I fought."

Hiram Berry doesn't ask anything more. He knows what that means because she insisted on taking lessons in self-defence after... just, *after.* It was LeRoy who first suggested it, and Rachel jumped at the opportunity. She wanted to feel powerful after so much power was taken from her.

"Mr Schuester will probably call you some time today or tomorrow."

"Okay," he says. "Are you hurt? Is Quinn hurt?"

"I'm fine," she says. "Just a few scratches." It's not enough to leave any permanent marks - not like the scars Azimio is surely to have. "Quinn is - she's at the hospital."

"Concussion?"

"They think so," she says. "She landed quite heavily on her left side, so they wanted to take her for an X-Ray and maybe an CT."

He hums. "Do you want me to get LeRoy to call to inquire about her level of care?"

She's tempted, but eventually declines. Wallingford and Dalton are to be kept separate. She made the decision, so she's going to stick to it.

Nearing the end of the call, Hiram reminds her to take her medication and tells her to get some sleep. It's Saturday, so breakfast is a little later, but she can't even think about food. Or sleep.

All she can think about is Quinn.

Really, she *wants* to think of little else.

Quinn has been hiding.

She was able to sneak into her room while the rest of the school was at the Sunday evening chapel service and then dinner, and she's been sitting on the edge of her bed ever since, her teeth clenched and her eyes tightly shut.

*It hurts.*

Everything just fucking hurts.

She loves it.

Rachel notices the light first. Her eyes already always automatically flick towards Quinn's bedroom door whenever she goes to her own, so, when she sees the light on under the door, her heart leaps into her throat.
With trembling fingers, she crosses the corridor towards the Head Student's door. She isn't even sure what she's going to say to her, but she knows she has to see her. So, steeling herself, she knocks lightly, and immediately opens the door.

The room is dimly lit from Quinn's bedside lamp, and the girl is sitting on the edge of her bed, completely still. Quinn barely looks up when Rachel steps inside and walks towards her, once again dropping to her knees in front of the blonde.

It's a familiar position, and they both find surprising comfort in it.

"Hey," Rachel whispers, getting her attention.

Quinn's eyes meet hers slowly, her face slightly pinched in obvious pain. "Hi."

"When did you get back?"

"An hour ago."

Rachel wants to touch her, so she does. She slides a gentle palm over her calf and massages lightly. It's all she can do not to react to the sight of Quinn's left arm in an ugly, green cast and held securely in a sling.

"I'm broken," Quinn whispers.

Rachel meets her gaze once more. "Concussion?"

"Mild."

"Shoulder?"

"Dislocated."

Rachel shakes her head. "Arm?"

"Fractured radius."

She hisses in response, taking note of Quinn's laboured breathing. "Ribs?"

"Bruised."

She breathes out. "I'm so sorry, Quinn."

Her eyes narrow slightly. "Why are you apologising?"

"This is my fault."

"No, it's not," she immediately argues. "This is not your fault, okay?"

Rachel says nothing as her hand slides up over Quinn's knee and along the top of her thigh. They both watch the movement with focused eyes, neither of them willing to make it to stop.

"Are you in pain?" Rachel asks, which they both know is an unnecessary question.

Quinn doesn't bother to respond.
Rachel moves her hand from Quinn's thigh to her cheek, feeling the soft skin under her fingertips. "Regardless of what you think about what happened, I still owe you," she says. "I don't - I can't even think about what would have happened if you -"

"Rachel," she cuts her off. "Stop, okay? It happened, and I'm just glad you're okay, okay?"

Rachel rises to her full height while still on her knees and shuffles forward, forcing Quinn's legs apart. She moves in close and carefully wraps her arms around Quinn's neck, drawing her into a gentle hug. For a moment, she panics, thinking this is the absolute worst thing to be doing, but then she feels the soothing pressure of Quinn's right hand at the small of her back, and they both relax into the embrace.

"Thank you," Rachel whispers against her skin.

Quinn just sighs, resting her chin against Rachel's shoulder. "Rachel -"

"I don't care what you say," Rachel murmurs, gently interrupting. "I'm saying thank you and you're accepting it."

Quinn's eyes slip closed, the fight leaving her. "Yes, dear."

Much to Santana's long-suffering annoyance, Rachel spends a worrying amount of time with Quinn during the first week of her recovery. Whether it's out of guilt or some sick sense of masochism, the Latina doesn't know, but she finds it bothers her to no end. Whether it's to do with Quinn or to do with Rachel, she's unsure.

Santana watches them carefully, searching and waiting for the moment their tentative 'coupling' explodes, because they all know it's going to. It's only a matter of time before one of them loses patience with the other, because Quinn is a terrible patient and Rachel is a doting carer.

It's inevitable, really.

Something's got to give.

It happens a week later while Rachel is walking Quinn back to her room after a long day of classes. The corridors are relatively empty, given that everyone else is on their way or already at their extracurriculars. Rachel's risking being late for her own dance lesson to make sure Quinn gets safely to her bedroom, and it's a truth not lost on either of them.

For some reason, it irritates Quinn. She doesn't want Rachel to have to adjust her schedule for her. She doesn't want her to feel as if she has to. All of this; it's suffocating, and she can't seem to accept that Rachel is doing any of it because she wants to, and not because she feels obligated to.

"I think people have finally stopped staring," Rachel says conversationally.

Quinn snorts. "At you, or at me?"

Rachel tilts her head in thought. "Both," she finally decides. It's not as if they're that far from each other, anyway.

"I suppose it helps that all the disciplinary hearings are over as well," she says, referring to the procedure they've all been pulled through to get to the bottom of the incident and execute the appropriate punishment.
It's safe to say Azimio Adams will not be bothering them again. Suspension was never going to be an option, and all three boys were handed expulsions, effective immediately. Rachel's never been more relieved not to have to walk through the corridors and see their stupid faces.

Just another difference between Dalton and Wallingford.

"How do you feel about that?" Rachel asks, her voice quiet.

Quinn quirks an eyebrow. "What are you my therapist now?"

Rachel shakes her head, unsure if Quinn is actually teasing her or not. "I'm just wondering how you're doing, Quinn."

"I'm fine."

Rachel wants to call her out, and, without heading her own warning, she does.

And, predictably, it escalates quickly, with Quinn on the hurt defensive and Rachel on the persistent offensive. Questions are asked and deflected, demanded and avoided, under Quinn practically growls in frustration and distaste as she grabs for her bag off Rachel's shoulder and squares up to the brunette.

"Nobody asked you to do any of this! Dammit, Berry, I can take care of myself!" she snaps. "God knows I've been doing it long enough!"

Rachel is left utterly dumbfounded when Quinn storms off without once looking back. What the hell? She's tempted to call after her, but the sound of slow clapping stops her, and she spins around to find a blond boy lounging on one of the window sills, his knowing eyes on her.

"Well done," the boy says, ceasing his clapping.

Rachel furrows her brow. "Excuse me?"

"I said well done," he repeats, sliding his feet to the ground and rising. "In all the time I've known Quinn Fabray, I don't think I've ever seen her react so... strongly. So, congratulations."

Rachel feels supremely uncomfortable. "I'm sorry, but, uh, who are you?"

The moves towards her. "How rude of me," he says, holding out his hand. "The name's Sam Evans. I think we have World Geography together."

Rachel shakes his hand, somewhat distractedly. "Rachel Berry," she says. Then, her curiosity getting the better of her, she asks. "You know Quinn?"

"I don't think anyone actually knows Quinn," he says, somewhat darkly. "But, yes, I suppose I do. We dated for a couple of months sophomore year."

"Oh."

He gives her a curious look. "Don't worry," he says. "I'm sure my relationship with her is long forgotten. It was more of a show, really. She was never quite into me, you know?"

No, Rachel doesn't know, but she still nods.

"Like I was saying, I've never seen anyone quite get under her skin the way you do," he says. "It's kind of funny, in a truly not funny way."
Rachel isn't sure what to make of any of this conversation.

"She's a special one, that Quinn Fabray," he says wistfully. "She doesn't let just anyone in close enough to see it, so I'd be careful, if I were you."

Rachel swallows audibly, unsure how she feels hearing things her subconscious already knows.

"You keep pushing and pushing," he says, almost conversationally. "It's all good and innocent now, but you don't know her at all. You keep calling her out for always being in control, but you have absolutely no idea what she's been through. You don't know how alone she forces herself to feel, so the guilt doesn't eat her alive. You don't know anything.

"Because, if you did, you wouldn't push as much as you do. She may look strong, but she's fragile, and you need to be careful, Rachel Berry." He closes his eyes for a moment. "I get scared that, one of these days, you're going to push just hard enough for her to fall off the edge."

Once again, Rachel is left shocked, rooted to the spot, as another blond head walks away from her.

What the hell?

Like, just, what the actual hell?

Without even realising it, Rachel's opinion of Quinn changes.

Everything she thinks she knows, she probably doesn't. In the beginning, she thought she could see something she recognised in Quinn's eyes, but now she knows better.

Quinn is different to her.

Quinn's darkness is darker.

It's the horrible, beautiful kind.

Rachel knows this is unhealthy for her, pining over a girl who, even if she did harbour any kind of feelings for her, would probably never act on them. Quinn has many a number of secrets, and Rachel isn't going to disillusion herself into thinking Quinn would ever tell her.

She talks to her father about it, and then she talks to her mother. Rachel's relationship with Shelby has grown strained over the years, since the divorce and since Rachel prefers to be in New Haven County with her father, but they've been trying to repair it since the... incident.

Daughters need their mothers for those kinds of things.

These days, they talk more and Shelby has more patience for Rachel's dramatics and Rachel has stopped comparing her parents to each other the way self-absorbed children tend to do. The main thing is that they do communicate better than they have since the divorce.

So, when Rachel calls Shelby to talk, they both know it's serious.

Rachel explains the situation in its entirety, even going so far as to mention her worries about pushing Quinn too far. The conflict comes from the idea that Quinn wants to be pushed, and Rachel is at a loss as to what to do.

"I think she's noticed," Rachel says, curling a strand of hair around her forefinger as she lies on her bed. "I mean, I feel all this anxiety and guilt whenever I feel like disagreeing with her now. I mean,
we haven't even really spoken about the Adams thing, and I swear Sam Evans is haunting me. I went my entire Dalton career without really noticing him, and now he's everywhere." She growls in frustration. "I just feel so... I don't even know, Mom. What am I supposed to do?"

Shelby waits a moment. "I think you're making this more complicated than it is, Honey," she says. "Why don't you just talk to her?"

She huffs in annoyance. "You sound like Brittany."

"She's a smart kid."

"Don't tell her that," she warns; "it'll go straight to her head."

Shelby chuckles, the sound dangerously similar to Rachel's. "I don't know what you want me to say. I think you already know what you have to do and say, and you're just looking for somebody to give you another option."

Rachel takes a deep breath and releases it slowly. "Well, I know what I want to say and do, but those are very different to what I know I have to say and do."

"Why?"

Rachel doesn't have enough time in the world to explain that, so she doesn't even bother. "I've been thinking of inviting her home for Thanksgiving," she says.

Shelby is quiet for a moment. "What did your father say?"

"He's fine with it," she says. "They all are, actually. They want to meet her, apparently, which is actually a little terrifying."

"I'm sure it wouldn't hurt to ask her then," she says. "The worst that could happen is she already has plans."

Rachel hums. That definitely is not the worst that could happen, but who's counting? "Just talk to her, Honey," Shelby finishes. "If I've learned anything through my many, many failed relationships; it's that communication is key."

"I hear you, Mom."

"I think you do."

Rachel hasn't really talked to Quinn since the day she met Sam. She's been trying to give the girl space, but she thinks she's overcorrecting because she can't even recall the last time she knocked on her door when she stands right in front of it, waiting.

Hmm.

After a quick knock, a 'come in' sounds from behind the door, and Rachel enters the room expecting to find Quinn at her desk or lying on the floor.

She does not expect to find Quinn Fabray in running gear.

"What on earth are you doing?" Rachel immediately asks.
Quinn gives her an incredulous look. "Going for a run."

"Absolutely not," she hisses. "You're injured."

"I'm fine."

"Quinn," she says, closing the door behind her. "Please be logical about this. I know it sucks not being able to play sport, okay, but you're barred from playing for a reason. It's barely been three weeks. How much healing can you honestly expect to have done in that amount time?"

"I'm fine," she dismisses.

Rachel blocks the door, leaning against it and shaking her head. "Why? Tell me why you're insisting on potentially aggravating your injuries."

Quinn clenches her jaw. "You don't understand. I need to run," she says. "I'm going crazy in here."

"There are other things you can do."

"Like what?"

"I don't know," she says, exasperated. "Read a book, watch a movie, play some chess. Just, not anything physical."

Quinn quirks an eyebrow. "Anything physical, huh?"

Rachel forces herself not to blush. "I will consistently fight you on this, so please can you just stand down, okay? There will be no running occurring today. You may as well put on your pyjamas."

They stare each other down for the longest time, and Rachel actually - and surprisingly - wins. Quinn mutters something under her breath, spins and stalks towards her closet. Unnecessarily violently, she removes clothes from a shelf and then disappears into her bathroom to change.

Rachel is both disappointed and relieved.

Sensing the victory, she pushes off the door and moves to sit on the edge of the bed. She's unsure if her presence will still be welcome but she's going to stay, anyway. There are things they need to talk about. Her mother and Brittany would be so proud.

When Quinn comes back out, she's in a purple t-shirt and sweatpants, her feet covered in purple socks and her hair hanging loose around her shoulders. She's ridiculously stunning.

"You're still here," Quinn deadpans.

Rachel nods once. "I need to talk to you about something," she says, patting the space beside her. "Come sit with me for a minute."

"Only a minute?" she questions as she crosses the small space and settles next to Rachel.

"Maybe a little more," she allows.

"What's wrong?"

Rachel wrings her fingers together in her lap. "I have to admit that I've been... struggling with this entire thing," she begins. "I'm - I'm not like you, who can just sweep it under the rug and move on without actually dealing with it."
Quinn can barely look at her.

"I know you must have your reasons, but it worries me that you just hold everything inside the way you do. I've been a right mess, really, walking on egg shells around you because I'm the one who's supposed to push you, but I just - I can't."

"Then you don't have to," Quinn offers, as if it's the simplest solution. "You don't have to do it anymore."

"But I want to."

"You're confusing me."

"Sam mentioned that -"

"What?" Quinn cuts her off, recoiling. "Sam? Sam Evans?" At Rachel's nod, Quinn grows pale. "You talked to Sam?"

Rachel doesn't know what to make of her reaction. "Umm, well, he actually talked to me, and he mentioned that -"

"I don't want to know," she forces out, lifting her right hand to stop Rachel. "I don't want to know what you two discussed."

"Quinn," she says, taking hold of both the blonde's hands. "Can you just wait a minute, please? He didn't really tell me anything I didn't already know or suspect. I already knew about the self-harm, remember?"

Quinn tenses, not used to it being talked about so freely.

"I just didn't think there was a chance it would be a little more serious than that."

Quinn raises her eyebrows. "He made you think I was five seconds away from offing myself?"

"Well, I wouldn't exactly put it as crudely as that but, essentially, yes."

"Jesus, Berry, if I was going to do that, I can assure you I would already be gone."

Rachel bristles. "I'm sorry, but that doesn't make me feel any better about this."

"It's not meant to."

Before Rachel can reply, Quinn's phone starts to ring, and the ringtone immediately alerts the blonde to who it is. The way her face slips on the mask of nothing is unnerving to Rachel, but she doesn't comment as Quinn rises and retrieves her phone from her desk.

"Hello, Mother," Quinn answers, keeping her back to Rachel. "It's fine. Yes, I am. I have." Quinn sighs, her shoulders slumping, and all Rachel wants to do is go to her and wrap her in the warmth of her arms. "Of course. It makes perfect sense. It's only a few days, anyway. I'll be fine. You too."

When the call ends, there's a beat of tense silence, and then Quinn spins quickly and flings her phone at her bed, making Rachel duck, even though it was nowhere near her. It's enough for Rachel to know the contents of the phone call.

Quinn is staying here for Thanksgiving.
Well, not if Rachel has any say in the matter.

A moment later, Quinn crumples right before her eyes, her knees buckling and forcing her to lean against her desk. It's a mixture of physical and emotional pain, and Rachel is up in an instant, rushing towards her.

"Quinn," she says, trying to catch her gaze. "Quinn, talk to me."

Quinn shakes her head. "I need you to go," she says. "Please, go."

"I'm not leaving you," Rachel argues. "Something's obviously wrong, and I'm not leaving you. I'm not going anywhere, so you're just going to have to deal with it."

"Why are you so fucking stubborn?" she asks, but there's absolutely no bite behind it.

"It's in my genes," she simply says, reaching out and pinching the fabric of Quinn's t-shirt between her thumb and forefinger.

Quinn sighs. "I really don't want to fight with you, right now."

"Then accept that I'm staying."

Quinn's eyes finally meet hers. "I have no choice, do I?"

"None, whatsoever."

Quinn lifts her right hand to run the backs of her fingers against Rachel's smooth cheek. "I sometimes wonder if you're real."

"I'm real."

"I don't deserve your patience."

"I'm the furthest thing from patient," she says, leaning into Quinn's touch before her hand falls away. "I'm annoyingly persistent."

"I'll give you that one."

Rachel's fingers release the t-shirt, and she spreads her palm across Quinn's abdomen, pressing down and feeling the warmth of her body through the thin fabric. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not really."

"Can I talk to you about something else, then?"

"I feel like I don't have a choice."

Rachel risks a step closer, adding slight pressure to her hand, wary of the still-healing ribs beneath her fingers. "I want you to come home with me for Thanksgiving."

Quinn's eyes widen. "What?"

She blinks, unsure what to make of that reaction. "Unless you have plans, of course," she adds. "But, umm, this is an invitation to come home with me. My parents would like to meet the girl who took on three football players for me."
Quinn turns beet red at the sound of that. "You told them about that?"

"I tend to tell them everything," she confesses. "It's a problem, sometimes."

Quinn smiles sadly. "I can't talk to my parents about anything," she says.

"Then, well, you can talk to mine."

She chuckles softly. "Are you sure you want me to come with you?"

"I'm sure."

"And your parents are definitely okay with it?"

"Fully supportive."

Quinn's eyes light up slightly, the 'yes' on the tip of her tongue. Then: "Wait, how would we be getting there?" she asks, tensing.

"Probably by train."

She visibly shudders.

"Not a fan?"

"One could say that," she admits quietly. "I can't do trains, Rachel. I just can't."

Rachel is desperate to know the reason why, but the scared look in Quinn's eyes stops her from asking. "I'm sure we can figure something out, okay?"

"You shouldn't have to change your plans for me," she argues immediately.

"I should, and I will," she counters right back. "I'm not about to force you to do something you don't want to do. We'll figure something out, okay?"

"When I was younger, they contemplated just sedating me for the entire trip," she offers with a small grin.

Rachel taps her abdomen in platitud. "We'll save that for Plan B, okay?"

"Maybe it should be Plan F," she grumbles.

Rachel smiles warmly. "But, just to clarify, that is a yes, right?"

Quinn nods, her hand coming to rest over Rachel's on her abdomen. "It's a yes."

"Good," she murmurs, her hand warming at Quinn's touch. It feels nice, safe, like home. "Good."

"You already said that."

"And, I mean it."
Chapter 8

Chapter Eight

"Let me get this straight," Santana says; "you're taking Quinn - *Quinn Fabray* - home with you for Thanksgiving?"

Rachel barely glances up from her small suitcase as she shifts around her clothes for the upcoming trip. She contemplated packing a duffel instead, but she thinks it'll be easier to have something to drag, especially since Quinn is currently able to use only one hand.

"Berry," Santana says, sounding serious. "Do you even know what you're doing?"

At this, Rachel does look up, her eyes meeting Santana's. "I have absolutely no clue," she confesses.

"Then, why? Why?"

She sighs. "I don't think I can explain it to you," she says, leaning her hip against her suitcase and folding her arms across her chest. "She would be staying here, alone, and I don't want that."

"She wouldn't be alone," Santana argues. "Not everyone goes home for Thanksgiving, and you know that."

"Well, you and Brittany are leaving," she says. "I'm leaving, and so is Kurt."

Santana huffs. "It's not your responsibility."

"I know that," she says primly. "Quinn and I have talked about this. I'm not doing it because I feel obligated to, okay? I want to."

"But, why?"

"Because, despite what is logical and realistic, I care about her," Rachel replies, her tone soft and oddly reverent. "I care about her, a lot, and I selfishly want her to spend the holiday with me and my family."

Santana shakes her head. "Does she know?"

"Know what?"

"How you feel."

Rachel narrows her eyes. "Santana, why are you asking questions you already know the answer to?"

"I'm just checking, Berry," she says. "You're planning on taking Quinn across the state to visit your family... the least you can do is be honest with her."

"What about you?" Rachel immediately counters.

"What about me?"

"When are you going to be honest with her?"
For the first time, Santana falters.

"Oh, it's all fine and dandy when it's me who has to reveal my feelings, but you're immune," she presses. "Quinn still thinks you abandoned her because of her, you know? I don't think it would be the end of the world if you just told her the truth."

"You don't know that."

"That's right," Rachel concedes. "I might not know for sure, but it's got to be better than whatever the two of you are doing right now."

Santana shakes her head, nervously fidgeting with the untucked hem of her school shirt. "You don't know," she says. "I can't just tell her I'm gay. She would never understand."

"I don't think you're giving her enough credit, Santana," she argues. "Kurt is gay, and he's practically attached to Quinn's hip."

Santana straightens her spine. "When you're not, you mean."

Rachel rolls her eyes. "Quinn has two hips, by the way. One for each of us."

Santana doesn't look amused. "You don't understand," she says. "You've never met her father."

Rachel's bout of amusement disappears in a flash, and she's wracked with an unsettling amount of apprehension. She hasn't really given much thought to... that. She's taking Quinn home, to Wallingford, to her father and... his husband.

Oh.

Santana reads Rachel's silence as agreement. "That's exactly why I can't tell her," she says. "It's just a thing, Berry. It doesn't even matter all that much about her father's politics, you know? Quinn is Catholic. People like me; people like you - we're the ones they believe are going to burn in Hell."

Rachel shakes her head, refusing to believe it, even though everything Santana is saying isn't so far off-base.

But, no.

Rachel knows Quinn. The blonde adores Kurt, and the boy is incapable of hiding his sexual orientation.

Still, Rachel can acknowledge Santana's reluctance. "I still think you should tell her," Rachel declares.

"Well, I think you should tell her too," the Latina immediately argues.

"My telling her is different to your telling her," she says.

"I'm not saying you have to tell her you like her, but you could confess that you like girls."

"So, I'm supposed to be the guinea pig here because you're too damn chicken to do it yourself?"

Santana glares at her.

"What?" Rachel says, glaring right back. She's a new person here at Dalton, wholly unafraid to stand up and use her words. "We both know I'm right. You're hiding behind how you think Quinn
is going to react because you're too scared to know for sure. How is this helping anyone, Santana? The two of you aren't even friends right now, and at least one of you doesn't know the true reason why."

"You don't understand," Santana presses.

"Maybe I don't," Rachel allows; "but at least I'm willing to."

While Rachel disagrees with Santana's arguments, she does accept she probably does have to be honest with Quinn about a few things. It wouldn't be fair to lead her into a house and blindside her with the family dynamics. Quinn deserves a head's up, even if it means she might potentially change her mind about accompanying Rachel.

So, the night before they're scheduled to leave, Rachel crosses the corridor from her own room, knocks once on Quinn's door and enters to find the blonde standing at her closet.

"Hey," Quinn says, glancing over her shoulder at her visitor. "Do you think I'm going to need more than one sweater?" she asks. "How cold does it get there?"

Rachel can't help her smile, taking in Quinn's relaxed posture and soft features. "I think one should be fine," she replies, moving to sit on the edge of the blonde's bed. "You can borrow one of mine if need's be."

Quinn hums in thought, turning back to her piles of clothes. She spends a moment deciding before she pulls a garment out and sets it on her desk. "You said you live on a farm, right? Does that mean I should take my riding boots?"

Rachel just watches as Quinn floats around the room, taking items out of her closet and piling them on her desk for more scrutiny later. She's cute like this, adorable in her obvious nerves and excitement.

"Although," Quinn says after a minute; "I don't think I can put those boots on with only one hand." She pauses, visibly thinking, and Rachel can't resist reaching out to touch her. Without shocking Quinn, she links her fingers with the blonde's and tugs her closer.

"I'll help you with them," Rachel assures her. "Come sit with me for a minute. I need to talk to you about something."

Quinn brow furrows, but she moves to sit beside the brunette. "Is something wrong?" she asks. Then: "Are you - are you changing your mind?"

"What?" she squeaks. "No, Quinn, definitely not."

"Oh, okay."

Breathing a sigh, Rachel squeezes Quinn's hand, seeking and offering comfort. "Before we leave, there's something I have tell you," she says, nervously nibbling at her bottom lip.

Quinn watches the action for the longest time, just waiting, and a little bit mesmerised.

"It's - it's about my parents."

Quinn nods to indicate she's listening, even if her gaze stays trained on the other girl's lips.

"They're gay."
Quinn's eyes snap up. "What?"

Rachel rubs her thumb over the back of Quinn's hand. "My parents, Quinn. I have two fathers. And a mother, of course, but we're visiting my dads, who live just outside of Wallingford, and I just have to tell you before we leave, in case that makes you uncomfortable."

She regards her carefully. "Why would that make me uncomfortable?" she asks, oddly curious.

Rachel hums. "Umm, I don't know," she says. "You're rather religious, and Christianity doesn't exactly accept homosexuality, and I just assumed..." she trails off, reading the dubious look on Quinn's face. "You really don't have a problem with it, do you?"

Quinn shakes her head no. "In case you haven't noticed, Berry, my closest friend is gay."

Rachel thinks, So is mine, but she remains silent. She also tries not to react to the fact Quinn refers to Kurt as her 'closest friend.' What does that make Rachel?

"There's a difference with being okay with it and being okay with it, Quinn," Rachel pushes on. "You'll be in our home. It's - "

"Rachel," she says, gently cutting her off and squeezing her hand this time, forcing them both to acknowledge the contact. "What are you really worried about here? I promise I'm not going to start quoting the Bible at your family."

Rachel laughs nervously.

Quinn sighs. "I'm not my father," she finally says. "He has his views, and I have mine, though I've never truly been allowed to express them. Give me until February."

Rachel frowns. "What's happening in February?"

"I turn eighteen."

Her mouth drops open. "I'm older than you?"

Quinn arches a perfectly sculpted eyebrow. "Yes? Why do you look so distraught about that?"

"I don't even know, to be honest."

"Did you want to be younger than me?"

"I don't even know."

"You already said that."

Rachel slumps slightly, resting her chin in her free palm as her thigh supports her elbow. "You're really okay?"

"I am."

Rachel studies her face for any hint of an untruth but she sees nothing. In fact, Quinn's expression is oddly open, and Rachel can't look away even if she tries. Once she's accepted the sincerity in Quinn's expression, she straightens. "Would you really quote the Bible?"

"Just, all the best parts," she says, winking.
Rachel's breath catches, because Quinn Fabray is now winking at her. *Okay. "About what?"

"About love," she immediately responds. "And how love conquers all; how it covers a multitude of our sins."

Rachel raises an eyebrow, oddly reminiscent of Quinn's patent arch, though she still needs to work on it. "And homosexuality is a sin?"

"If it is, then it has the potential to be forgiven through love."

"So, my parents aren't going to burn in Hell?"

Quinn pauses, feeling her chest tighten at the sudden vulnerability in Rachel's voice. It's obvious to her that Rachel's been told that a number of times. She can't even imagine the homophobes she's encountered. "Not for being gay," Quinn eventually says, careful and serious. Then, in an attempt to lighten the mood, she says, "Though, I don't know your parents so they could end up there for an entirely different reason. Are they Yankee fans?"

Rachel bursts out laughing after a surprised beat, automatically moving to cover her mouth.

"No," Quinn says, removing her hand. "I want to hear."

Rachel's features soften and her chest fills with warmth. "You're very special, Quinn Fabray."

She shrugs in response. Then: "Were you serious about helping me with my boots?"

"Try not to think about it."

As expected, Quinn shoots Rachel a heated glare. "Just for future reference, telling me *not* to think about it definitely *isn't* helping," she snaps.

Rachel rolls her eyes, and then refocuses. "Look at me, Quinn," she says. "Keep your eyes on me."

Somewhat reluctantly, Quinn's gaze meets hers.

"For whatever reason, you can't stand trains," Rachel says, holding Quinn's attention. "They're terrible, horrible things, right?"

Quinn frowns. "I'm not sure where you're going with this…"

Rachel ignores her. "Whatever happened to make you hate them has to have been the *worst* thing, right?"

Quinn manages to nod.

"It was the *absolute* worst?"

"You already said that," she grits out.

Again, she's ignored. "So, whatever happens when you get onto this train, right now, will never quite compare, right?"

Quinn just stares at her.

"Right?" Rachel presses.
Quinn lets out a shaky breath. "I suppose," she relents. "You're making it sound so easy."

"It is easy," she says, stepping back towards Quinn and holding out her hand. "Try not to think about it," she repeats. "Just take my hand, keep your eyes on me and take slow steps and steady breaths."

Quinn shakes her head. "I should have taken my pill earlier," she mutters. "I'd be zonked out by now."

Rachel pouts. "But then who am I supposed to talk to?"

"I can't believe you're making me do this," she grouses, reaching for the offered hand and allowing Rachel to pull her onto the train and guide her through the aisle towards their seats. She's desperately trying not to think about it, but the thoughts are creeping up on her and she's starting to panic.

"You're okay," Rachel suddenly says, squeezing her fingers. "You're okay. Remember why you got on."

"For you?"

Rachel looks over her shoulder at her. "If that's enough to keep your feet moving, then yes."

Quinn keeps her eyes on the back of Rachel's neck as they walk, her focus on the little hairs found there. She has the somewhat uncontrollable urge to reach out and touch, but she'll settle for Rachel's fingers.

When they reach their seats, Rachel guides Quinn into the window seat and immediately drops down beside her. She already brought in their luggage before she was forced into coaxing Quinn onto the train with only minutes to spare before departure. The blonde was all too happy to wait as long as possible on the platform.

Rachel watches Quinn carefully once she's settled, the blonde's eyes sliding shut and her head leaning back. Her profile is pure perfection, and Rachel can't bring herself to look away.

"You know," Quinn suddenly says; "your staring at me really isn't helping me."

Rachel flushes instantly, dropping her gaze. "I'm sorry," she says. "I'm just worried. And curious."

Quinn hums.

"I know I said I wasn't going to ask, and I'm not, I promise, but it's not to do with an accident of some sort, is it?"

Quinn opens one eye to peek at the brunette. "Not in the physical sense, no."

"Oh, okay."

Quinn squeezes the fingers of the hand she's still holding as she closes her eye once more. "Will you talk to me?" she whispers.

"Excuse me?"

"Talk to me," she repeats. "It'll keep me calm."

"What do you want me to talk about?" she questions, startling when Quinn jerks at the sudden
movement of the train.

"Oh, God," Quinn murmurs, shutting her eyes tighter.

"It's okay," Rachel whispers, leaning her shoulder against Quinn's and turning her head to face her. "You're okay." And, then, without thinking too much about it, she begins to sing softly, practically right into the blonde's ear, crooning the soothing words of *Somewhere Over the Rainbow* by Israel Kamakawiwo'ole.

_Somewhere over the rainbow,_
_way up high_
_And the dreams that you dream of,_
_once in a lullaby_

_Somewhere over the rainbow,_
_blue birds fly_
_And the dreams that you dream of,_
_dreams really do come true_

_Someday I'll wish upon a star_
_Wake up where the clouds are far behind me._
_Where trouble melts like lemon drops,_
_High above the chimney top,_
_That's where you'll find me._

_Somewhere over the rainbow,_
_bluebirds fly_
_And the dream that you dare to_
_Why, oh why can't I?_

Rachel is startled by the conductor's approach, and she quickly digs in her backpack for their tickets to have them ready. It's difficult to do with one hand, but she's not releasing Quinn's for anything. As long as she's okay with the contact, Rachel isn't going to waste any opportunity.

She continues humming softly until the conductor comes and goes, and then she resumes her singing, leaning in that bit closer, as if she wants to press her lips against the shell of Quinn's ear.

_Well, I see trees of green, red roses too_  
_I'll watch them bloom for me and you_  
_And I think to myself,_  
_what a wonderful world_

_Well, I see skies of blue and I see clouds of white_  
_The brightness of day, I like the dark_  
_And I think to myself,_  
_what a wonderful world_

_The colours of the rainbow, so pretty in the sky_  
_And also on the faces of people passing by_  
_I see friends shakin' hands, sayin' 'How do you do?'_  
_They're really saying I, I love you_

_I hear babies cry and I watch them grow_  
_They'll learn much more then we'll know_
And I think to myself what a wonderful world
World

Someday I'll wish upon a star
Wake up where the clouds are far behind me.
Where trouble melts like lemon drops,
High above the chimney top,
That's where you'll find me.

Somewhere over the rainbow,
bluebirds fly
And the dream that you dare to
Why, oh why can't I?

When she finishes, there's the deepest, most profound silence before Quinn opens her eyes and turns those deep hazels on her.

"You are wonderful," Quinn whispers.

"Because I can sing?"

"Among other things, yes."

And, of course, Rachel blushes. "Are you feeling a bit better?"

She nods. "Keep talking, though."

"About what?"

"Tell me about your family," she offers. "Who am I going to be meeting?"

Rachel relaxes slightly, smiling at the mere thought of her family. "Well, on LeRoy's property, there are at least seven generations of the Holt family," she explains.

"Seriously?"

"Some of them are in the family cemetery, of course," she clarifies with a cheeky grin. "They've lived there for a long time, and the property size doubled - or tripled - when he married my dad."

Quinn nods, following that much. Rachel tried to explain the vineyard and the berry farm to her, and Quinn even did her own research to make sure she would be able to maintain conversation if it was needed.

"LeRoy's parents live in a cottage behind the main house, which is great. I love having them around because my dad's parents weren't really all that accepting of his, umm, change of lifestyle, and my mother's family is, well, from Oregon, so I never really see them because she doesn't see them all that often." She tilts her head to the side. "I like to escape to their cottage sometimes. Growing up, the house was always so full of boys, and my Nan is just so warm, you know?"

No, Quinn doesn't know. Her entire family is cold and calculating and, on those odd occasions that Quinn actually sees any of her extended family, it's always at a formal function where she's supposed to act a certain way.

"Also, Grandpa Holt tells the most amazing stories, really," she gushes. "I have a feeling he's going to love you."
"Why?"

"You're a very good listener."

She shrugs, effectively ignoring the comment. "I think it's great you're close to your grandparents," she says. "I rarely see mine."

"Are all of them still around?"

"My mother's parents are both still alive, and my father's father," she explains. "I haven't seen them since last year's New Year's party at the house."

Rachel's thumb strokes the back of Quinn's hand, which is one of her favourite things to do. Just being able to feel her soft skin is everything. "I think I take it for granted, sometimes," she says thoughtfully. "They're getting old, and I get scared that I'll go back to Dalton and just never see them again."

Quinn gently nudges her with her shoulder in a sign of comfort, and Rachel offers her a grateful smile.

"LeRoy and my dad work really hard maintaining the estate," Rachel continues. "It's one of the biggest vineyards in the state, after they combined the properties, so it's a pretty large operation. I think my dad was expecting an easy, simple life when he left the corporate world, but he was so wrong. Sometimes, the stress is a little too much, and I get worried about him. He tends to overwork himself, and he definitely doesn't look after himself properly."

Quinn mutters, "Men," in amusement, and Rachel giggles. Then: "Do they know who I am?" she asks.

"Uh, yes," Rachel says, frowning. "I told them who - "

"No," she interrupts gently. "I mean, do they know I'm a Fabray?"

"Oh."

Quinn tenses. "They don't, do they?"

"It's not going to matter," Rachel assures her. "I know you're nothing like your father, Quinn. I mean, you have far less body hair." When Quinn doesn't react to her attempt at humour, Rachel sighs. "Look, my parents are really forgiving, non-judgmental, friendly people. My entire family is that way, actually; it can be a little annoying at times. All I'm saying is that it doesn't matter what your surname is, okay? It matters who you are."

"And, who am I, Rachel?"

She hums in thought. "Do you know what I thought of you the first time I saw you?"

Quinn shakes her head.

"It was the day I came for my interview and entrance exam," she explains. "I picked a school as reasonably far away from home my parents would allow, and I asked my mother to accompany me. We were waiting outside the main reception for one of the teachers administering the test to collect me to take me to the venue, and I remember seeing you duck into the reception with a bouquet of flowers."
Quinn instantly flushes at the memory. "I didn't even see you," she says.

"I know," she dismisses kindly. "But, I watched as you handed the flowers to one of the women behind the front desk."

"Denise."

"And she burst into tears."

"It was her birthday."

"And your smile," Rachel says. "It was both happy and sad at the same time, and I couldn't quite figure out how that could be."

Quinn presses her lips together.

"You know, I wasn't all that sold on the idea of going to Dalton until then," she confesses. "There's another school in Windham County that I was considering, but then I saw you and I - " she stops suddenly, blushing. "The students were kind and polite, and they seemed happy and sad, and I just knew it was the place I had to be."

Quinn raises her eyebrows in amusement. "So, what you're really saying is you picked Dalton for me?" she teases, and Rachel playfully swats her arm with a grin on her face.

Rachel clears her throat. "I have three older brothers, all from LeRoy," she says. "Daniel is the oldest, and he's married to Emily-Anne. They work with my parents on the estate but live in Wallingford. They've actually just welcomed a baby girl."

"You're an aunt?"

"I am," she says proudly. "Lena was born on the second. Do you want to see pictures?"

"Wow, that's just weeks ago," she says. "Oh, of course; I'm a sucker for cute things."

Rachel regards her for a moment. "I'll remember that," she murmurs as she reaches for her phone and immediately finds the endless number of pictures her family have sent her since the baby's birth. She holds the phone out for Quinn because she's not willingly releasing her uninjured arm.

"She's tiny," Rachel gushes. "And just so - "

"Beautiful," Quinn finishes, her eyes shining as she takes in the baby's tiny, pink face peeking out of a pink bundle. "She's absolutely precious, Rachel."

"I honestly cannot wait to meet her," she says. "I think I'm more excited about that than seeing my entire family combined."

"They must love that."

Rachel shrugs unapologetically as she scrolls through the rest of the pictures for Quinn to see. It's one thing for the blonde to see the adorable baby on the screen, but she rather enjoys seeing Rachel's reaction far better. There's such a soft, content look in her eyes, this perfect baby bringing joy to an entire family, even if it's just through the phone.

Eventually, Rachel puts away her phone and angles her body to face Quinn, tucking one leg under her body. "After Daniel, there's Levi, who's in his second year of Law School at Northwestern. As far as I know, he's bringing his girlfriend, Kelsey, whom he's been dating since I was in diapers, I
Quinn chuckles. "So, since last year?"

Rachel exaggerates a gasp. "Rude."

"I'm kidding," she says. "Is she also in Law School?"

"She's actually an Art Major, and she works in a gallery in Chicago."

"Art, huh?"

Rachel studies her face. "Maybe you can show her some of your drawings," she offers.

Quinn ducks her head to hide her blush. "Maybe," she murmurs noncommittally.

"Next, there's Eric, who was the baby before I came along," she says, her voice taking on a tone that Quinn doesn't quite recognise. It's almost a mixture of irritation and affection. "He's a junior in college, studying Psychology, and he's continually bitching about how hard it is."

Yip. Definitely irritation.

"Do you talk to them often?" Quinn asks. "Your brothers, I mean."

"I talk to Daniel the most," she confesses. "Levi is good about checking in from time to time, and Eric takes years to reply to messages, so I barely bother with him, sometimes."

Quinn almost laughs at the obvious distaste she has for her youngest older brother's behaviour.

"I miss them, obviously, so I'm keen to be home, even if it's for only a few days," she concludes. "I'm also rather excited to introduce them to you."

Quinn arches an eyebrow. "And why is that?"

"Because you're important to me."

"We still know nothing about each other."

Rachel leans closer, her eyes catching Quinn's. "I think I know enough to like what I see."

"And, what do you see?"

With her free hand, Rachel reaches to palm Quinn's cheek, turning her head to face her properly. "I think you are tragically beautiful, Quinn Fabray," she whispers. "Sometimes, it even hurts to look at you."

"I don't know if you're insulting or complimenting me."

Rachel ignores her. "I've seen and experienced things that are... awful. I know what it's like to feel empty and dirty and lost and confused and powerless, but there's something about you... whether it's in your eyes or your grace. It - it makes everyone around you feel safe and powerful. It's one of the reasons you're such a brilliant leader."

Quinn isn't sure what to say to that, so she just shifts slightly and rests her head on Rachel's shoulder. She sighs in content, her eyes slipping closed again. From her position, she can smell Rachel: a heady mixture of strawberries, almonds and something distinctly Rachel.
"I was seven years old the last time I rode a train without completely freaking out," Quinn says after the longest silence. She keeps her eyes closed as she speaks, her tone conversational. "I was always kind of scared of them, but I could handle them if I was distracted enough. I was with my parents and my nanny, Mary. It was before all the politics took over, and we were travelling for the campaign. I think they thought travelling by train would make my father look more like 'a man of the people.'" She chuckles humourlessly. "My parents were fine, you know? They were always somewhat distant and not at all affectionate, but they were fine. And then, well, I learned something very important on that trip that I've never been able to forget."

Rachel wants to ask for more, but even she knows not to.

They sit in silence, Quinn drifting in and out of sleep, until lunch time rolls around. Quinn refuses to move from her seat, so Rachel ventures to the food car by herself, unable to decide if the fact that Quinn bends over in her seat and tucks her head between her knees is amusing or just incredibly heartbreaking.

A bit of both, maybe.

Rachel doesn't dawdle, hurrying with her purchases, and then returning to Quinn's side. She sets their food on the table in front of them and lays a gentle hand on Quinn's back, feeling the girl's muscles move under her fingertips.

"I got you a chicken salad," Rachel tells her as Quinn sits up, looking particularly traumatised. "And some Skittles," she offers with a sheepish smile.

"How do you know I like Skittles?"

"Lucky guess."

Quinn eyes her curiously, but doesn't comment. "Thank you," she says instead, dragging her salad across the table and immediately tucking in. She's not really hungry, but she definitely isn't in the mood for the Spanish Inquisition if she doesn't at least attempt to eat.

"Tell me about your friends," Quinn says after a while, catching Rachel just as she's biting into her tomato and lettuce panini. "Will I be meeting any of them?"

Rachel removes the sandwich from her mouth, looking thoughtful. "I don't know if you will meet them," she confesses. "It's such a short time, so I imagine it'll just be a family-filled weekend." She sets her sandwich down and leans back. "I didn't really keep many friends after..." she trails off, knowing that Quinn understands.

"I'm sorry," Quinn immediately says, though it feels empty.

Rachel offers her a warm smile. "My best friend's name is Tina," she says. "You'll probably meet her, I'm sure. She tends to show up whenever she wants because she claims her own life and family are boring, and she enjoys living vicariously through me." She rolls her eyes at the thought of her friend. "There's also Noah. He's a little older than me, but we've known each other a long time. He's highly inappropriate and a terrible influence if you take him too seriously, but he's a real sweetheart."

Quinn raises her eyebrows. "Ex-boyfriend?"


Quinn giggles. "The lady doth protest too much."
"Oh, shut up," she says. Then: "I won't lie and say we haven't... kissed, because we did, but it just felt *wrong*. Like incest."

"That's gross, Rachel," Quinn says. "I'm eating here."

Rachel flicks her bicep with her finger. She's enjoying this side of Quinn, a girl who looks slightly more at ease the further away from school they get.

Quinn pierces a wedge of tomato with her fork and holds it out for Rachel, who just eyes it curiously. "What? You know I like Skittles but not that I hate raw tomatoes?"

Rachel hesitates only a beat before she leans forward and eats the tomato wedge right off Quinn's plastic fork, her eyes locked on hazel the entire time. It's a charged moment that gets interrupted by the sound of Rachel's phone buzzing on the table. They both startle, blushes immediately settling over their features.

Rachel looks at her phone, and then laughs. "It's Daniel," she tells Quinn. "He's going to pick us up at the train station, and he claims he's leaving now and going to drive two miles an hour to make sure he's there on time."

Quinn laughs lightly. "He sounds like a hoot."

"Oh, you better not tell him that," she says; "it'll go straight to his head."

"My lips are sealed."

When Quinn actually gives in to slumber after she's picked at her salad, Rachel uses the opportunity to call her mother. It's a quick one, just letting her know they're safely on the train and on their way.

Shelby has had quite a bit to say about Rachel's decision to go visit her father instead of going to New York, but Rachel doesn't feel too bad about it because she spent nearly the entire summer in the City of Lights.

She'll see Shelby in December.

And, really, it's much safer to introduce Quinn to anyone *but* Shelby. Even if they *are* just friends - and that's probably all they'll ever be - Quinn is important to her, and she wouldn't want Shelby and her *ways* to push Quinn away, for whatever reason. It's practically an art form of Shelby Corcoran.

One that, thankfully, Rachel has failed to inherit.

Even if she managed to inherit everything else.

Rachel is forced to wake Quinn when they near their final destination. There's one more stop before they're in Wallingford, and there's something Rachel needs to discuss with her before they arrive.

Of course, a half-asleep Quinn Fabray *has* to be the cutest thing she's ever seen, and she loses her train of thought far too quickly, stumbling over her words as Quinn questions her on the time.

"Almost four-thirty," she manages to say.

Quinn stretches as best she can, making a mewling sound that makes Rachel want to reach out and
touch.

Gosh, how is she supposed to survive *days* of this?

Quinn's eyes are a little red and the sleepiness won't completely leave her, which is because of the anxiety medication she admitted to taking before she does any travelling.

"How did you sleep?" Rachel asks.

Quinn shrugs, yawning for good measure. "Sorry I was out for so long."

"That's okay," she assures her. "Your snoring was oddly soothing."

She laughs lightly, waking that bit more. "We're almost there?"

"We are," she says with a nod. Then: "Can I tell you something?"

"Of course." She turns slightly, visibly giving Rachel her full attention, even if her eyes are still slightly unfocused.

"Earlier, you asked me about my friends," Rachel says, her eyes on Quinn's face. "I told you I lost quite a few people after everything that happened."

Quinn nods to indicate she's listening.

"I don't really like to talk about it," she says, her voice low. "I was in therapy right through it all, and it's something I've tried desperately to put behind me. They know who I am in Wallingford, which is why I decided to move schools. I get looks sometimes, and people pass comments about me and my family. It's something you can learn to ignore or brush off, but it still happens."

Quinn places her hand of Rachel's knee, squeezing gently. "I'm sorry you've had to go through any of this, Rachel. Every time I think about it; I just - " she stops, unsure what she even wants to say.

"I wanted to keep Dalton separate from this life, but Adams just went and ruined that for me."

"He's a fucking asshole."

"That, he is," she agrees quietly. "I fought with my dad about it, and I hate that he thinks I'm ashamed."

Quinn picks up something in her tone of voice. "Are you?"

"Sometimes," she confesses, furrowing her brow. "It's just been really hard, you know? There's already so much I have to defend on a daily basis, and it can be so exhausting. I selfishly just wanted to be 'just Rachel' and that's all. I didn't want some moniker attached to my name based on who my parents choose to love or on who decided violence is the only way to _cure_ me."

Quinn swallows audibly, knowing that Rachel is telling her something without actually _telling_ her. "I know it doesn't mean much, and I definitely don't say it nearly enough, but I really do think you're pretty great. I wouldn't change a thing about you."

This time, Rachel does reach out to touch, her fingers brushing against the back of Quinn's neck. "That's where you're wrong, Quinn. It means more than you think."

"Dad, I'd like you to meet Quinn Fabray," Rachel says as the three of them stand in the entrance
Quinn, this is my dad, Hiram Berry.

If Quinn were to draw a picture of what she thought Rachel's father looked like, she's convinced she would have come close to someone like Hiram. Maybe just a little leaner. It's easy to see Rachel in the man, and the beaming smile he offers her is completely infectious.

Quinn puts out her right hand the way she's been brought up to do, and says, "You have a lovely home, Sir."

Hiram just chuckles heartily before tugging Quinn into a hug, blatantly ignoring her formality. "She's so polite," he says over her shoulder to Rachel. "Where did you find her?"

"Dad," Rachel whines with a roll of her eyes.

Hiram is still smiling when he releases Quinn. "Come in, come in," she says. "Let me introduce you to the family."

Quinn casts a worried look at Rachel, but the brunette just waves her off, essentially leaving her to the wolves. Steeling herself, Quinn follows Hiram further into the house towards the kitchen, where they find LeRoy pulling roasted chicken from the oven. It looks and smells divine, which is the first thing she says to the towering man.

"I always love a fan," LeRoy says, washing his hands at the sink. He wipes them on a dish towel before gently shaking Quinn’s hand. "We're huggers in this family," he says; "but I imagine you've been overwhelmed enough."

Quinn's smile is sheepish, but she definitely appreciates the consideration.

"How is the healing coming along?"

She looks thrown momentarily, frowning slightly.

"Physician," he says, shrugging as he points a thumb at himself. "We were worried to hear about your injuries."

Quinn swallows audibly, feeling uncomfortable with their obvious concern. Her own parents barely mentioned the incident beyond do we need to send you to a specialist? "I feel fine," she says. "I was sleeping on my left side to keep the ribs stable, but the pain is pretty much gone by now." She gestures to her plastered arm. "It's mainly this monstrosity to deal with."

"Rachel tells us you're a striker for the girls' soccer team," he says, leaning against the island. "Do you know when you'll be able to get back to training?"

"Uh, probably not before Winter Break," she answers, making a mental note to question Rachel about just how much she's told the family about her.

Before LeRoy can comment, Hiram returns to the kitchen with three people in tow, and Quinn is introduced to Levi, Kelsey and Eric, who are kind and friendly. Kelsey even calls dibs on signing Quinn's cast whenever she gets a chance.

Next, she meets LeRoy's parents, who encourage her to call them Grandma and Grandpa, though Quinn suspects she won't actually call them anything at all. She starts to feel slightly uncomfortable with all the attention in the kitchen and, as soon as Hiram notices, he gets them moving again, touring the downstairs until they get to the living room to find Rachel, Emily-Anne, Daniel and baby Lena.
Rachel manages to drag her eyes away from the bundle in her arms to give Quinn a beaming smile. "Come sit with me," she says, using her head to gesture to the spot on the couch beside her.

Barely wasting a second, Quinn crosses the room and gently sits beside her, careful not to jostle the baby. She leans in rather close, her body pressing against Rachel's as she peers at the baby's little face and wide, brown eyes.

"The pictures don't do her justice," Quinn murmurs absentmindedly.

"That's what I said," Rachel says, looking at Quinn again, and surprised to find her sitting so close. "Oh, uh, this is my sister-in-law, Emily," she says, clearing her throat. "Em, this is Quinn."

Quinn looks across Rachel at the only other blonde in the house. "Hello," she says, keeping her hand firmly at her side. "It's really nice to meet you, and congratulations on this little human being over here."

"Thank you," Emily-Anne answers, and then looks at Rachel. "She's so polite," she says, echoing Hiram's sentiment. "Do you think she can teach your brothers a thing or two?"

Rachel's gaze falls on Quinn's face, whose attention is focused on the baby. Whatever she wants to say gets stuck in her throat when Quinn shifts closer and reaches out to caress Lena's cheek with the back of her forefinger.

"So soft," she whispers in awe.

Emily-Anne pipes up. "Do you want to hold her?"

Quinn's eyes snap up. "I don't know how safe that'll be with my cast," she says, looking put out.

"We can prop her up with a pillow in your lap," the new mother suggests. "As long as you stay seated, I think we're okay."

Quinn barely has time to offer any protests - not that she was going to - before Rachel and Emily-Anne are setting her up with a pillow and Lena, who feels as if she barely weighs anything. Quinn leans forward and marvels at the tiny features in front of her.

"Hello," Quinn whispers to the baby, only vaguely aware of Rachel taking out her phone to snap a few pictures. "You are honestly the most beautiful baby I have ever seen. It's not even fair. Like, have you seen your nose? It's such a pretty nose. And those pouty lips. You're going to be a little heartbreaker, aren't you?"

Quinn's face spreads into a smile, and Rachel takes the perfect picture - that's definitely going to be her new wallpaper; she doesn't even care who sees it.

Quinn ignores it all, her eyes on the baby. "You have absolutely no idea how much you're already loved," she murmurs. "You are so loved, baby Lena."

Rachel puts away her phone and leans into Quinn, just wanting to touch. "You really are," Rachel echoes Quinn's words before her eyes settle on the unsuspecting blonde. "You truly are so very loved."

"Hey."

Quinn spins quickly, almost knocking over her toiletries. "Hi," she breathes, smiling at Rachel as
the brunette enters the room. "Is it time?"

She nods. "I was sent to get you," she says. "Are you feeling better after your shower?"

"Much, thank you," she says. "It was nice to get out of the uniform."

Rachel hums thoughtfully, eyeing Quinn carefully. She's dressed in a pair of skinny jeans, a dark green fitted blouse and startlingly white *Supergas*. She looks relaxed, her hair loose and her face fresh. Now, Rachel has seen Quinn in clothes that aren't part of their school uniform, but it's never felt like this.

"You look nice, by the way," Quinn says, interrupting Rachel's thoughts.

She instantly blushes, looking down at her loose, blue, knee-length dress and bare feet. "Thank you," she says bashfully. "You clean up quite nicely, as well."

Quinn tucks a lock of hair behind her hair. "Are you sure your brother doesn't mind I've taken over his room?"

Rachel rolls her eyes. "Daniel doesn't even really *live* here anymore," she says. "He'll survive, I promise. He's just turning on the dramatics because it's obvious Lena likes you better than she likes him, which is completely understandable."

Quinn latches on to that, unable to let it slide. "And, why do you say that?"

Rachel sputters. "Is this your fishing for a compliment?"

"This is my being genuinely curious," she offers.

"Then, it's probably because you smell much nicer than he does," she says. "I swear, it's as if the scent of apples and cinnamon just follows you everywhere. It's heady and intoxicating."

Quinn raises her eyebrows, surprised.

"And I just said entirely too much."

Quinn steps towards her. "You think I smell like apples and cinnamon?"

"Don't you?"

"I don't know."

"Well, you do," she says. "You really do."

Quinn tilts her head to the side, just waiting, enjoying Rachel's discomfort.

Rachel shakes her head. "Why are you like this?"

Quinn's face splits into a grin, and it's the first of many to steal Rachel's breath. "I'm glad I'm here, you know? Your family is awesome, and they've been really nice and accommodating. Thank you for inviting me, truly. I - I appreciate it."

Rachel regards her carefully. "But...?"

"Why did you *really* invite me to come with you?" she asks carefully.
Rachel swallows audibly. Well, she can't exactly tell Quinn the truth, now can she? *Can she?* Well, maybe she can get away with some of it. "I worry about you," she says, suddenly sounding serious, which definitely wasn't her initial intention. "I worry about you all the time, Quinn, and I just couldn't stand the idea of you being alone over Thanksgiving."

Quinn breathes in slowly. "I wouldn't have been alone," she says on the exhale.

"Let me rephrase," she says. "I couldn't stand the idea of you not being with me for Thanksgiving."

"Oh."

Rachel nods slowly. "I wanted you here and I wanted you with me," she continues to explain. "After Sam and after everything at the dance, I just - I want you with me, Quinn."

She blinks. "Do you think I would do something?"

Rachel licks her lips. "I don't know," she confesses. "How does anyone ever really know?"

Quinn's lack of response does very little to alleviate either of their worries, but Rachel reaches out anyway, her fingers linking with Quinn's.

"Let's go," she says. "They're probably rioting waiting to eat."

"Can't have that."

"No, we definitely can't."
Chapter Nine

There are questions a plenty, fired and lobbed at Quinn from every direction as she sits between Rachel and Eric at the dining room table. It's slightly uncomfortable, but Rachel keeps patting her knee in comfort, which goes a long way towards keeping her grounded and present.

Quinn comes to the conclusion really early that Rachel must have instructed her family not to discuss anything to do with politics or religion around her, and she's unsure how she feels about that. She's relieved, of course, because any talk of Russell Fabray is bound to sour any mood, and she doesn't generally engage in conversation about her religion. It's an immensely private issue for her, particularly when it comes to the perceived sin of homosexuality.

Most of the questions centre around school and sports and their tenure as Head Students. Not all of it is sunshine and roses, and Quinn doesn't attempt to shy away from the less than happy parts. The two of them have fought a lot, but they somehow manage to get things done and done well.

Halfway through dinner, Quinn leans into Rachel and whispers into her ear, "Why do I feel as if I'm being vetted?"

Rachel tenses momentarily, her eyes darting about. She's going to kill her family.

Quinn raises her eyebrows. "Rachel, am I?"

"For what would you be vetted?" she asks, trying to by herself time to think up a suitable response.

"Well, I don't suppose you need a Head Student with a habit for scoring soccer goals and has a barely decent singing voice to help run this farming operation, do you?"

Unable to stop herself, Rachel giggles, and heads turn towards her, which makes her blush. "Quinn," she murmurs.

The blonde just grins as she straightens and innocently resumes picking at her food. She hasn't dished all that much already - mostly the roast chicken and half a potato - but she's barely eating even that.

The second LeRoy opens his mouth to question her on whether she's enjoying the food or not, Rachel shoots him a pointed look that he, thankfully, catches, and keeps silent. Quinn's relationship with food is an entirely other can of worms that is not going to be opened in front of everyone.

Really, she doesn't think Quinn will even let her into that one.

After dinner, Rachel disappears into the kitchen with Eric, Levi and Kelsey to do the dishes, and Hiram invites Quinn to join him for a nightcap on the front porch.

Quinn's eyes widen slightly. "An actual nightcap?"

"You're safe here," he answers easily. "We won't tell."

Quinn manages to smile at him, though it doesn't reach her eyes. "I think I'll just stick with my water," she says. "I'm not - I don't really drink."
Hiram looks thoughtful for a moment before his face splits into a smile. "Well-mannered and wisely moral. Why aren't you my daughter?"

Quinn chuckles lightly as she lifts her glass from the dinner table and follows him out the front door of the house. The porch is dimly lit, and the air is chilly, but she's loving every moment of being here.

Hiram walks right to the edge of the porch and leans against the railing as he stares out at the fruits of his labour. In the darkness, they can't make out much of the grapes or the berries or anything. Quinn knows they're out there, and she finds she's looking forward to being able to explore once daylight lets her.

"Do you know anything about viticulture?" Hiram asks, noticing the curious look on Quinn's face as she too looks out at the invisible greens.

"Not much," Quinn admits. "But I knew considerably less than I did before Rachel told me what you did here."

"She mentioned that you're quite the reader."

Quinn blinks, unsure if she has a right to be irritated with Rachel or not. "Seriously, how much does she tell you?"

He laughs heartily, his entire body shaking. "She loves to talk about the things she cares about," he says. "It's much more fascinating getting to see her face light up than it is just hearing it on the phone."

Quinn can only imagine.

"If you're up for it, I'd like to show you around," he offers. "Only Daniel is at all interested in any of the work we're doing here, so it'll be nice to have a discussion about it with someone who actually wants to learn."

Quinn can't help her grin. "I'd like that very much, Sir." Then: "Rachel's not thinking of joining the family business?"

"Hah," he roars. "That'll be the day. My baby girl is headed to New York City the second she can, and it'll be a miracle to get her back here."

"Broadway, huh?"

"I assume you've heard her sing?"

Quinn nods.

"It's magical."

Quinn barely wastes a breath before she's speaking. "She's magical."

Hiram regards her carefully, hearing something in her voice that forces him to pause and take notice. "Not everybody sees that," he says.

"She's mentioned that, yes," Quinn says sombly.

"But, you do."
Quinn bravely meets his gaze, acknowledging his words are a statement and not a question. "I do," she says anyway.

Thanksgiving morning is a late start for Rachel. She rolls out of bed just after nine-thirty and trudges down the stairs, still half-asleep and sporting wild bed hair. She practically stumbles into the kitchen to find LeRoy and Grandma Holt buzzing about with breakfast and dinner preparations. Quinn is sitting at the kitchen table with Rachel's cousins, Julian and Declan, and all three of them are chopping vegetables.

"Good morning, Honey," LeRoy says as soon as he sees her bleary eyes. "Welcome, welcome. Thank you for finally blessing us with your radiant presence!"

Rachel doesn't have the energy to be amused as she receives a kiss to the forehead and heads straight for the counter beside the fridge to get a glass of freshly-squeezed juice LeRoy prepares every morning, without fail. She practically gulps it down as she staggers towards the kitchen table and comes up behind the youngest of the cousins, Declan.

"Hello, Monster," she says, bending to tickle his sides and press a sloppy kiss to his cheek.

Declan squeals, recoiling, and Rachel immediately moves onto Julian. She throws an arm around his neck and presses a kiss to his cheek, which he bravely endures; the ever-stoic Holt boy that he is.

Without even thinking about it too much - or, at all, really - Rachel moves her attention onto Quinn, her arms wrapping around the blonde's neck in a casual embrace.

"Good morning," she sleepily murmurs, her lips pressing against Quinn's cheek. It's so simple and easy, and it takes her brain a second too long to realise what she's doing. Quinn tenses in her arms, and Rachel immediately snaps back to reality as she freezes, and then releases the blonde and moves away as if she's been scorched. "Shit, I'm sorry," she mumbles, stumbling backwards.

Before anyone can say anything, she bolts, thereby missing Quinn's surprised but pleased look and the wonder in her eyes as she touches her fingertips to her tingling cheek.

The panic doesn't dissipate as Rachel goes through the motions of getting ready to face the day. If she can help it, she's going to avoid Quinn as much as possible. She imagines it's going to be incredibly awkward. What was she thinking, seriously? Just kissing Quinn like that. Her cheek, sure, but it was still a kiss.

When she's showered and dressed, she heads back downstairs and goes straight into her father's office to find Hiram sitting at his desk, working.

"I know, I know," he says when she steps into the room. "I'm just checking my emails."

"Sure, you are," she says with a roll of her eyes as she moves into the office and drops into one of the chairs opposite the desk. "How long have you been 'checking your emails?'" she asks, using air quotes.

He scowls playfully. "I'll be done by the time breakfast is ready," he says. "I have to be. I love having meals with the entire family, and it's honestly like a miracle to have all the children together these days."

"And now you've got a grandchild," she says. "You're getting old, Mr Berry."
He sighs, entirely too knowingly. "I know."
"Are you *trying* to take it easy?"

He shrugs noncommittally. "You know me."

"I *do* know you," she says. "That's why I have to ask, because you definitely don't look after yourself nearly well enough."

"What are you, my mother?"

She shakes her head in amusement, and then grows serious. "You talked to Quinn last night?"

"I did," he says, abandoning his emails to give her his full attention. "She seems like a good kid, burdened in some way. There's something heavy on her shoulders, isn't there?"

Rachel doesn't respond to his question, refusing to give anything away. Quinn has her secrets, and Rachel is going to try to protect them. "I just want to help her," she says, almost whispering.

"I know you do, Sweetheart," he says. Then, almost reluctantly, he asks, "Is that all you want?"

"What?"

"Rachel, you brought her home with you," he says. "I assume that's for a reason."

She swallows nervously. "I like her," she admits softly. "A lot." She presses her lips together, almost guiltily. "It's not the reason I brought her here, though. Well, not the *full* reason. There are no actual ulterior motives other than I just want to help her, and possibly keep an eye on her while I'm at it."

"Does she know?" he asks.

"I've never actually *told* her," she says; "but I suspect she has an idea, even if she won't acknowledge it."

Hiram nods thoughtfully, filing away that piece of information for later. "Sweetheart, is *she* helping you?"

Rachel nods, her bottom lip trapped between her teeth. "Every day," she says. "Whether she even knows it or not." She sighs. "Dad, she makes everything so much better, and I barely even know what to do with myself."

Hiram chuckles softly. "Don't you just hate it when they do that to you?"

After breakfast, during which, admittedly, Rachel remained quiet and awkward with Quinn, Hiram takes Quinn on the tour he promised. He sees so many things in the young blonde and, like his daughter, all he wants to do is help.

"Are you coming with us?" Quinn asks Rachel on her way out of the house.

Rachel can barely meet her gaze. "No," she says; "I think I'm going to stick around here and help with dinner preparation as much as I can."

"Oh." Quinn shifts awkwardly, and then reaches out to hold Rachel's hand and tug her closer. "Are we okay?" she asks softly, worriedly. "You've been... off, all morning. Is it something I did?"
"No, Quinn," she rushes to say, internally chastising herself for being so weird. "It's not you. It's me. I should never have just, umm, kissed you like that this morning. I didn't even ask."

Quinn blinks. "Is that what has you in such a tiff?" she asks. "It's fine, you know?"

"It is?"

"Of course," she says, and then leans all the way forward and presses a chaste kiss to Rachel's cheek. "See? No big deal."

Rachel is too stunned to respond, her skin warm and a fluttering exploding in her abdomen.

"We're okay, Rachel," Quinn assures her. "I should get going. Hiram's probably waiting for me. See you later."

And, all Rachel can really do is watch the girl go, desperately trying not to feel as if she's witnessing her very own heart walking away from her.

"It's beautiful," Quinn says, her eyes taking in the endless rows of vines before her. There's something very real about seeing it in the daylight, grapes and leaves and sticks all forming the base of what is inherently part of the Berry-Holt dynasty.

Or is it Holt-Berry?

"Do you think you could ever live somewhere like this?" Hiram finds himself asking, glancing over his shoulder at her as they walk towards the barn.

"I like to think so," she answers after a moment of contemplation. "I prefer the quiet, so I think I could be happy in a place like this."

"It's better than the city, huh?"

Quinn chuckles. "I definitely think this is a far cry from a place like New York City."

"Have you been?"

"A few times, yeah."

"Are you a fan?"

Quinn thinks it over. "I like the... culture of it, I suppose. I think it'd be a very different place to live in, as opposed to visiting. I just don't know how functional it would be for me, because I doubt I would be able to use any of the public transportation."

"Oh, yes, Rachel mentioned you had a problem with the train," he says, frowning slightly.

Quinn, once again, isn't sure if she's irritated or not with Rachel's habit of discussing her with her parents. Is there a line drawn? What constitutes too much sharing, and is everything up for grabs? "Yeah," she says lamely.

"Rachel's destined for New York," he says, moving them along. "She's had her sights set on heading back since she was very little. Her dreams were always going to take her very far away from here."

Quinn can hear the sadness in his tone, and she attempts to assuage that. "This is her home, Sir,"
she says. "She can go as far away as she wants, but she'll always come back. The way her face
lights up whenever she talks about this place or her family... It's impossible to think she could stay
away."

Hiram slows his pace slightly, forcing himself not to mention the way Rachel looks when she's
talking about Quinn. "You've got to know her quite well, haven't you?"

"When we're not fighting, yes."

"She can be quite the feisty one, can't she?" he says, grinning wryly. "She's just like her mother
that way."

Quinn wants to ask a bit more about Rachel's mother, but she doesn't. Parents, in general, are a
sensitive issue for her, so she can only imagine what it's like for Rachel, particularly when you add
on the prejudice, homophobia and residual trauma of everything she's been through.

"I assume she's told you all about that debacle," he says.

"Bits and pieces," she confesses.

"It's not one of her favourite things to talk about," he explains. "The divorce wasn't easy for her; it
wasn't easy for any of us, really, but especially her. She was young and confused, and Shelby and I
did a lot of fighting, especially over Rachel. I'm a lawyer, you see, and it was very ugly."

Quinn can only imagine.

"When the divorce came through and Shelby was awarded full custody, I moved here. I was
always going to move here, but I wanted to bring her with me. I wanted this life for her."

"She eventually found her way here."

"And it hurt her," he says. "I know she'll never say it to my face, but I hurt her. By leaving her and
New York and by finding more ways to make her life more difficult, I hurt her in ways I'm sure she
never could have imagined."

Quinn wants to offer a rebuttal but the words won't come.

"When did she tell you about us?" he asks.

"Excuse me?"

"When did she tell you all about us?"

She swallows tightly. "Day before yesterday, mainly. And yesterday."

"By necessity, I assume?"

"She - she was worried I would be uncomfortable," she confesses quietly. "But, I think it's more to
do with me than with anything here."

"Oh?"

"I assume you know who my father is."

"Unfortunately."
Quinn lets out a humourless laugh. "It is unfortunate, isn't it?"

Hiram sighs. "I may not agree with his politics, but he is your father, so I won't disrespect him in front of you."

Quinn eyes him skeptically. "That's kind of you, Sir," she says; "but I don't really care what you say about him. I'm sure I've heard much worse."

"Strangers?"

She nods. "He has a lot of haters, and I've been on the receiving end of several verbal attacks whenever people learn who I am."

"It is unfortunate how much hate there is in the world, isn't it?"

"Indeed, it is."

"So, this is it," Hiram says, bringing Quinn to the end of the tour of the large barn that houses the bulk of their operations. "What do you think?"

Quinn's words fail her for the first minute, and then she smiles. "This is awesome," she says in wonder. "I mean, it's insane, but completely awesome, really."

"Rachel says you're a smart girl," he says. "Do you think you have any pointers for me on how to make the operation more efficient?"

Quinn just stares at him in surprise. "Are you serious?"

"Very," he assures. "Think about it, and we'll talk about it before you leave."

Quinn just nods.

"Based on what you said last night, I'm assuming you don't want a tasting," he says, eyeing her carefully.

"Maybe not today," she says; "but I definitely would like to try some before I leave. I think it'd be poor taste not to."

"You're not obligated to do so, Quinn."

"I know," she says; "but I still want to."

"Turkey's going in!" LeRoy announces happily, as he bends to slide the tray with the turkey and various diced vegetables into the oven. "How's that gravy coming along, Stacey?" he asks his sister-in-law as he straightens.

"Taste Test," Stacey yells, and both Julian and Declan come running from their positions at the kitchen table.

Rachel just giggles at the display. She's currently in charge of the lemonade, making it from scratch and succeeding in making a complete mess in her little corner of the large kitchen.

LeRoy comes over to check on her progress, poking her bicep for good measure. "How do you think Hiram and Quinn are doing?"
Rachel tenses for a beat, before she slides a forced smile onto her face. "I'm trying not to think about it, to be honest."

"She seems genuinely interested in the farm," he says.

"She is," Rachel agrees. "When I told her what we did here, she practically lit up. I think she enjoys learning about new things."

"I just think she wanted to get out of the house," he says with a chuckle. "With Patrick and the family staying here as well, breakfast was a busy affair. I don't think she's used to the noise."

"No, she's definitely not," she says. "She's handling it well, though. She loves Lena, and I think Julian and Declan like her."

LeRoy nods. "With Rob, Den and Ty coming tonight; I think she's going to have to beat them away with a stick," he says, watching as Rachel's face pinches in sudden distress. "She's a very pretty girl, Sweets."

"I know," she says tightly.

"I can see why you like her."

Rachel freezes, and then sighs. "Am I really that obvious?"

"Yes," he says. "No."

"That really doesn't make me feel any better," she grumbles. "I'm trying not to do anything... weird."

"Scared she'll run?"

"Terrified."

"Sometimes, these things are inevitable," he offers unhelpfully.

Rachel abandons her task and turns to face him fully. The sounds of the kitchen are drowning out their conversation, so she's unafraid when she asks, "Were you ever scared of how my dad would react if you told him how you felt?"

"Oh, definitely," he answers. "Well, at first, I was more afraid of what I was feeling. I knew one thing my entire life, mainly, and then this thing was just happening and it can be really scary, regardless of how old you are."

"I'm not afraid of it," she declares.

"But you're afraid of something?"

"I'm afraid of her."

LeRoy licks his lips, visibly thinking. "Has she given you any indication that she may feel the same?" he asks. "I'm wondering, because your dad wasn't very subtle once I actually started to look. It makes things easier when they actually help."

Rachel laughs, despite herself. "She's an enigma, that one," she declares. "I've been trying to figure her out since we met, and I've got nowhere."
"I think you've got somewhere, Sweets," he says, smiling warmly at her. "Look where you both are, right now."

"You're back," Rachel says, slightly mystified, as she descends the stairs to find Quinn standing in the entrance hall with a happy smile on her face. "How did it go?"

"Rachel, this place is amazing," she says, her smile growing that bit more. "Can we stay here forever?"

"Sure, Quinn," she says, moving to stand right in front of the blonde. "We can stay as long as you'd like."

"Forever."

Without thinking too much about it, Rachel rises onto her toes and kisses Quinn's cheek, her skin cool from the outdoors. "Forever," she echoes.

She'll do all she can to make it happen.

"Let's all go around the table and say what we're thankful for," Grandma Holt says, earning a groan from several of her grandchildren. "Now, now," she warns, looking stern.

LeRoy pats his mother's hand gently. "I think we're all just worried that you want us to go around the table before we eat," he says, playing peacekeeper. Really, after the endless minutes it too to get a group picture before they sat down, he's starving. "We'll be here a long time, if that's the case. There are a lot of us here."

It's true. The entire Holt family is in attendance, spread out on two tables joined together in the large dining room. It's something the Holt family has been sure to maintain: large tables to accommodate their large family.

They're growing every day.

"Of course not," Grandma Holt says, as if her son just said the most preposterous thing ever. "We'll eat as we go around the table."

LeRoy exchanges an amused look with his husband, and then leans back in his seat. "By all means then, dear mother of mine, get us started."

There's a lot of generic thank yous given for family and food and home. Some of the boys are thankful for their good looks which, if it's meant to impress Quinn, definitely doesn't. Emily-Anne is thankful for friends who becomes family and the wonders of creating new life. Hiram is thankful for all their smiles and laughter, and he's especially grateful for the growing numbers of this family he didn't even know he needed.

Julian is thankful for his new PlayStation, and Declan is grateful for gravy. The laughter that produces is loud and hearty, which gives way to Rachel's turn.

Suddenly shy, she ducks her head slightly. "This year, I'm thankful for my family, obviously," she begins, her hands resting in her lap. "My friends, old and new. I'm thankful for fresh starts and clean slates. I'm thankful for life and love and the opportunity to learn and discover and feel all the wonderful, good things in this world." She ends with a beaming smile, and Quinn's hand slips into hers in her lap. She turns to her left to see Quinn's eyes, shining and bright, trained on her.
The two of them stare at each other for the longest time before LeRoy clears his throat and speaks, "It's your turn, Quinn."

The blonde's eyes snap away. "Uh, right," she says, and Rachel's hand squeezes hers. "This year, I'm thankful for, well, getting to spend this holiday with this lovely family," she says, and Daniel coughs a suck-up, that gets him elbowed in the ribs by his wife. Quinn chuckles in response. "I'm thankful for kind people with good hearts, who expect nothing and give freely. I'm thankful for the truth, and those who tell it." She swallows nervously, and then drops her gaze, prompting Eric beside her to speak.

Rachel tugs on Quinn's hand to get her attention. "You okay?" she mouth's.

Quinn's eyes stay on her lips, watching her form the words. "As much fun as it is holding your hand, I have to take it back because I kind of need it to eat."

"Idiot," she grumbles, even though she's grinning. "Eat your vegetables."

"Can I pass you my tomatoes?"

"Of course."

"I'm thankful for you, too."

Rachel drags her eyes away from the baby in her arms and looks at Quinn, who's sitting right next to her on the couch in Hiram's office. The house is still abuzz with people, and Emily-Anne practically begged Rachel to bring Lena - and, by default, Quinn - into the quiet for a few minutes.

"What do you mean, Quinn?" Rachel asks, her eyes searching the blonde's face.

"At the table, I wanted to say I'm thankful for you, too, but I didn't want to - "

"Embarrass yourself?"

"I was more concerned about you, actually," she says. "But, I am. Thankful, I mean. I shudder to remember what my life was like before you started making it your mission to jump down my throat whenever I opened my mouth."

Rachel giggles softly. "You're very cute, did you know what?"

Predictably, she immediately blushes, ducking her head.

"I'm thankful for you, too," Rachel says. "Just so you know. I'm thankful for a lot of things about Dalton, but you in particular."

Quinn's cheeks are still on fire, so she changes the subject. "Why does Daniel call you 'B'?" she asks, frowning adorably.

Rachel relaxes into the couch, the side of her body resting against Quinn's. "Well, besides the fact that I had enough energy as a child that he used to refer to me as a buzzing bee; it's mainly because of my second name," she explains. "It starts with a B."

Quinn arches an eyebrow. "We both know that's not all you're supposed to say about that."

Rachel shrugs. "I'll tell you mine if you tell me yours."
Quinn laughs. "Fine. Tell me yours."

"No, you tell me yours first."

Quinn's gaze meets hers. "Rachel Berry, I promise I will reveal my middle name to you the moment you tell me yours."

The severity in her tone catches Rachel off guard, and her mouth automatically opens. "It's Barbra."

Quinn rolls her tongue over the name. "Barbra. Rachel Barbra Berry." Her eyes study Rachel's face. "I can see it."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"What's yours, then?"

Quinn's grin is mischievous, and Rachel's heart beats that bit faster. "You already know it."

"I do?"

She nods. "Quinn."

"Quinn?"

"Quinn is my middle name."

Rachel's eyes widen. "No way?"

"Yes, way."

If she wasn't holding a baby in her arms, Rachel would fold them across her chest. "That's not fair," she argues. "You tricked me."

"And, now you sound like a four-year-old."

"What's your first name then, and why do you call yourself by your middle?"

Quinn takes a breath, using the moment of reprieve to make a decision. She wants Rachel to know her, in every way: the good and the bad. It's terrifying, but she's finding it increasingly difficult to keep hiding herself from this disarming girl. "I was named after my grandmother," she explains. "My father's mother. She passed away when I was six years old, and I don't really remember all that much about her. Anyway, her name was Lucille, so I was named Lucy, which definitely doesn't suit me, at all."

Rachel's inclined to agree, but she doesn't say anything. It's obvious Quinn has something more she would like to say.

"I started calling myself Quinn after she died," she explains. "My father - he couldn't quite bring himself to say Lucy, so I asked him to call me something else. I just wanted my father to talk to me, you know? I just wanted him to look at me and actually see me."

Rachel rests her hand on Quinn's thigh, adding gentle pressure.

"For a long time, I thought the one thing that was wrong with me was that my name reminded him
of his dead mother," she adds a beat later, her eyes dropping to Rachel's hand on her leg. "But it was more than that. Apparently, there are a lot of things wrong with me."

"Quinn, no," she hastens to argue. "There's nothing \textit{wrong} with you."

Quinn looks at her. "Thank you for saying that, but there are still so many things you don't know about me."

"I want to learn."

"And I find I want to tell you," she admits. "I've - I've never actually told anyone any of that. Not even my therapist."

Rachel blinks. "You see a therapist?"

Quinn chuckles. "It's unbelievable, isn't it?" she jokes. "I've been in therapy all this time and I'm still so fucked up."

"Quinn," she admonishes.

The blonde shrugs. "I see her to battle my anxiety, mainly," she explains after a moment. "It hasn't worked, obviously. She mainly just drugs me up. I suppose it's partly my own fault because I'm not completely honest with her about everything, but I've always been terrified that she reports back to my parents because they're the ones who sent me to her in the first place."

Rachel can understand that fear, so she doesn't attempt to alleviate it. "I think talking to someone is good, though," she says. "It definitely helped me, at least. After the divorce, my mother sent me to a child counsellor, which was... odd. We kind of just drew pictures and talked about imaginary adventures. Eric says you can learn a lot about a child's psyche that way."

"Did it help?"

"I think so," she says. "I don't know any different, so I imagine it did. I think I managed to adjust accordingly, and then I learned that my dad is in love with another man who has his own entire family." She sighs. "My mother went \textit{insane}, Quinn. Like, \textit{insane} \textit{insane}. She refused to let me see him, and she threw the \textit{biggest} adult tantrum the first time I came to visit him here."

"I was young so I didn't really see what it was all doing to her. In my mind, she was just this evil person who was keeping me from seeing my dad and I hated her for a while. I'm not proud of it, now that I can put myself in her shoes. I can't even imagine what it feels like to face the possibility of losing your child to your ex-husband and his new family."

"And then she did?"

Rachel sighs, shifting slightly and dropping her head to rest on Quinn's uninjured shoulder. "I asked to move here after a particularly terribly bullying incident in New York," she says, her voice low. "It - it was bad, and I wasn't happy at all, and my parents actually \textit{talked} about it, and they let me move. At the time, it was the best thing ever to happen to me... and then it just wasn't."

Quinn doesn't press for more.

"When you're a kid, you never really think about it," Rachel says.

"Think about what?"
"The consequences of your words or your actions."

Quinn blinks. "No, I don't suppose you don't."

"Inherently, you know right from wrong, but - " she stops. "I always wonder about it."

"About what?"

"What kind of person I would be if just one thing about my life happened differently."

"I think about that too," Quinn says, her own cheek resting against Rachel's head.

"It doesn't help with anything, does it?"

"No," Quinn says; "I reckon it just makes everything worse."

Quinn doesn't sleep well. All she can think about is little Rachel, trying to navigate all that life sends her way. Quinn could hear the sadness in Rachel's voice, and all she wants to do is hold her and protect her and make her feel all those positive, good things she deserves to feel.

It's terrifying.

Quinn doesn't want this.

She can't have this.

Not yet.

It's too soon.

When Rachel emerges from her bedroom the next morning, she's dressed and ready to face the day. This time, when she sees Quinn, she's going to be at the top of her game. There will not be any sleepy kisses to cheeks and lingering hugs around apple and cinnamon necks.

She's determined and focused.

Which all amounts to naught when she strolls into the kitchen and finds Quinn Fabray, flushed red, wearing a white tank top, the tightest jeans she's ever seen and a 'Kiss the Chef' apron. Rachel's eyes nearly bug out of her head at the sight, her mouth going dry.

"Hey, Rachel," Quinn says when she spots her, her own smile bright. "We're transforming leftovers."

Rachel looks from Quinn to LeRoy to Grandma Holt, and then back to Quinn. "Hey," she says, still in a bit of shock. "How long have you been up?"

Quinn's smile falters slightly, and her eyes grow darker. "A while," she says, and Rachel makes a note to ask her about it later. "We're making omelettes, by the way. What do you want in yours?"

"I'm having an 'Everything Omelette,'" LeRoy declares from behind Quinn.

Quinn visibly grimaces, and Rachel giggles. "He's not kidding," Quinn says. "It's currently cooking, and it has everything in it. I'm actually terrified of that particular concoction."
LeRoy eyes his daughter curiously. "Are you coming inside or not?"

Rachel jerks into motion and crosses the kitchen to hug LeRoy and Grandma Holt. All her resolve to keep her head around Quinn dissolves when the blonde waits expectantly for her own hug. Steeling herself, she steps into Quinn's space and wraps her arms around her neck, automatically closing her eyes and breathing in her overpowering scent.

Even in the kitchen, the apples and cinnamon wash over her.

Quinn's arms close around her waist, and the two of them hug for longer than is strictly necessary. Quinn releases her first, looking that bit more flushed. "So, your omelette?"

Rachel takes a large step away from her. "Uh, what are you having?"

Quinn blinks. "Oh, I already ate."

"Oh?"

"I've been up for a while."

Rachel immediately steps back into her space, her own eyes studying Quinn's face. There are circles under her eyes, and her lips are pressed into a thin line. "Later," she says.

Quinn grins, despite herself. "Do I have a choice?"

"You always have a choice, Quinn."

Before Quinn can respond, LeRoy interrupts them, however inadvertently, by banging a pan on the stove, and they both flinch. And then giggle.

"Sweets?" LeRoy says. "The boys are keen to have a barbecue this evening; what do you think?"

"Any particular reason?"

"Do we ever need a reason to have more food?" he asks rhetorically. Then: "But I do think, with Eric's birthday just passed, we could use it to celebrate a little."

Rachel nods in agreement. "That sounds like a good idea, yeah. Can I invite Tina and Noah?"

LeRoy laughs out loud. "I'm sure, even if you didn't, those two would show up here anyway. They're like bloodhounds, sniffing out a Holt barbecue from afar."

She smiles knowingly, and then turns to Quinn. "Looks like you'll get to meet my best friends after all."

It never quite occurs to her that Quinn is about to meet a hell of a lot more.

"What am I supposed to wear?" Quinn asks, poking her head through Rachel's slightly ajar door. She's been in the brunette's room a handful of times, but it's never been for more than a few minutes at a time. Now, though, she walks straight into the room and sits on the edge of the bed and lays back, her head resting on Rachel's outstretched legs.

"Anything you want," Rachel answers, eyeing Quinn over the top of her book. Despite the temperatures outside, the blonde has been in her tank top nearly all day, and it's distracting to Rachel. She didn't even know Quinn had biceps like that.
Quinn quirks an eyebrow. "So, I could go naked?"

"I'm sure the boys wouldn't complain."

"Rachel," she says, a steady smile on her face. "What are you going to wear?"

"Probably just a dress."

Quinn rolls onto her side, and uses her free hand to take the book from Rachel. "I like you in dresses," she says seriously.

Rachel's eyes widen in surprise, and the breath catches in her throat. "Oh?"

"I think they show your personality the best, and I'm kind of a fan of it."

Rachel sits up to study Quinn's face, thinking back to what LeRoy said about reading the signs. Is this one of them? Is this Quinn's way of telling her what she needs to know without actually telling her?

"Do you want to tell me why you didn't sleep well last night?" Rachel asks, and Quinn immediately looks away. "No, don't do that," she presses. "Talk to me."

"It's nothing," she dismisses unconvincingly. "I'm fine."

Rachel lets out a long-suffering sigh, contemplating the best way to go about this. She wants Quinn to be able to talk to her, and the best thing she can think to do is offer something of herself.

So.

"Quinn," she says.

"Rachel?"

"I do worry."

"What?"

"You asked me if I thought you would do something if you weren't here, and the answer is, yes," she says, reaching out with her right hand and running a soothing hand over Quinn's perfect hair. "I worry about it, all the time, because it feels to me as if you blame yourself for something terrible, and I - " her voice catches, and she forces herself to take a deep, calming breath. "I know what that feels like. I know, Quinn, because I blamed myself for what happened to me too."

Quinn's eyes widen, and she immediately sits up, shifting as close as she can to the brunette without actually touching her.

Needing some form of contact, Rachel rests her hand on Quinn's bent knee. "I've never really told anyone this, but I blamed myself for what happened. I thought that I must have done something to deserve it; that it was my fault; that I asked for it in some way, and it was horrible, Quinn. It ate me up from the inside, and it made everything black and ugly. It just sat inside of me, this miserable painful thing, consuming and consuming until I felt as if there was nothing left.

"Sometimes, I look at you, and I see it in your eyes, Quinn, and it terrifies me. It paralyzes me with fear, and I don't want that for you. I never want that for you. So, yes, I'm worried, all the time, because I know. I know what it's like to get lost in the dark and want nothing more than to let it take you with it."
There are tears in Quinn's eyes. "Rachel," she whispers.

Rachel's other hand cups Quinn's cheek. "Please don't shut me out," she whispers. "I'm right here, okay? I'm here, and I'll bear the weight with you. I'll hold your hand in the dark and lead you into the light, because I know what it feels like to think you have to search blindly. I'm not going to leave you, Lucy Quinn. I'm not going to let you suffer in the dark the way I did."

Quinn won't cry, but she does drop her head to rest her forehead against Rachel's collarbone. "It wasn't your fault," she whispers brokenly. "It wasn't your fault. It wasn't."

Rachel closes her eyes, her nostrils overwhelmed by apples and cinnamon. "It wasn't your fault either, Quinn. Whatever it was, I promise it wasn't."

Rachel decides to wear a purple dress.

Quinn might not have explicitly said it's her favourite colour - Rachel suspects it's actually green, or even red - but she is definitely a fan of wearing it. Rachel isn't going to spend too much time thinking about the fact that she's dressing for Quinn, and chooses just to enjoy the evening. She's going to see Noah and Tina, and she's definitely missed them.

Once she's deemed herself presentable, she heads downstairs, knowing the barbecue is already in full swing downstairs. She can hear voices and music, and she just hopes Quinn isn't feeling too overwhelmed by the sheer volume of people in attendance. Rachel's family loves a celebration. Any excuse, really, to have hoards of food and warm company.

Rachel skips down the stairs and stops in the kitchen to check on things. Grandma Holt is sitting at the kitchen table with baby Lena, and Rachel kisses both their foreheads before she heads out back. She steps out through the back doors, her eyes already seeking out Quinn in the surprising number of people.

When chestnut brown lands on hazel, Rachel's breath catches, and she takes an automatic step forward. Quinn is looking at her over the rim of her glass, happily ignoring the conversation Robert and Eric are trying to have with her. A grin spreads across Rachel's face as her feet keep her moving, a single destination in mind.

Her tunnel vision is the only reason she doesn't see him coming because, before she knows it, Finn Hudson is standing right in front of her, his dopey smile in full display, and Rachel practically yelps as she walks straight into his chest.

"Hey, Rach," he says, and immediately wraps her in an unexpected hug.

Rachel tries to squirm out of his embrace, and he releases her just enough... to kiss her.
Chapter Ten

Rachel registers two things at the same time: Finn's tongue in her mouth and Quinn Fabray no longer in her line of sight. Her fight or flight senses kick in immediately and, fighting off a vicious flashback, she shoves Finn away from her as hard as she possibly can.

"What the hell?" she shrieks, and the entire backyard falls silent, their heads snapping towards the commotion. Her breathing is laboured and she's seeing his face and feeling his hands on her body.

"Get away from me!" she screams, her hands coming up to cover her face, and then her ears as the flashback hits. She shuts her eyes tightly, trying desperately not to give into it.

She screeches when a hand touches her back, her arms flailing to get away from the contact.

"Don't touch her," Quinn suddenly yells, and she's so close now. "Just, everybody get back, turn away. Give her a minute." Then: "Now!" she growls.

Rachel hears light footsteps, and then Quinn's voice, gentle and soothing now.

"Hey, Rach," she murmurs. "Do you know where you are?"

Rachel shakes her head violently, smelling him all around her.

"I'm here," Quinn whispers, and she steps closer. "I'm right here. You're safe here, I promise. It's just us. Your friends and your family. Do you know where you are? You're here, at home, safe and loved. I'm right here with you. Reach out and touch me if you need to."

Rachel forces herself to steady her breathing.


Slowly, Rachel drops her hands to wrap around her own body, taking up a protective stance.

"I'm right here," Quinn says again. "Reach out. I'm right here."

So, Rachel does.

Keeping her eyes closed, she reaches blindly with her right hand, and her fingers close around the fabric of Quinn's dress. She holds it tightly and tugs. The blonde goes willingly, and lets Rachel wrap her arms around her neck. Apples and cinnamon wash over the brunette, and she allows her body to relax.

"Can I hug you back?" Quinn whispers.

"Gently."

Rachel can barely feel Quinn's hug, and the reverence in her embrace is almost Rachel's undoing. She buries her face in Quinn's neck and just holds on.
"I'm right here, Rachel," Quinn whispers into her hair. "You're okay."

"I'm not okay," she mumbles against Quinn's skin, and the blonde shivers.

"You will be," she counters. "We'll find our way through the dark together."

At the sound of that, Rachel actually laughs, and Quinn's smile is small but present. "I'm so embarrassed."

"Don't be."

"I don't even know what happened."

Quinn's smile slips off her face and her eyes harden. "I do," she says darkly. "Do you want to go inside? Spend a minute alone. Freshen up. Anything you want."

Rachel finds herself nodding, even though her heart rate spikes at the word *alone*. It's what she wants, but also not. Still, she says, "I'd like that."

Quinn waits a few more seconds before she initiates the release, stepping back slightly but still shielding Rachel from curious eyes. She glances over her shoulder and locks eyes with Emily-Anne, which prompts the woman forward.

"Emily, take her inside," Quinn says, and her fellow blonde immediately complies, guiding Rachel back into the house without a fight. Though, Rachel does cast a longing look at Quinn that she's just able to ignore.

There's something she has to do.

When they're out of sight, Quinn turns the fiercest, coldest glare she can possibly muster on an unsuspecting Finn Hudson. The boy actually shrinks back, and several other people even flinch. "I don't know and don't particularly care to know who you think you are, but the next time you want to force yourself on someone, *don't fucking do it,*" she practically growls, her tone low and dangerous. "Do I make myself clear?"

He nods dumbly.

"Now, when Rachel comes back out here, you will be gone. She is not going to see you, and she is not going to hear from you. If you ever deign to do something as stupid as that again, I'm going to show you *exactly* how I got this cast." She resists the urge to roll her eyes at herself because, seriously, she fell down a fucking flight of stairs. "Do we understand each other?"

He nods again.

"Good." She produces the fakest smile possible, and then spins around with a flick of her hair and disappears into the house after her brunette friend.

The backyard is eerily quiet in the wake of all the excitement, until Robert breaks it.

"Just when you thought she couldn't get any hotter."

He's awarded with a swat to the head first by his aunt, and then again by LeRoy.

"Has she said anything?" Quinn asks Emily-Anne when she finds the new mother sitting on the edge of Rachel's bed, looking pensive.
"No," Emily-Anne says, looking particularly shaken. "She just went into her bathroom and I haven't heard a peep since."

Quinn nods. "I can take it from here, if you don't mind," she says.

Emily-Anne doesn't read it as a request. It's more of a command, and she rises to her feet immediately, acquiescing. There's just something about this girl that's both frightening and incredibly soothing. "We'll be downstairs if she needs anything."

Quinn twists her body slightly. "Actually, do you think someone could make us some hot chocolate?" she asks.

Emily-Anne nods enthusiastically, jumping at the opportunity to do something. "I'll get right on it and bring it up."

"That won't be necessary," she says. "We'll have it downstairs."

There's no room for arguing, so the woman just nods again, and then disappears from the room. Quinn waits a beat to gather her thoughts before she gently knocks on Rachel's bathroom door.

"Rachel," she says softly. "Can I come in?"

"It's open."

Quinn turns the handle immediately and slips into the bright room. She's unsurprised to find Rachel sitting in the empty bathtub, her head leaning back and her eyes closed. Quinn moves towards her, taking slow and purposeful steps, and settles on the edge of the bath with her eyes on the brunette.

Rachel surprises them both by being the one to break the silence. "What's your favourite colour?"

Quinn startles, and then smiles. "It's green, on most days," she says; "but I'm quite the fan of red these days."

She smiles slightly. "Is there any specific reason for that?"

Quinn thinks there is, but she won't say so. "What's your favourite colour?" she asks, avoiding answering the question.

"Guess."

"I'm going to go with yellow."

Rachel chuckles lightly, her eyes remaining closed for a long moment. "You would be correct."

"I generally am."

She sighs in response, suddenly feeling content. She isn't even thinking about what happened downstairs. She's here, safe with Quinn, and she feels all her worries fade away.

"Tell me what you need," Quinn eventually says, growing antsy with the silence.

Slowly, Rachel opens her eyes. "I need you not to need me to apologise."

"Done," she says.
"I also need you not to need me to explain."

"Also done."

Rachel blinks once, twice, before she reaches for Quinn's hand and squeezes her fingers. "Thank you."

Quinn just nods, and then squeezes back. The two of them sit in comfortable, companionable silence for the longest time. Quinn's back hurts slightly, and her breathing grows unsteady. The sound is enough to pull Rachel out of her musings.

"We're going back downstairs, aren't we?" Rachel questions, sighing at the feel of Quinn's fingertips that are now dancing along the skin of her forearm.

"You tell me," she says in response.

"We're going downstairs," she declares, and Quinn grins at her.

"That's my girl."

Two cups of hot chocolate are waiting for Quinn and Rachel once they've cleaned themselves up enough to head downstairs. The beverages are still warm, sitting innocently on the kitchen island, just waiting for them.

"Mine?" Rachel questions, looking surprised.

Quinn just nods. "Where's the cinnamon?"

"Cabinet above the stove," Rachel absently answers, her attention on the chocolate liquid. "Do I even want to know how there's a hot cup of hot chocolate just waiting for me?"

"It's magic."

"You are magic," she concludes.

"That, she is," a voice says, and Rachel automatically flinches at the intrusion. It's Noah, though, and he's wearing his easy, schoolboy smile. It's incredibly difficult to be mad at him.

Quinn doesn't have that problem. "You can't just sneak up on us like that," she snaps. "And, don't even tell me I should have seen you coming. You snuck up on us on purpose."

Noah eyes her carefully, struggling to figure her out.

Rachel clears her throat. "Noah, this is Quinn," she says. "Quinn, this is -"

"Noah Puckerman," Noah interrupts, holding out his hand for Quinn to shake, which she does, albeit reluctantly. "I really want you to have my babies," he says, leering at her, and she can't stop herself from visibly cringing.

"Noah," Rachel admonishes, somewhat testily.

"Sorry, Babe," he says, moving to kiss the top of her head but stopping at the last moment. He's not going to be touching her unless she wants him to. "How are you feeling?"

Rachel merely shrugs because she doesn't want to lie to him. "What's going on outside?"
"The evening is well underway," he says. "It took a while, but I think they've all managed to push the incident from earlier from their minds."

Rachel chooses to be relieved by that. "Is - is Finn still here?" she asks, and she's not completely oblivious to the way Quinn clenches her fists on the countertop.

Noah shakes his head, nervous eyes flicking Quinn's way. "Your brothers made sure he left, and he was all to willing to go. I think he just wanted to change his pants after shitting them."

Rachel frowns. "What?"

"Blondie over here is fucking scary," he says. "Even I flinched, and I've been to juvie."

Rachel turns questioning eyes on Quinn. "What is he talking about?"

"I have no idea," she immediately replies, her tone and expression all innocence.

Rachel gives her a look that clearly says she doesn't believe her, but Quinn is wholly unaffected by it. She just stands perfectly still, her back straight, and sips at her hot chocolate. Rachel makes a mental note to give her a fierce hug when they're next alone.

But, for now, she says, "Quinn Fabray, my hero."

And, despite her stoic front, the blonde can't stop her blush.

"Do you want some more potato salad?"

Rachel can only watch in amusement as Grandma Holt attempts, yet again, to get Quinn to dish anything more onto her pitiful plate of food, but she's failing. Quinn politely declines every time, merely stating that she already has some... that she's barely touched.

They're definitely going to have to have a discussion about food soon. Quinn definitely can't be getting all the nutrition she needs with how little she eats.

Rachel is sitting at one of the wooden tables in the backyard, her back warm as she chose to position herself beneath one of the upright electric heaters. It's heaven, really. The empty space to her left is Quinn's seat, but the blonde is fetching a garlic roll for the two of them to share, though Rachel suspects she'll be eating most of it.

When she finally decided to come back outside, nobody mentioned anything about the reason she was missing in the first place. Nobody tried to hug her either, which was a relief. She's kept Quinn right by her side, and they spent about an hour moving from group to group and mingling.

When LeRoy declared the food ready, it was a mad dash to plate up, and Rachel used the opportunity to pull Quinn into a hug that lasted much too long.

Now, though, Rachel believes it wasn't nearly long enough.

They're sitting with Noah, Tina, Emily-Anne and baby Lena, and all seem to have taken to Quinn in various ways. Noah obviously has the hots for her, Tina adores but is slightly wary of her, and Emily-Anne just loves her.

Lena, well, she loves just about everyone.

And, well, Rachel is pretty damn sure she's in love.
"So, do we get to sign your cast?" Declan asks, eyeing the green-wrapped plaster around Quinn's left forearm.

Quinn glances down at her still-pristine cast, and visibly weighs her options. "I don't think there's enough space for the lot of you," she says, which earns her a chuckle from the group gathered around her.

Rachel's hand is resting on her knee under the table, hidden from sight, and it's the only thing stopping her from feeling overwhelmed by the many eyes trained on her. She's shiny and new, and there is really a disproportionate number of boys in this family.

"She hasn't even let Rachel sign it, Kid," Daniel says; "I think you're fighting a losing battle there."

The reason for that is Rachel hasn't actually asked to sign it. Quinn isn't sure what she would say, but she hasn't really been forced to think about it. In her mind, she knows if she lets one person sign her cast; she'll have to let everyone as well, and she really doesn't want that.

It'd just be messy.

"Ice cream!" LeRoy yells, emerging from the house with a tray in his hands. There are three huge tubs of ice cream on it - vanilla, mint chocolate and strawberry cheesecake - and two boxes of cones.

A lot of people fall into line quickly, but Quinn barely moves.

Rachel leans in close to her to whisper. "Are you going to have some?" she asks.

"Probably not."

"Why?"

There are things Quinn can say, she knows, but the lies are starting to taste like acid in her mouth whenever she has to say them to Rachel. "I wasn't really allowed to indulge when I was a kid," she says. "I suppose I just got used to it."

Rachel presses her lips together. "What if we were to share one?"

Quinn raises her eyebrows. "Share a... cone?"

Rachel falters. "Or a bowl," she offers, mentally kicking herself. Sharing a cone? Seriously? She may as well have suggested they just cut to the chase and exchange saliva. Which, okay, sounds gross when you don't call it kissing.

Quinn gives it a bit of thought, and then nods with a grin. "Is there a particular flavour you prefer?"

"Surprise me."

Quinn's eyes flash with something, and then she's getting up and heading into the house to fetch a bowl and two spoons. Rachel can just watch her go, wondering what it was she saw in the hazel. There was excitement, sure, fear, and something else entirely. All Rachel knows is it had very little to do with ice cream.

When Quinn does finally return to her side, the bowl is less than halfway filled with vanilla and mint chocolate ice cream. The blonde looks particularly sheepish as she meets Rachel's gaze.
"There's something I have to tell you," she says, sounding serious. "I haven't told you until now, but it's probably like a dealbreaker or something, so I need you to know."

Rachel's eyes widen. Oh, God, what is she going to say? "What is it, Quinn?"

She sighs. "I really don't like strawberries," she confesses. "Or, any berries, really. Like, at all."

Despite herself, Rachel bursts out laughing. She practically cackles, doubling over and clutching at her stomach as Quinn's words roll around in her head.

"It's really not that funny," Quinn grumbles petulantly as she spoons some ice cream with more force than is strictly necessary.

Rachel's laughter eventually tapers off, and she reaches out to twirl a strand of Quinn's hair around her forefinger. "Quinn Fabray, I am so glad I get to know you," she murmurs.

This time, they both blush.

Rachel is almost safely in her bedroom when Hiram steps out of the room he shares with LeRoy. It's obvious he's come looking for her from the pleasantly surprised look on his face.

He reiterates that by saying the words, "Just the girl I wanted to see."

Rachel smiles at him, automatically moving towards him. "What's up, Dad?"

"I just wanted to check on you," he says gently. "We haven't had a chance to talk after what happened tonight. Are you okay?"

She presses her lips together. "Well, I wouldn't say I'm okay, but I will be," she says. "I'm more embarrassed by it than anything, and I think I'm going to have to make an appointment with Dr Howell for Winter Break. I thought I was over the flashbacks." She can't help sounding disappointed in herself, and Hiram's face twists into a look of sympathy.

Rachel hates it.

At least Quinn doesn't use that look on her. Quinn's eyes are sad, sure, but there's never pity. There's an apology and shared pain, but she's never looked at Rachel as if there's anything less about her because of what's happened.

Maybe it's just men, or just her father.

"I'm quite tired, though," Rachel says, extricating herself from this conversation. "I'll see you tomorrow, Dad. Goodnight."

Hiram leans forward slightly, as if to kiss her cheek, but stops himself.

Rachel sighs, but she doesn't move to close the gap between them. It's too soon, and she's not about to test her own reactions so late in the evening.

"Goodnight, Sweetheart," he finally says, and they go their separate ways.

Instead of going to her own bedroom, Rachel moves towards the closed door of Daniel's bedroom. She knows Quinn is behind it and, steeling herself, she raises her hand to knock lightly. She barely waits for a confirmation, before she's slipping into the dark room.
Quinn sits up in bed, ruffling the sheets. "Rachel?" she questions, sounding adorably confused. Rachel can't actually see her facial expression but she can imagine it. "Is everything okay?" she asks. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Rachel says. "I just - do you - " she stops, suddenly coming back to herself. What is she doing in here? God. No. This isn't part of the plan.

"Rachel?"

She takes a step back. "You're sleeping," she says. "I don't even know what I'm doing here. I'm just going to - "

"Rachel," Quinn interrupts, her tone of voice leaving very little space for arguing. "Come lie with me," she says, lifting her arm and opening the duvet. "I want to talk to you about something."

Rachel lets out a shaky breath. "Are you - "

"Sure?" she questions. "Of course. Now, hurry, you're letting out all the warmth."

Rachel jerks into motion and crosses the room. She barely hesitates as she climbs into bed beside Quinn, and the two of them settle on their backs, side by side, without touching. "What did you want to talk about?"

"Whatever you want to talk about."

Rachel chuckles. "So, that was all a ploy to get me into your bed, huh?"

Quinn breathes out slowly. "It worked, didn't it?"

"I'll get you a medal," she deadpans.

Quinn giggles, and then yawns. "You can talk if you want to," she offers. "Or, we can just lie here, okay? You're kind of warm."

"Oh, so I'm here for my body heat, then?"

"Among other things, yeah."

Rachel closes her eyes, allowing her body to relax into the mattress. She can smell Quinn all around her and it's soothing and welcoming. She can hear Quinn's steady breathing and it's settling.

Reaching blindly, Rachel's left hands slips into Quinn's right, their fingers linking and their palms pressing together. "I want to tell you about Finn," she says softly, and Quinn gently squeezes her fingers in support. "I imagine you have your own thoughts about him, but I think you should know the full story. He's been my first everything, you know? My first friend, boyfriend, duet partner. He was actually even my first kiss, with tongue." She chuckles to herself. "He's my first love, Quinn, and I sometimes hate him for it."

Quinn knows she shouldn't speak, so she doesn't. Rachel is telling her something important.

"I slept with him for the first time the summer before junior year," she says, and Quinn does her best not to react. Just the thought of Rachel with him hurts. Just thinking about it makes her cringe. "It was his birthday, and he'd been asking, and - " she stops suddenly. "How stupid was I?"

"Rachel, no," Quinn immediately says.
"It's okay, Quinn," she says, rolling onto her side so she can look at the blonde's profile. "I know I did it for all the wrong reasons. I've come to terms with that and, as much as I regretted it at the time, in hindsight, I'm glad it was him, you know?"

Unfortunately, Quinn does know.

"We were dating when it happened. Things weren't so great before, though, and I'm convinced that he was going to break up with me." Her laugh is humourless now, and Quinn plans Finn'a death a million different ways. "Obviously, he couldn't do that afterwards." She snorts. "Well, I thought he couldn't."

At this, Quinn also rolls onto her side because she wants to see Rachel.

"I wasn't okay," she says. "I was barely functioning as a human being, let alone as a girlfriend, and - " she stops, forcing herself to take a deep breath. "I try not to blame him. I mean, I don't, because I wasn't - " she stops again. "I won't get into the details of how I found out, but I learned that he was cheating on me."

Even though Rachel's face remains unchanged, Quinn's hardens. She shifts close enough until they're breathing each other's air. "I am so sorry."

"Please don't apologise for him," she says.

"I'm not," Quinn counters gently, because she's done apologising for other people. "I'm apologising for everything."

Rachel smiles gently, her hand reaching to cup her cheek. "You are so precious, Quinn Fabray."

Quinn leans into her touch. "Is my cheek your favourite part of my body?"

Rachel flushes, but she doesn't take her hand back. "Actually, it isn't."

"What is?"

She presses her lips together, choosing to roll with this... flirting. Is it flirting? Whatever it is, Rachel isn't backing down. "I don't think I can accurately answer that question, Quinn," she says; "I haven't yet seen every part."

Quinn's breath catches, and she's suddenly thankful for the dark.

Rachel clears her throat. "So, we broke up," she continues, bringing them back from whatever dangerous place they're wandering. "Shit happened. I moved schools."

Quinn waits because, honestly, she doesn't know if she could speak if she tried.

"This past summer, we kind of rekindled things," she explains. "It wasn't anything serious, and we clearly didn't discuss anything properly because I thought it was over. I don't - I don't want to be with him anymore. Not in any way." Rachel needs to say this for herself, and for Quinn. "I think there was a part of me that worried if someone would ever want me again, you know, and I needed to be sure. I couldn't bring myself to sleep with him, though, so I can only imagine what he's been up to since I've been back at school."

"It looked like he missed you," Quinn says.

Rachel's fingers shift to thread through Quinn's loose hair. "Maybe," she allows; "but I rarely think
about him unless he's right in front of me. There are other, more important, people on my mind these days."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah."

Quinn closes her eyes at the feel of Rachel’s fingers, absently humming in content. "Good," she murmurs, turning her head slightly and pressing a soft kiss to the inside of her wrist. "Good."

Rachel chuckles softly, her eyes also slipping shut. "You already said that."

When Rachel opens her eyes the next morning, she's alone. It takes her a moment to get her bearings and, when she realises she's in Daniel's room, she panics.

She's in Daniel's room.

Which means she slept in here.

With Quinn.

Who's not here.

Rachel scrambles out of bed and leaves the room in a rush, hoping nobody sees her as she makes her way to her own bedroom to get ready for the day. She can only wonder what must be going through Quinn's head right now because she's five seconds away from losing it completely.

They flirted and they touched and they slept together.

Rachel has no idea how she's supposed to handle this day. Is it going to be awkward? Are they going to pretend none of it happened? Are they going to talk about it?

By the time she does leave her room, Rachel has a splitting headache, and the roaring noise in the kitchen definitely doesn't help alleviate it. She slips into the ruckus, kisses LeRoy's cheek and then helps herself to a fresh bagel that she nibbles on from her position in the corner.

"Looking for Quinn?" Emily-Anne asks, sidling up to her and bumping their hips.

Rachel swallows the bite of bagel in her mouth. "Is she out with my dad?"

Emily-Anne shakes her head. "She was in here pretty early," she says. "LeRoy offered her an out when the noise picked up. The boys can be a bit relentless."

Rachel mutters something under her breath.

"What's that?"

"Nothing," she says. "Where is she, then?"

"With Grandpa H."

Rachel nods her thanks, pushes off the counter and goes in search of her blonde. She just wants to lay eyes on Quinn; just to know she's still here. There's a part of her that believes Quinn is one of those that could run if pushed too far, and Rachel is terrified she has.
Though, all those worries completely dissipate the moment she arrives at her grandparents’ cottage to see her grandfather and Quinn sitting together on the front porch, both of them staring out at the vineyard and sipping at glasses of lemonade.

They see her coming a mile away, and Quinn's face splits into a beaming smile that makes her heart stutter.

Oh, she's so very screwed.

"There she is," Grandpa Holt says. "We were wondering when you were going to join us."

Quinn gets to her feet when Rachel is near enough, and drags a chair into position next to hers. Grandpa Holt pours a third glass of lemonade and, a minute later, they're all sitting together. The entire situation is a little overwhelming because Quinn is wearing a pair of denim shorts - in November - and Rachel can't stop her eyes from dropping down every few minutes. There's just so much pale skin on offer, and all she wants to do is touch.

Grandpa Holt clears his throat, catching her attention. "I was just telling Quinn here about the fishing trip we took when you were eight," he says.

Quinn's gaze catches hers. "Did you really fall out of the canoe?"

Rachel feels heat rise up her neck. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Grandpa Holt just chuckles, and then continues with his story about the one trip Rachel remembers fondly. It was the first time she really opened up to the new family she was now suddenly a part of. It was terrifying, setting off with these strange people and being expected to fit in.

She's never fit in.

She's too Rachel for that.

When Grandpa Holt finishes with his story, he excuses himself and rises to his feet. Without any hesitation, he presses light kisses to both their foreheads, and then shuffles into the cottage, leaving the two girls alone. They sit in comfortable silence until Quinn breaks it, slight amusement in her tone.

"Rachel Berry," she says. "Can I tell you something?"

"Anything."

Her grin is mischievous. "You snore."

Rachel gasps. "I do not."

"Oh, but you do," she says. "It's kind of cute, really."

"Quinn, are you messing with me?" she asks, because she is not going to acknowledge that Quinn just called her 'cute.' She's already struggling enough, as it is.

She laughs out loud. "You should ask Brittany; I'm sure she'll tell you."

Rachel shakes her head. "Not that I believe you or anything, but did I keep you up?"

"No," she replies. "It was actually the best sleep I've had in a while."
Rachel swallows audibly.
"You're very warm."

"Do you want more lemonade?" Quinn asks Rachel as she tops up her own glass.

"No, thank you," she replies, leaning back in her chair and relaxing slightly. She's said more things to Quinn in the past few days than she's said to Brittany and Santana combined, in the few months she's known them.

She's under no illusion that this entire trip is going to change things between the two of them. She's vowed to make a move before they leave and, if that ends up ruining the friendship they've managed to cultivate, then so be it.

What she's already seen between them makes her think it's worth the risk.

*Quinn* is.

"How are you feeling today?" Quinn asks, her voice sincere and her eyes gentle. "On top of your snoring, it also sounded as if you were having nightmares."

Her brow furrows slightly. "I generally do," she says. "Have nightmares, I mean. I've become a pro at stopping my awake mind of thinking about it, but my mind is open for the pickings when I'm asleep."

Quinn crosses one leg over the other, and Rachel's gaze drifts. "Do you remember them when you wake up?"

"Sometimes," she confesses. "I wasn't ever a bad sleeper but, after what happened, I was so jittery for so long that I could barely get through the night without the contracting roof having me convinced someone was coming to kill me." She shakes her head. "I really put my family through the ringer with my midnight panic attacks and demands that LeRoy check the outside for any intruders."

Quinn taps Rachel's shin with her dangling foot, and the brunette manages a smile in response.

"At school, I'm busy enough not to think about it, and I get exhausted enough to have dreamless sleep, but last night's flashback kind of brought it all to the forefront, and I was powerless to stop it." She sets her half-empty glass of lemonade on the floor and leans forward, resting her elbows on her thighs. "Can I tell you about it?"

Without even missing a beat, she says, "Rachel, you can tell me anything."

"His name is Justin Prescott," she immediately says, surprising herself by being able to say his name without her voice faltering. "Wallingford is a pretty small place, even if its population is excess of forty thousand, so people generally know people. I'd seen him around a few times but I didn't know his name until I was forced to learn it in the worst way." She wrings her fingers together. "It was a Saturday. We were having a barbecue at the house, and LeRoy needed someone to go into town to pick up some last minute things, so Emily and I volunteered. It was just a normal day, Quinn, and everyone was going about his or her business as usual.

"Emily drove, of course, and I manned the radio. We were singing at the top of our lungs, being goofy and silly and just *us*. I was louder before, you know, more in your face. I used to break out into song at the drop of a hat, greet everyone I saw in the street. I was so young and trusting and
stupidly naive." She chuckles darkly, her eyes remaining forward. Right now, she can't bring herself to look at Quinn. "There's a grocery store in town that LeRoy likes for their fresh bread rolls, so we stopped there. To save time, we split up. She went for the rolls and tomatoes, and I decided to walk around the block to the little store that sells my dad's favourite Norwegian biscuits. LeRoy wanted them for making dessert, and those biscuits are to die for." She halts. "Well, that was a poor choice of words."

Rachel's eyes glaze over for a moment, getting lost in the memory.

She clears her throat. "Anyway, so there's this alley you walk past to get to the shop," she explains. "They tried to make it look pretty by putting potted plants and a few benches, but it was still pretty ugly. He was sitting in there when I walked past, and I waved." She covers her face with her hands. "I waved at him, Quinn. I fucking waved at him."

It's probably the first time Quinn's ever heard her swear that way, and it tells her all she needs to know about this moment that Rachel needs.

"Even though we live twenty miles out of town, LeRoy Holt is well known. The wine is known. So, everyone knows about my dad, and about me, and it was hard, you know? Lee's wife's family were livid, so they're rather estranged now. And this is an even smaller town when there are people who are homophobic, you know? You meet them all the time, and they say things, but you just ignore them and keep doing what you're doing. It's fine. It's something you can get used to. I think I tried to overcorrect, somehow. My personality could be a lot more friendly.

"Anyway, I bought the biscuits and a packet of liquorice that Lee likes, and then headed back to the car. I used the same route. Of course, I did. Why wouldn't I?" She shakes her head. "You know, for someone who grew up in New York, I had zero self-preservation skills." She licks her lips. "It all happened so fast, and then really slowly, at the same time. I can't explain it, really, but, one minute I was walking on the sidewalk, and the next I was flat on my back behind a bench with a blade pressed to my throat. Sometimes, I can still feel it there." Unconsciously, she presses trembling fingers to her neck. "Afterward, they told me I was in that alley for nineteen minutes," she says. "Nineteen painful, terrifying, horrific, degrading, disgusting, dehumanising, violent, hellish minutes."

Quinn sits perfectly still as she listens.

"I learned his name that day, and I learned so much more about myself," Rachel says. "I always thought I had this life figured out. Things happen all the time, good and bad, and we keep going regardless, you know. My parents got divorced, my dad moved to another state, I was bullied, my mother sometimes resents my talent, my dad married another man... these are all things that happened, and they're all things I managed to get through. I survived them with a determination I didn't even know I had, until I just did.

"So, I should have been able to survive this, right? I should have fought harder. I should have screamed louder. I should have punched and kicked and struggled and bitten. I should have done so much. But, I didn't. It wasn't enough.

"I remember this moment when the fight left me," she says, disgusted with herself. "I - I wanted to die, Quinn. I just wanted the pain to stop. I just wanted it all to stop."

Quinn gets up then, and moves to Rachel's chair. She doesn't even think about it as she gathers the girl right into her lap and holds her. She's not thinking that Rachel might not want to be touched, which is moot anyway when the brunette burrows into her, soaking up warmth and comfort.
"It didn't stop," Rachel cries into Quinn's shoulder. "It hasn't ever stopped, and it's never going to stop. Sometimes, I see him in faceless crowds, and I hear his voice in a chorus of others. I smell his breath when I'm walking the streets and I feel him when I close my eyes. He took something from me. He took everything from me."

Quinn's grip tightens, and her own tears are falling into Rachel's strawberry hair. "I'm sorry," she whispers. "I'm so sorry."

Rachel just sobs and sobs until she's spent and Quinn's shirt is soaked. She pulls back, suddenly apologetic.

"Don't," Quinn says before she can begin to apologise. "It's okay," she whispers, using the pads of her fingers to wipe at the tear tracks on Rachel's cheeks. "You are so beautiful."

"Quinn," she breathes.

Quinn rests her forehead against Rachel's. "You're wrong, you know?"

"I am?"

"He didn't take everything," she says, her right hand rising to press over her heart. "He didn't take this, and, if I have anything to do with it, he never will."

After a quiet lunch, a red-faced, puffy-eyed Rachel goes upstairs to catch a nap. Quinn doesn't follow because she suspects Rachel wants a moment to herself. It's been an emotional day and they've both been avoiding gazes and sidestepping questions about why they both look as if they've been crying for years.

It doesn't take Rachel long to fall into slumber, and the exhaustion she feels saves her from the nightmares. She's perfect pickings for them in this moment, but all she feels is the warmth of Quinn's fingers on her skin and the smell of apples and cinnamon wrapped all around her.

She feels much better when she wakes more than two hours later, her chest lighter and her body more energised. She's going to enjoy this last night at home, if it's the last thing she does.

After a quick stop at the bathroom, she heads downstairs, slowing at the bottom of the staircase and trying to decide where she wants to go.

It's the sound of running feet that alerts Rachel, and she immediately follows the source because, yes, she hasn't seen Quinn in one hundred and forty-three minutes and she's missing her already. It's pathetic, she acknowledges, but she doesn't actually care.

"What's going on?" she asks Eric when he moves into view in the otherwise empty kitchen.

He grins at her. "Come into the backyard and see for yourself."

Shrugging in acceptance, she follows him out of the house and into the backyard of the house - which is really just open to the many vines of what is their home - to find Quinn Fabray standing in a grape tank, bare feet and a beaming smile... that grows impossibly wider when she sees Rachel.

"Rachel!" she shouts, her excitement getting the better of her. "I'm squishing grapes," she says, sounding giddy and childlike in her excitement. "With my feet."

Rachel can't help her own smile. "I can see that," she says, folding her arms across her chest. "How
"does it feel?"


"I thought that was your maybe favourite colour."

"Doesn't mean I want red feet, Berry," she says. "And, by the way, your support has been noted."

Rachel laughs out loud. "Honestly, the fact that you can go from playful to petulant to sarcastic that quickly really gives me whiplash."

"Do try to keep up, dear."

Levi and Kelsey burst out laughing behind Rachel, and she glares at them over her shoulder. Levi just raises his palms in innocence. "I think she's my favourite of your friends, like, ever," he says.

"Hey!" a voice calls out, and Rachel turns towards the source, clearly surprised.

"Noah?" she asks, startled. "I didn't know you were here."

He shrugs, his eyes barely straying from where Quinn is laughing at herself. "I thought I'd drop by. It seems I made a good choice. This is quite the sight."

Just from the look on his face, she knows. He's not here for her at all; he's here for Quinn, and that's not okay. She would be perfectly fine with it if Quinn were any other girl, but she's not. Quinn is Quinn and Noah Puckerman isn't getting anywhere near her if Rachel can help it.

"Hey, Rach," he says, distracted by the image of Quinn in front of him.

"Hmm?"

"Don't think this is weird or anything, but do you know if Quinn has a boyfriend?"

Rachel feels her hackles rise, and it takes all her willpower not to snap at him in some way. "Not that I know of, no," she says carefully.

"Do you think she would ever go for me?"

Honestly, she thinks not, for a lot of reasons, both to do with Quinn and to do with Noah. In the end, she says, "I don't know, Noah." She glances at Quinn's flushed cheeks and happy smile. "Guys ask her out all the time at school, but she says she just doesn't have time for dating. We're all pretty busy, and you don't even live in the same Counties."

Noah frowns at her. "Who said anything about dating?" he asks. "I was talking about hooking up."

At that, Rachel rounds on him. "You will not, Noah Puckerman," she hisses, making him recoil in surprise. "I will not have you making Quinn yet another notch in your belt. Do we understand each other?"

"Um, okay."

"Good."

Before she can turn away, he steps into her space. "Is there a particular reason why?"
"She's my friend, Noah," she says, the word tasting like acid in her throat. "How awkward do you think it's going to be after you take her to bed?"

Noah eyes her carefully. "Are you sure that's all it is?"

"Of course," she dismisses, and then walks away.

Really, both girls have enough problems to work through without adding a nineteen-year-old boy's raging hormones into the mix.
Chapter 11

Chapter Eleven

"You could have just told me, you know?"

Rachel has to drag her eyes away from Quinn - it's becoming increasingly difficult to do with every second that passes - to give Noah her attention. "What?"

"You and Quinn," he says, dropping into the chair beside her. "You could have just told me. You know how I am about that."

Rachel gulps audibly. "There is no 'me and Quinn,'" she says. "She's my friend."

"But that's not all you want, is it?"

Rachel sighs heavily in defeat. "I really thought I was hiding it better than this, but apparently not."

He smiles in sympathy. "We just know you really well," he says. "Although, I get the feeling you're allowing her to know you in all the important ways."

She presses her lips together. "She's special."

"Indeed, she is," he says, sounding slightly wistful, and she tries not to be irritated by it. It's just Noah being Noah. "Are you going to tell her?"

"I think I'm going to have to," she confesses, studiously ignoring the way he's staring at Quinn. "Lines keep getting blurred and I have no idea where I stand with her. I think, for my own sanity, I'm going to have to clear things up for both of us."

"How do you think she's going to take it?"

"Well, seeing as her closest friend is gay, I think she'll actually be okay with the whole 'Rachel likes girls' part, but the whole 'Rachel likes Quinn' might be a bit much to stomach."

Noah looks back at Quinn, who's currently being chased by Declan with a jug of grape juice in his hand. It looks as if he intends to throw it at her, and Quinn ducks under Eric's arm and hides behind him.

Sometimes, she can act like such a kid.

Rachel loves it.

"I think everything is going to be okay," Noah finally says, basically declaring it. "She's going to surprise you."

Rachel merely hums in acknowledgment of his words, even though she can't bring herself to believe them.

"That worries you too, doesn't it?" he asks, reading the vacant look in her eyes for what it is. "Either way it goes, you're terrified."

"I don't want to lose her," she says, practically whispering. "We could not be friends by the end of this, or we could be... more, I guess."
He looks thoughtful. "Would she give you more?"

"I don't know," she admits. "She's terribly confusing, you know? And, even if she did, it's doubtful it would ever become an open, full-blown commitment."

Noah nods in understanding, though she suspects he doesn't really get what she's trying to say. Even if Quinn was somehow okay with a relationship; it would be a secret one.

She's Quinn Fabray.

And, as much as they both would probably like to forget that fact, they can't.

Not yet, at least.

"Well, I think it's all going to work out," Noah says again, sounding even more sure of his prediction. "You heard it here first, folks," he says. "Rachel Berry and Quinn Fabray are going to have their happily ever after."

As much as she would like to believe him, she's not naïve enough not to acknowledge all the shit they're going to have to get through to get to that elusive 'happily ever after.'

Quinn's sudden shriek draws Rachel's full attention from Noah, and they both look to see that Declan has succeeded in pouring grape juice over Quinn's light purple top.

Julian is quick to follow with his own glass of juice. And then Eric and Levi and Dennis and Tyler and Kelsey, but Quinn just glares hard at Daniel, and he retreats with his palms raised in innocence.

Rachel immediately gets to her feet with her own glass of juice still in her hand, her mouth going dry at the sight before her.

Quinn Fabray, covered in juice and sopping wet.

Rachel's dirty mind is taking her to all sorts of places because Quinn is wet. Her top is sticking to her skin, revealing the lipstick kisses on her pink bra and the outline of her oh-so-delicious abdominal muscles. Her hair is slicked back, and her eyes are crinkled through her shock and subsequent laughter.

She's gorgeous in every way.

Robert clears his throat. "Will you marry me?"

Quinn just rolls her eyes before her gaze settles on Rachel. "And you?" she asks slyly, arching one of those perfect eyebrows. "Have you come to join the party?"

Rachel cocks her head. "I was feeling a little left out."

Quinn's eyes flash with something, sparkling under the latent challenge. "Well, then, Berry, come and get me."

Rachel doesn't waste a second as she takes off, and Quinn practically squeals in her hurry to get away. Rachel chases her around the backyard, Quinn easily evading her because, damn, Quinn Fabray is fast. Quinn even manages to make a grab for a fresh pitcher of juice, which ends up all over Rachel's clothes before either of them can blink.

"Quinn!" Rachel shrieks
"Oh, shit," the blonde laughs, and then backs away when Rachel lunges for her. "Too slow, Miss Berry," she taunts, and then squeals again when Rachel breaks into a run. They're both aware of laughter going on all around them, but they have eyes for only each other.

Eventually, Quinn slows enough to let Rachel catch up, and the brunette tackles her to the ground, both of them laughing at the absurdity of it all. Quinn doesn't even feel the residual pain of her healing ribs and shoulder because now she's lying on her back on the grass and Rachel Berry is on top of her, her body pressing down on her in all the best ways.

"You're the worst," Rachel says, her hands either side of Quinn's head and her eyes on Quinn's face.

"You like it," Quinn taunts, that same damn eyebrow arched.

It's another beat before the laughter is gone and the amusement gives way to something else. The smile slips from Quinn's face, and her breath catches.

As if she's just realising the position they're in, Rachel's eyes widen and she immediately scrambles off the blonde, laughing nervously. She gets to her feet and holds a hand out to help Quinn to hers.

Once the blonde is upright, her chest rapidly rising and falling, neither makes a move to release the other's hand. Almost shyly, Rachel meets Quinn's gaze through her lashes, and there's a moment.

Just a moment.

"Quinn," Rachel breathes, and the spell breaks.

Quinn sucks in a sharp breath, taking her hand back. "I should - I need to - umm - " she awkwardly stumbles through her words, and then absently gestures at her clothing. "I should change," she finally says and, before Rachel can even say anything, she's bolting towards the house.

Rachel can only stare after her, her own heart thumping in her chest.

"Oh, yeah," Noah says coyly as he sidles up to her. "She totally wants you."

Quinn can't get her heart to stop beating as if she's just ran an endless marathon. It's thumping and loud and fast and everywhere. She can feel it in her fingers; the blood rushing in her ears. She's short of breath and she just can't seem to catch it.

All because of Rachel Berry.

It isn't supposed to happen like this.

Quinn had a plan.

She was supposed to survive through everything her parents expected of her until she could get out, and then only was she supposed to try to be happy.

They've been punishing her, and she's been punishing herself, but even she knows she can't atone forever, so she did the thing and set a goal for herself. Turn eighteen, gain access to her trust funds, graduate high school, ensure she'll be able to be self-sufficient, and then defect.

She doesn't want to be a Fabray.

She just wants to escape the expectations, love freely and live guilt-free. It's what she wants for herself, and none of it is supposed to happen this way.
Rachel Berry was never supposed to happen.
Not now, at least.
It's too soon.
It's too early in the plan, and Quinn hasn't paid enough to deserve the happiness this flighty girl is offering her.
In truth, Quinn has been struggling for a while, hiding her growing feelings and responses behind amusement and animosity. It's much easier fighting with Rachel than whatever this is.
They slept in the same bed, for goodness' sake.
Quinn knows what the girl's breath feels like.
It isn't supposed to happen like this.
It isn't supposed to happen at all.

Quinn spends an obscene amount of time in the shower, struggling to clean her body and hair of grape juice with one hand. She's also trying to stall as much as possible. Maybe she's spending too much time with Rachel and they need to cool it a little.
Sure.
She can totally do that.
It's what she should have been doing this entire time. In fact, coming here probably was the worst thing she could have done, but she just couldn't say no to Rachel when she got all sincere and imploring. Who wants to be alone at Thanksgiving, anyway?
Not Quinn.
She doesn't want to be alone ever again.
And she can't ignore the very real fact that Rachel seems to be offering just that to her.

Rachel is waiting for Quinn in Daniel's bedroom when the blonde finally returns from the bathroom. Both of them are freshly showered and wearing clean clothes, hair slightly damp and wearing shy smiles. Quinn's resolve immediately crumbles at the sight of Rachel in a knee-length green dress and bare feet.
"Hey," Rachel says from her position perched on the end of the bed. "Finish the hot water?"
Quinn's smile is sheepish as she tosses her towel at Rachel. "Shut up."
Rachel suddenly looks nervous, her hands fisting the damp towel she now has in her lap. "You're not avoiding me or anything, are you?"
Quinn frowns as she makes her way to the dresser to deposit her toiletry bag. "What? No. Why would you think that?"
"After what I told you this morning - " she can barely finish her sentence before Quinn is suddenly
in front of her, dropping to her knees and imploring Rachel to stop with her own eyes.

"Never," Quinn whispers, though it comes out strongly. "Never, Rachel."

"But you've been gone a long time," she points out, frowning slightly. "I mean, dinner is practically already ready. Are you sure everything is okay?"

Quinn looks away, feeling her heart rate rise at the sincerity of Rachel. "I was cold," she says. "And, I think my shorts are stained. I tried to wash them, but I kind of just left my clothes soaking in the tub. It's a little difficult to do things with one hand."

Rachel studies her face, knowing there's something she's not saying. "Did I make you uncomfortable?" she suddenly asks, refusing to dance around this anymore. "I mean, I know we've just been joking around and all that, but I don't want to do anything to - "

"Rachel," she interrupts, exhaling slowly. "Stop, please."

"I'm sorry," she says automatically.

Quinn shakes her head as she rises up to look into Rachel's eyes. "You've done nothing wrong, okay?" she reassures. "It's just - "

"What?"

"It's a lot."

Rachel's brow furrows.

"I'm an only child, you know," she says, and it suddenly clicks for Rachel.

"Ohh," Rachel says, laughing lightly as she cups both of Quinn's cheeks and forces her lips into a pout. "I have a big family."

"It's huge."

"And they're always around."

"All the time."

Rachel giggles. "I see," she says, releasing Quinn. "Well, there's only one more night of family, and then you and I get to go back to homework and responsibility."

"My two favourite things," Quinn drawls.

And... Rachel is reaching out again, her hands resting on Quinn's shoulders. "We can hide up here for a while," she offers. "We're waiting on Uncle Jared and Aunt Edith to get here, anyway."

Quinn takes a moment to place them in the large family tree she's been learning. Jared is the Holts' middle son, and he and his family live in Wallingford. Robert, Dennis and Tyler are his children.

Ah.

"My potential in-laws," Quinn jokes.

Rachel rolls her eyes. "If Rob is to be believed; you've agreed to a summer wedding."
Quinn laughs, her head tilting to the side. "Not that it's important or anything, but I've always wanted to get married in August."

Why did she even say that?

You're not helping yourself, Fabray.

Rachel's hands squeeze Quinn's shoulders for a beat. "I'll remember that," she says. Then: "So, you want to get married?"

Quinn chuckles secretively. "Uh, yeah, probably."

"Only probably?"

Quinn gently pries Rachel's hands off her and shifts so she can sit on her bottom and lean against the end of the bed. From her position, she reaches for one of Rachel's hands and tugs. The girl follows the movement and slips off the bed, settling right beside the blonde.

"I have to find someone to marry first," Quinn eventually says, which also isn't helping her cause.

"Anybody in your sights?" Rachel asks, and it sounds forced.

Quinn looks at her for the longest time, and eventually decides not to answer the question at all. "Do you want to get married?"

She nods, mercifully allowing the topic to shift. "I think, for a while, I wanted the wedding more than the marriage," she says; "but I've grown, somewhat." She shrugs, her shoulder bumping Quinn's. "I want that shared life with someone, you know. I want to live through all of life's trials and tribulations with someone by my side, loving me and letting me love them."

"Don't you ever get scared of that?" Quinn asks. "Marriage is - it's scary."

"I think I know the truth of that more than most," she says. "I literally watched my parents' marriage implode in all the ugliest ways, and then I look at how my dad is with LeRoy and it's fascinating to me that two people can complement each other so well. I've seen two ends of the marriage spectrum, I think, and if I can get something in between; I think I could be happy."

"Is that really what you want?"

"To be happy?"

Quinn presses her lips together. "Does your happiness have to lie with another person?" she asks, sounding very serious. "Doesn't it just put a lot of pressure on both of you?"

"Probably," she admits. "I've been happy alone, you know. I've also been happy with someone else. I think I would choose the latter, though I'd settle for the former. I just want to be happy, Quinn."

"And you're not, right now?"

Rachel breathes out slowly. "If I'm being perfectly honest, I think this is the happiest I've been in a very long time."

Quinn can't think of anything to say without taking them past that invisible line she's decided to draw in the sand. They're teetering on something here, and it's going to give at some point. She'll happily put it off for as long as possible. There's still too much to get through before she can allow herself to accept any kind of happiness, particularly one that lies with Rachel Berry.
"Are you?" Rachel asks.

"Hmm?"

"Happy, Quinn? Are you happy?"

Quinn wants nothing more than to be honest with her, so she tells the truth. She knows Rachel can handle it. "No," she says. "I don't think I've ever truly been happy, Rachel. Even as a child. I think there were bursts here and there, but it never lasted. It's always been this abstract concept to me, fleeting and elusive. And, if I really think about it, I don't think I've ever felt as if I actually deserve to feel it."

Now, that's an entire can of worms not to be opened right now, but Rachel can't resist. She wants to know all of Quinn. "Is that what Sam was talking about?"

"What?"

"He mentioned that you - " she pauses. "Well, I don't really understand what he was saying, and you're saying something similar now, so I can only guess that you're not letting yourself feel happiness, right?"

Quinn tenses. "Right," she echoes.

"Am I allowed to ask why?"

"You can ask."

Rachel sighs, leaning against Quinn. "One day, will you tell me?"

Quinn breathes in slowly. "I think, with the way things are going; I'm probably going to end up telling you everything."

Rachel rests her chin on Quinn's shoulder and studies the blonde's profile. "Does that scare you?"

"It terrifies me," she confesses.

Rachel makes the decision quickly and nuzzles the skin beneath Quinn's ear, and both girls relax into the contact. "If it makes you feel any better; you kind of frighten me as well."

"It really doesn't."

Rachel puffs out a breath, making Quinn shiver. "I want to know everything about you, Quinn."

"Like what?"

"What's your favourite song?"

Quinn chuckles. "Jumping right into the tough ones, aren't you?"

"I suppose I am," she says. "Most people claim it's impossible to pick a favourite song, but I think it's possible. You know. You always know, deep down, which is your favourite."

Quinn hums deep in her throat, and Rachel closes her eyes, just enjoying the feel of Quinn. "I think I can bring it down to two," she finally says. "Please don't make me choose."

"Tell me both."
"Collide by Howie Day," Quinn says, acknowledging that both her choices aren't particularly happy, feel-good songs. They're actually a little sad and depressing. "And Cover Your Tracks by A Boy and His Kite."

"I've never heard that second song," Rachel says, immediately reaching for her phone on the bed. She unlocks it, opens her YouTube App and passes it to Quinn. A search and a click later, the space between them is filled with soft, purposeful music.

Rachel watches Quinn's face as they listen to the song, the blonde absently humming along.

Heart, cover your tracks  
The blood that you spill will wash what you lack  
Soul, sew up your wounds  
Test out your engine. Give it some room

Mind, pick up your pace  
Capture the thoughts you always chase  
Soul, open your wings  
Lift this cage higher than any dream

Cover your tracks  
Sew up your wounds  
Pick up your pace  
Open your wings

Heart, flesh out your webs  
The past that was tangled will unwrap and shed  
Soul, sing out your songs  
Clear out your throat. Belt it out strong

Cover your tracks  
Sew up your wounds  
Pick up your pace  
Open your wings

Cover your tracks  
Cover your tracks

Rachel sighs happily. "Can you play it again?"

Quinn glances at her. "Any specific reason why?"

"No."

"Okay, then."

"Quinn?"

"Hmm?"

"Where did you go to school before Dalton?"

Quinn opens one eye to peek at Rachel, who's already peering up at her with wide, imploring eyes. They've been sitting here for nearly half an hour, the same song playing on a loop and lulling them
both into an easy, calm mood.

"I'm just curious," Rachel adds, almost embarrassed.

"I went to a school called Sunningdale an hour outside of Hartford," she finally says. "I was there from the second until the eighth grade."

"Why did you move?"

"They don't have a high school."

"Oh."

Quinn sighs. "I suppose there are schools closer to Hartford but, seeing as I was already in boarding school, it didn't really matter to me where I went."

Rachel snaps up, almost knocking her forehead against Quinn's teeth. "You were already in boarding school?"

Quinn blinks. "Uh, yeah."

"But you were so little."

This time, she shrugs. "It was fine. I was fine."

"Did you like it?"

"I didn't really know anything else, so I wouldn't say that, no," she confesses. "But, I guess, once you stop crying for your parents and focus your attention on schoolwork and sports, you eventually get used to it. They try to keep you busy enough not to miss home."

Rachel's face falls. "This makes me sad," she says with a pout. "You were barely your own person before you were sent off."

"I had people who looked after me and actually cared about me at Sunningdale," she says, which really means she's saying something else entirely. "I suppose I should thank my parents for doing at least that much for me, you know? It could have been different. I could have been different if they..." she trails off, unsure what she's going to say.

"Your parents," Rachel says with a shake of her head. "They're not very nice, are they?"

Quinn swallows audibly. "They're not really parents," she says. "I'm more of their... investment, as it were. Part of the fodder to perpetuate my father's image of 'family.'" She takes a breath. "It's not entirely their fault, though. I mean, I don't blame them or anything. It's just - " she stops. "It's complicated."

There's something there, and Quinn knows Rachel can hear it in her voice. She doesn't ask, though. There are times Quinn knows that Rachel wants to push and does, and then there are times like now, where she gives Quinn the softest of looks, leans forward and presses her lips to a soft cheek, and then sighs.

"I'm glad you came to Dalton," Rachel murmurs.

Quinn doesn't say it back because she won't accept that anything Rachel has been through to get to Dalton is remotely worth it.
"I'm just so glad I met you," Rachel adds a beat later.

"Me too," Quinn says, and she means it. Even if she met her too early for her liking; she's glad she met her nonetheless.

"It was bound to happen, wasn't it?"

Quinn nods. "Please don't call it anything lame."

"It was destiny, Quinn," she practically sings, and the blonde groans. "It was fate."

"Why do I know you?"

Rachel laughs, and it's the most glorious thing Quinn has ever heard. There's happiness to be found just in that sound.

It seals it, really.

Quinn Fabray is in deep, deep trouble.

"Dinner!" LeRoy yells from downstairs, and both girls flinch at the sound interrupting their little bubble. They haven't moved in an hour, just talking and breathing and being.

Together.

Quinn doesn't want to shift an inch, but Rachel's stomach growls, and they both laugh. "Someone's hungry," Quinn says.

Rachel still doesn't move. She's enjoying being able to soak up Quinn's warmth, her body practically draped over the blonde's. She really doesn't want this moment to end, but it does.

In probably the worst way.

There's a knock on the door, forcing Rachel to straighten, and Hiram sticks his head into the room and smiles at them. Rachel isn't even sure why she's blushing, but she can't help it.

"Quinn," Hiram says. "Can I borrow you for a second?"

"Sure," Quinn immediately says. She gently pats Rachel's leg, and then rises to her feet slowly. "I just need to put on some shoes."

"Meet me in my office."

"Okay."

When he's gone, Rachel stares at Quinn for a moment. "What do you think he wants to talk about?"

She shrugs. "I don't know," she says; "but it's probably to do with the vineyard. We started chatting about it while you were napping, so, maybe he just wants to finish up."

Rachel nods to herself as she too rises to her feet and switches off the music on her phone. The sudden silence is unsettling, and the entire atmosphere immediately turns awkward. They've been in their own little world, just sitting here and existing, and now life is resuming and they have to walk out and face it.
"Lee will throw a hissy fit if you take too long to get to the dinner table."

Quinn chuckles, and then playfully salutes her. "So noted."

"You're ridiculous."

"Don't sound so surprised, dear," she says. "I think you'll find I'm a lot of things."

"Quinn?"

"Sir?"

Hiram rolls his eyes, but refrains from calling her out on her address. "I took the opportunity of selecting one of my favourite wines for you to try," he says. "If you're still willing, of course."

She smiles politely at him. "Of course."

"It's just old enough, I think," he says. "2001. I've already decanted it - aired it - so it's in perfect condition. Personally, I'm not all that much of a fan of chilled wine. I think it's best to be had at room temperature."

Quinn just watches as he pours the red wine into two separate wine glasses and then reaches across his desk to hand one to her. She just holds the glass in her hand as she waits for instructions because she knows there's more to this.

There's an art to this.

Of course, there is.

Hiram smiles knowingly at her. "The wine's aroma or nose is important," he says, swirling his own glass and sniffing lightly.

Quinn does the same, feeling a bit like a fraud. Still, she knows how to act the part. She's very good at playing the role, and she'll grow into this one.

"What do you smell?" Hiram asks.

Quinn hums in thought. "It's kind of smokey," she says after a moment. "Is that... wood?"

"Cedar."

She grins at him. "Do I even want to know how you do that?"

He chuckles heartily. "I don't think we have enough time for that, Kid."

"Next time, then?"

He nods. "Next time, indeed," he agrees, and Quinn feels a certain warmth spread right through her. "Are you ready for a taste?"

She tenses slightly, and then nods. "I'm assuming I don't just gulp it down."

"You assume correctly, Quinn," he says with a laugh. "Drink slowly. Actually taste it."

Quinn waits a beat before she does as instructed, and sips at the deep red liquid. It's... different, and it's new. She wasn't expecting to like it, but she kind of does.
"What do you taste?" Hiram asks.

"It's slightly sweet on the tongue," she says; "at first, at least."

"It's bold," he agrees. "Wait a moment. Can you feel how smooth it is?"

"It draws out," she says, nodding. "There's a long finish. It's almost fruity."

Hiram nods, suddenly delighted at Quinn's level of interest and apparent palate. "There are hidden layers of fruit," he says.

Quinn drinks again. "I taste blueberries," she says, scrunching up her face slightly.

"Not a fan?"

"Not really," she admits. "I don't like any kind of berries all that much."

He throws his head back and laughs out loud. "That's hilarious."

"I know."

He shakes his head in amusement. "There's also blackcurrants and cherries, by the way," he says. "We grow them all on the farm."

"It's good wine, Sir."

"I like to think so," he says, looking equal parts smug and bashful. It's a look that reminds her of Rachel, and she can't help her smile.

When Quinn sets down her relatively untouched glass, Hiram takes the cue and gets them moving. He's learned a little bit about her in the few days they've been able to interact, and one of her tells is this: crossing one leg over the other and wringing her fingers in her lap. She's uncomfortable, for some reason, and he's going to give her the out she's silently looking for. Hiram imagines it's something to do with the alcohol itself, and he makes a mental note to keep an eye on it.

"We should probably head to the table," he says, rising to his feet. "Lee might send a search party, and he gets cranky if we're not all seated for the start of the meal."

Quinn breathes out in relief, gets up, and follows him out of the room. She wants to get the taste of the alcohol out of her mouth, and she wants to rid herself of the smell, so she stops by the guest bathroom on her way. She rinses out her mouth and washes her hands with pretty-smelling soap, trying not to think about what alcohol represents in her life.

Something dirty.

Something painful.

"No," she says to herself as she stares at her reflection in the mirror over the sink. "Not today, Quinn." When she's managed to get a hold of herself, she finally makes her way into the dining room.

Into what has just turned into the lion's den.

"Are we not even going to talk about this?" Jared suddenly asks, cutting into all conversation at the long table and bringing about silence.
LeRoy cuts his younger brother a harsh look, immediately knowing what's on his mind. "Jared," he hisses in warning.

Declan looks between them, confused by the animosity he's sensing. "What's going on?" he asks, as only the youngest grandchild can.

Jared opens his mouth, but LeRoy beats him to it. "Nothing," he says, shooting another glare at Jared.

Quinn shifts in her seat, just knowing the silent discord is about her. Her surname and her father. She can't say she's surprised. It was bound to happen, and the fact that LeRoy is trying to shield her from it is endearing and wonderful, but the last thing she wants is for the family to fight owing to her presence.

"It's not nothing," Jared presses, and every eye is suddenly on him, save for Quinn's. Out of everyone in the room, she knows it's not nothing. "Russell Fabray's daughter is literally sitting at the dining room table."

Several things happen at once. Most of the table gasps - though, Quinn can't be sure if it's because they didn't know who she was before now or because of the way Jared practically spits out the words - and others start talking all at once, directing their words at Jared.

Quinn just sits quietly as people talk and shout around her.

"He openly hates the LGBT community!" Jared says loudly. "He's not even shy about quoting the fucking Bible. He's a racist in all the worst ways, dammit. He would look at you like you're the dirt on his shoe, LeRoy, and now you have his spawn staying in your home."

Quinn closes her eyes.

"He's a rich, bigoted asshole! Why is everyone just conveniently ignoring that? Do you have any idea what loops we've had to jump through just to get and keep our businesses running? Do you have any idea the way people have suffered under his laws in this Goddamn state?"

It goes on and on, Jared just spewing out all the awful things about her father - and, well, her - while everyone else tries to get him to stop talking.

On and on.

Until.

"I get it!" Quinn suddenly snaps, her eyes flashing dangerously, and everyone falls silent. "My father is an abhorrent, miserable excuse of a human being. I get it, Mr Holt, so I really don't need you to remind me, okay?" She practically growls. "I'm the one who's had to grow up and live with him. I'm the one who shares his goddamn surname, so, please, save me the lecture and accept that I know far more about how much of a monster my own father is than you possibly ever could!"

There's just stunned silence at the table, and Quinn feels it all closing in on her. Quite abruptly, she gets to her feet, making several people flinch as her chair topples over. "If you'll excuse me," she says, fake politeness and suppressed horror lacing her tone.

And then she bolts.

Rachel is frozen in place for all of five seconds before she's on the move, scrambling to her feet and knocking her elbow on the table. She doesn't even feel the pain as she throws her uncle a
disgusted look and goes in search of Quinn.

The front door is flung open, still swinging on its hinges, and Rachel races through it, Quinn's name already on her lips. It's pointless, though, because she hears a sound to her right. She flies down the front steps and turns in the direction to see Quinn doubled over in the dark, retching.

"Quinn," she says in disbelief, moving towards her. "Oh, Quinn," she murmurs, finally reaching her and holding back her hair with one hand. With the other, she rubs soothingly on her back.

"I'm sorry," Quinn chokes out. "Rachel, I'm so sorry."

Rachel frowns. "Why are you sorry?"

Quinn lifts herself up, eyes bloodshot and wet with tears. Her nose is running and she looks a bit green. She's still the prettiest girl Rachel has ever seen. "Weren't you in there?" she asks, incredulous. "I just flew off at your family, and I'm sure I ruined dinner."

"Quinn, no," she says. "It's not you who should be apologising, okay? You did nothing wrong. You've done nothing wrong. Uncle Jared was way out of line, and I'm sorry you had to sit through any of that. It's not fair to you, and I hate him a little bit, right now. I know you're nothing like your father. There's too much goodness and kindness and purity in that heart of yours."

She shakes her head. "Rachel, you still don't know anything about me."

"I don't care," she argues strongly. "I know enough to know you're nothing like him. You're you, and I like who you are."

Quinn wipes at her eyes. "You're an idiot," she says, but not unkindly.

"I know," Rachel allows, because she is an idiot sometimes. Like now. Without warning, she wraps her arms around Quinn's neck and holds her close, their bodies fitting perfectly together. Quinn hugs her back after a moment, and the two of them lose themselves in the embrace for the longest time.

Eventually, Quinn releases her and pulls away. "I'm disgusting, right now," she says, flushing from embarrassment.

Rachel gives her a once-over. Yip. Still the prettiest girl she's ever seen.

Quinn's blush increases under the obvious scrutiny. "I think I'm going to go for a walk," she says softly. "Clear my head."

Rachel nods, refraining from asking if Quinn wants any company. She can sense Quinn's need to be alone, and she's going to give it to her. "Don't get lost," she says.

"I think I'll just head to the barn," she admits. "Freshen up over there, and then head back."

Rachel reaches out and squeezes her bicep. "I'll be here, okay?"

"Okay," she says, offering Rachel a reassuring smile. Then: "I'm still sorry. Please will you tell your parents I'm sorry."

"It's not necessary, Quinn," she says; "but I will."

"Thank you."
And then she's walking.

Rachel stands perfectly still as she watches Quinn walk away from the house, disappearing into the dark and taking Rachel's heart with her. The feeling in Rachel's own chest is odd, but not new.

She's come to accept it.

She has no choice now.

Breathing a sigh once Quinn is out of sight, she turns and heads back into the house, unsure of all but one thing. Whatever comes out of this night, it's Quinn. It's Quinn, and she has a feeling it's always going to be.

Somehow, she's going to have to learn how to live with that.

In the dining room, she finds everyone still seated, existing in tense silence.

Hiram jumps to his feet as soon as she enters the room. "Rachel?" he says, frowning at the somewhat vacant look in her eyes. "Sweetheart, are you okay? Is Quinn okay?"

Rachel blinks rapidly, her mind spinning. "I - uh - I think she'll be fine."

"Where is she?"

"She went for a walk," she says, looking desperately distracted. "She - she - "

Hiram suddenly moves towards her. "Honey, what's wrong?" he asks, asking the question softly, soothingly, as he draws her into a hug. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Dad," she says, mumbling into his sweater so only he can hear her.

"What is it?"

"I'm - "

"Sweetheart, it's okay," Hiram says. "Whatever it is, it's okay."

Rachel shakes her head because this is the furthest thing from okay. "I'm - " she hesitates, "I'm in love with her."

Rachel waits for Quinn in Daniel's room.

And waits and waits.

She has to force herself not to go looking for her because Quinn needs her time and space. She knows it's pointless to call her because she can literally see Quinn's iPhone sitting on the nightstand. She's really going to have to have a chat with the blonde about that.

Eventually, she goes to her own bedroom to change into her pyjamas and perform her nightly routine, before she returns to Daniel's room and crawls into the bed. She plans on staying awake as long as possible, quietly enjoying the scent of Quinn in the sheets and in the air.

Even though this entire night turned to shit, Rachel doesn't think she's ever felt this content.

And Quinn isn't even here.
It's well after midnight when Quinn makes it back to the dark house, and she's just relieved the front door is unlocked. She slips inside in complete silence and makes her way up the stairs towards Daniel's room. She knows she's going to have to apologise to Hiram and LeRoy for just storming out of dinner the way she did.

Her knees sting a little after her fall, and she stops at the bathroom to clean the scrapes with disinfectant she finds in the cabinet above the sink as best she can - particularly with one working hand. As long as she doesn't get an infection, she decides, and then heads to Daniel's room.

Quinn can't say she's surprised to find a certain Rachel-shaped lump in Daniel's old bed, which is why she doesn't switch on the overhead light. Unfortunately, that doesn't stop the brunette from stirring and moving into a sitting position.

"Hey, you," Quinn says softly.

Rachel blinks away her sleep, smiling crookedly. "Hey," she croaks.

Quinn can't help her grin as she moves over to her suitcase to retrieve her own pyjamas. "Did you get lost?" she asks, sounding amused.

"I was waiting for you," she defends weakly. "I fell asleep."

Quinn keeps her body facing away from Rachel, kicks off her shoes and pulls on her sweatpants under her dress. Without thinking too much about it, she lifts the dress over her head, exposing the scars on her back to the moonlight, and Rachel gasps.

Quinn tenses immediately and quickly slips on her t-shirt. Shit. Refusing to turn around, Quinn quickly grabs for her toiletry bag, and then leaves the room.

And she leaves Rachel, with whatever thoughts she's currently thinking.

It's almost inevitable that Rachel is still awake when Quinn returns. As long as she tried to take brushing her teeth and washing her face, Rachel is sitting up against the headboard with a pensive look on her face.

Apparently, they have quite a bit to talk about, and Quinn isn't even sure she wants to fight against it. It's just so exhausting having to hide herself, and Rachel is proving to her, day in and day out, that she can handle it.

Breathing a sigh, Quinn accepts her fate and climbs into bed beside Rachel. For the longest time, neither of them says a word, and then Rachel speaks.

"I'm sorry," she says.

"I'm sorry, too," Quinn automatically replies.

Rachel reaches for one of Quinn's hands and links their fingers, just needing to touch her. Quinn accepts the contact, even if she's desperately wary of what it means.

"Are you up for talking?" Rachel asks.

"Do I have a choice?"

"I won't let you hide from talking about it, Quinn, but, right now, you have a choice," she says, gentle and soothing, her voice matching the movement of her thumb on the back of Quinn's hand.
Quinn risks a look at her, and immediately gets lost in the affection and sincerity she finds. "So, I have the option not to talk *tonight*?"

Rachel just about manages a smile. "Do you know what my favourite time of day is?"

Quinn frowns, clearly thrown by the quick change in topic. "Uh, no," she says.

"It's now," she says. "Late at night, after everyone has gone to bed and the house is perfectly still and quiet. When the *world* is just serene. I find such peace in it; just *silence*."

"Sometimes, I can't stand the silence," Quinn confesses. "I end up thinking too much."

Rachel squeezes her fingers. "What keeps you *here*, Quinn?"

The question catches her off guard, and she tenses for a beat. "The future," she says. "My escape."

"From what?"

"Everything," she breathes. "This life. Myself."

"Why are you so intent on running away from yourself?"

Quinn chuckles darkly. "Why wouldn't I, when everyone else is?"

"Rachel," Quinn murmurs into the dark of the room, her right hand wrapped around Rachel's forearm.

"Hmm?"

"Thank you," she whispers.

"For what?"

"For *this*," she says. "For being my friend, for being here, for inviting me to come home with you, for trusting me, and for helping me."

Rachel shifts closer, soaking up the other girl's warmth in all the best ways. "You're welcome, Quinn," she says sleepily, her eyes staying closed. Then: "Quinn?"

"Hmm?"

"Thank you," she breathes.

Quinn chuckles softly, her breath washing over Rachel's face. "For what?"

"For letting me," she says, yawning. "Thank you for letting me be exactly what you need."
Chapter 12

Chapter Twelve

"Quinn?"

"Good morning, Sir."

Hiram's smile is genuine as it spreads across his face. "Are you ever going to call me Hiram?"

Quinn shrugs. "I don't know," she says. "I haven't yet decided."

Hiram chuckles lightly, finding the girl more and more endearing every time they talk. "Would you care to take a walk with me?"

Quinn regards him carefully. "Is this a poor attempt at disguising your intent to question me about my feelings regarding what happened last night?"

This time, he laughs openly. "Something like that, yes."

Once again, Quinn shrugs, bowing her head slightly. "Then, sure, we can walk."

Hiram gestures with his left arm, and Quinn gets them moving at a steady, comfortable pace as they leave the safety of the house and start on their way. It's quiet and the sound of their footfalls is almost soothing... until Hiram speaks.

"You were out quite late last night," he starts, and Quinn remains silent. "I think there was a part of Rachel that was convinced you wouldn't come back."

"Where was I going to go?" Quinn asks, trying to joke and failing miserably.

"I don't know, Quinn," he says; "where were you going to go?"

Quinn licks her lips, but doesn't respond. She did go for a walk, stopping by the barn to rinse her mouth and splash her face. And then, instead of turning back to go to the house, she just kept on walking. She probably wouldn't have stopped if she hadn't tripped over a vine and landed on her knees, scratching the skin.

That was why she wore jeans instead of dresses, dammit.

Quinn can still feel the skin pulling as she walks. It's unpleasant but it doesn't hurt anymore.

If Quinn thought anyone would allow her to ignore anything that happened last night, she's severely mistaken. The Holt-Berry - Berry-Holt? - clan talk about things, apparently. They're so very different to her own family, all of whom she's sure have never discussed any of the events leading up to Grandmother Lucille's death.

Or, anything else, really.

Hiram clears his throat. "I should apologise for last night," he begins. "While a lot of my family shares Jared's view on your father's politics, it was uncalled for and unfair to you to attack you that way. So, I'm sorry, Quinn. It was never my intention to have you feel anything less than welcome in our home."
Quinn isn't sure what to say to him, so she remains silent. It's more than she was expecting, but she's not surprised. This family is kind.

Well, most of them are, anyway.

"It's okay," she eventually says.

"Is it?"

"I don't know," she confesses. "I'm shielded from a lot of it when I'm at school. I'm supposed to be one of his supporters, and I guess I'm still young enough not to be hounded by people who hate him. I assume that'll change when I'm older."

But, by then, she hopes she'll be out, and she won't care what her father or anybody else thinks. She just needs to hold on a little longer.

Hiram takes a deep breath and releases it slowly. "Regardless of that," he says; "it still should never have happened."

Quinn just nods, and they continue on their walk in silence, both of them lost in their own thoughts. It would be comfortable if Quinn couldn't sense there's something more the man wants to say to her.

So, she waits.

"There is actually one other thing I wanted to talk to you about," Hiram eventually says, still debating with himself over whether this is a good idea or not.

When Quinn looks at him expectantly, he makes the decision.

"I assume you know Rachel likes you," Hiram says, his tone flat and his expression blank.

"I like her too," Quinn automatically says, even though she knows he means the different kind of 'like."

"She like likes you," he clarifies anyway.

Quinn says nothing. As far as any of them knows, she's incapable of reciprocating, and she intends to keep it that way for as long as possible.

The only person who knows she likes girls at all is Tori, and Quinn knows the woman will take that secret to her grave. They both have too much to lose from something like that ever being revealed in their respective circles.

So, it's not a truth Quinn would willingly hand out to a man she just met, even if he's halfway responsible for giving her the wonderful human being that is Rachel Berry.

"Unfortunately, Rachel's never been very good at hiding her feelings," he continues. "She wears her heart on her sleeve in all the best ways, Quinn, but she's been burned by it a few too many times."

Quinn hums in response, because she can see that.

"I never want her to get hurt again."
She glances at him. "Are you telling me that because you expect me to hurt her?"

"Isn't it inevitable?" he questions mildly. "She likes you and, if I know her, she's going to end up telling you one day, and that day is going to hurt her."

Quinn swallows audibly. She's hoping that elusive 'one day' takes forever to come because she's definitely not ready for it.

Her heart might be, but everything else isn't.

She needs to get out first.

Rachel entered her life too early.

"But it'll be what she needs," Hiram goes on, his assumptions about Quinn's feelings on the matter propelling him forward. "So, this is what I ask of you, Quinn," he says. "Be gentle with her. Be kind and clear. She will hold onto anything, and I know you don't want that for her."

"No, I don't," she agrees quietly.

"Will you do this for me, Quinn?" he asks. "Will you be gentle? She's already hurt enough in this life."

Quinn feels tears pool in her eyes. "Of course, Sir," she says, soft and strong. "Of course, Hiram."

"Are we going to talk about it?"

Quinn is dedicating too much brain power towards trying not to freak out about the fact she's back on a train to be irritated with Rachel's question. The very last thing she wants is to talk, and Rachel must know that.

Rachel sighs, her fingers automatically linking with Quinn's. "Would you like me to sing to you?" she asks softly, noting the blonde's clenched jaw and tightly shut eyes.

"Please," Quinn whispers.

"Any requests?"

"Surprise me."

Rachel hums in thought as she searches her considerable mental musical catalogue for a suitable song. In the end, she decides on 'Cover Your Tracks', which she's managed to memorise, and it immediately calms Quinn. The trembling stops and the tension in her muscles dissipates until even Rachel can feel the relief.

She sings on a loop, the words passing over her lips and straight into Quinn's ears.

Eventually, Quinn sighs in content. "You know, if that song wasn't already one of my favourites, it would be now," she says, her tone a little forced.

"Thank you, Quinn," she says. Then, never one to get distracted, she immediately asks, "Now, are we going to talk about it?"

Quinn clears her throat. "What are we supposed to talk about?"
Rachel angles her body to face her. "Well, there's a lot to talk about regarding last night," she says; "but I'm more interested in what you and my dad talked about on your walk this morning."

Quinn licks her lips, which is an action Rachel can't help staring at. "What makes you think we were talking about anything?"

"Quinn, are you being intentionally obtuse?"

"I am, yes."

"What did you talk about?"

"Rachel," she huffs.

"I know you talked about something because you didn't look the same when you got back," she says. "Quinn, what did he say to you?"

Quinn doesn't respond. She's unsure what she's supposed to say because she's still feeling conflicted. If Hiram's right, then Rachel is going to tell her something very important, and Quinn is expected to say something.

Whatever she says, it's going to hurt Rachel.

That much is already known.

She can say no, or she can say yes, and force them to keep it hidden.

Be gentle.

Rachel deserves more than Quinn's troubles and her conflicted mind.

She deserves more.

"Was it bad?" Rachel asks, suddenly sounding smaller than Quinn has ever heard her. "Because, you know, I want you to come back, and I - "

Quinn squeezes her fingers to silence her. "We talked a bit about last night," she says. "He apologised for your uncle, and then assured me not everyone in the family believes I'm anything like my father."

"Good," she huffs.

"And then we talked a little about you."

Rachel sucks in a breath. "Oh?"

"He loves you very much, Rachel," she says.

"I know he does," she replies, sighing. "I've never doubted that."

"Haven't you?"

She sighs. "I don't know," she confesses. "Maybe. A long time ago. During the divorce, and after he moved. He left, and I suppose there was a part of me that believed he left because of me."

"But, you know better now, don't you?"
"I think I understand a hell of a lot more about life and love now," she says. "I think experience has taught me a lot. It can be a brutal teacher."

Quinn raises her eyebrows. "C.S. Lewis?"

She offers a small smile. "Sometimes, I forget you're so darn smart."

Quinn shrugs in response.

"Are you okay, though?" she questions. "Are we okay?"

With another squeeze to her fingers, Quinn meets Rachel's gaze. "We're okay," she assures her. "We do have a few things to talk about, but I don't see the point in rushing. I'm not going anywhere."

"Good," she replies; "because neither am I."

"You know, Quinn," Rachel says; "you're kind of cute when you're high."

Quinn pouts adorably. "I am not high," she declares, a slight whine in her voice. "Just, a little loopy."

"Still cute."

With a shake of her head, she shuffles across the corridor to her own bedroom now that they've finally reached the fourth floor. "I'm going to unpack now," she says. "And then nap?" Rachel teases.

"Shut up," she calls over her shoulder, and then disappears into her bedroom. It's both a relief and a burden to be back in her space. She knows she's going to remember the trip (mostly) fondly. It ended a little strangely, but she's willing to take it because she got to spend time with Rachel. She got to sleep with Rachel. Twice.

If that doesn't make it the best Thanksgiving ever, she doesn't know what does.

Quinn starts to unpack immediately, just managing to lift her suitcase onto her bed without re-injuring herself. She honestly can't wait until her cast comes off and she can become a fully-abled human being once again.

She just wants to go back to playing sport.

Quinn separates out her laundry and chucks it into her hamper, and then returns everything else to her closet. She's done in ten minutes, zipping closed her empty suitcase and sliding it off her bed before carrying it over to her closet. She can't lift it high enough to put it away, so she'll have to ask Rachel to -

The knock at her door brings a smile to her face because she knows that particular knock. "Come in," she calls out, and the door immediately opens.

Rachel steps into the room, a slight furrow in her brow.

Quinn's smile falters. "Rachel, are you okay?"
"I need to talk to you about something," Rachel says, and the severity of her tone gives Quinn a pause. She suspects she knows what's coming, but it still catches her off guard. Her movements grow still and she turns her gaze on the brunette.

Rachel looks nervous, her fingers tapping against her thigh. It's a tick Quinn has discovered, and the sight of it is doing nothing to help Quinn with her own nerves. She's not prepared for this, and all she can hear is Hiram repeatedly telling her to be gentle.

"Maybe you should sit," Rachel suggests.

"I think I'll stay standing," she says automatically.

"Quinn," she says.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

Rachel opens her mouth to speak, and then immediately snaps it shut. She shakes her head, laughing nervously. "This isn't happening," she says, talking to herself. "This is just totally crazy."

Quinn frowns, because now she's just confused. "Rachel, what's going on?"

"I've - I've been trying to wrap my head around something very important, Quinn."

"Okay...?" she says, skeptical yet kind. "Can I help?"

"I do believe you're probably the only one who can," she says cryptically, and Quinn's eyebrows rise. Where is she going with this? "I mean, you're Quinn Fabray, and I'm Rachel Berry. We're - we're supposed to clash, right? I mean, we do, but then you say the sweetest things and you flirt and you look at me as if the great big world doesn't even exist and - " she stops. "This is crazy, Quinn."

Quinn blinks. "This is crazy, Rachel," she echoes. She needs Rachel to stop talking right now. She's barely holding on as it is, and any more words from those perfect lips... she's going to give in.

"It's been an emotional weekend," Quinn continues, trying to stem the flow of revelations.

"I know," Rachel says with a nod. "I know a lot of things now, Quinn." She takes steps forward, moving to stand right in front of Quinn, so she can look her into her eyes as best she can. "I keep thinking that you must know as well. Am I wrong?"

Quinn doesn't respond.

"I want to be all those things you insist on thanking me for," she says. "I want to be your friend, your confidante, the person you can always count on, the person you allow to help you. I want to be all those things and so much more, and you know that, don't you?"

"I wasn't going to say anything, you know? I was just going to hold it in, suck it up and get through this year as your friend, but I can't. I can't do that, and I'm not about to ask either of us to change. We both deserve better than that." She sucks in a deep breath and exhales slowly. "I have to tell you, because it's not fair to either of us." Her eyes lock onto Quinn's, and she thinks she sees pleading there. It makes her falter.

What is Quinn asking her to do?

Rachel shakes her head, clearing it. "I like you, Quinn," she says, the words coming out in a rush. "I mean, I really like you, in all the ways that I probably shouldn't, but I do. I'm sorry, but I really
do, and I'm tired of having to hide it, even though it seems I've been doing a really poor job of that."

All Quinn is thinking is *be gentle be gentle be gentle* but Rachel just keeps talking, saying all the right words to help *Quinn*.

There's a rejection expected - both of them *need* Quinn to say the words to end all hope of *this* ever becoming something. All she has to do is open her mouth and say, "*I'm sorry, Rachel, but I don't feel the same way.*"

It's simple.

It's all she has to do.

So, of course, she fails.

Epically.

It's not entirely her own fault - she'll stand by that - because Rachel just doesn't stop talking, and there are only a select few ways to get her to shut up.

"... been thinking about this a lot and I've come to the conclusion that the best way for us both to move forward is to - *mmph.*"

It happens so quickly, Quinn isn't sure any neurons are even firing in her brain.

One second she's listening to Rachel go on and on about how they're supposed to work together through all the headaches of running a school without everything being awkward and, the next second, they're doing *this*.

Quinn Fabray is kissing Rachel Berry.

The second their lips touch, Quinn feels every single worry she has simply melt away, and she steps into the kiss, her hands finding purchase on Rachel's hips. She almost smiles into the kiss... before reality snaps her back and she pulls away, her eyes wide and an apology on the tip of her tongue.

But.

She *can't*.

She can't bring herself to apologise or turn and run. She can't say the words to end this all before it even begins. She just can't and she *won't*.

So, instead, Quinn risks the smallest of smiles, which isn't that difficult to do when she sees the look of complete and utter shock on Rachel's face. "Has anyone ever told you that you talk too much?" she asks, surprised by the husk in her own voice.

Rachel just continues to stare at her, dumbfounded. "Quinn," she eventually says. "You kissed me."

Quinn waits, allowing Rachel a moment to catch up.

And, catch up, she does.

The moment her mind wraps around what's just happened, she's reaching out for Quinn and pulling her into another, more heated, kiss. Quinn feels fingers in her hair and a palm pressed to the back of her neck. Really, she's more concerned with learning all she can about Rachel's perfect mouth with
her own than anything else in this moment.

This time, Rachel is the one to pull away, stepping back. "Okay, and now I kissed you," she says, her tone one of disbelief. "But, why are you kissing me back?"

Quinn raises her eyebrows.

"Don't do that," Rachel suddenly says. "Logically, I know what's going on right now, but I need you to tell me. I need to hear you say it because this could all be some kind of fever dream, and I keep thinking you're going to run."

Quinn steps forward, regaining the space Rachel put between them. "What do you need to hear from me?" she asks, her tone understanding and sincere.

"Why are you kissing me back?"

"Because I want to."

"Why?"

"I like kissing you," Quinn says, as if its the simplest thing in the world. It is. "I would really like to be kissing you a lot more."

Rachel stares at her, her eyes clouded in confusion and... slight heartbreak. "Is that all?" she asks, her voice shaking.

"No," Quinn says, lifting her right hand to tuck a lock of hair behind Rachel's ear. "Do you have any idea what you've done to me?" she whispers. "How you've claimed my every thought. How you've come to claim my heart."

Rachel's breath audibly hitches.

"I want you to know all of me," Quinn confesses slowly. "I've never wanted that before. It's big, Rachel, because I've spent my entire life not needing or wanting anybody or anything, but then you just entered my life without warning, and I - " she stops suddenly, swallowing. "I wasn't ready for you. I'm still not, but I want - I want you. I'm tired of hiding it, too."

Rachel's eyes search her face. "Is this really happening?"

"It is," Quinn replies.

Rachel's own palm cups her cheek, just needing to touch her. "What happens now?" she asks.

Quinn knows they still have a lot to talk about but it's the last thing she wants to do. Still, she says, "I don't know."

"Okay," Rachel says, smiling when Quinn leans into her touch. "Why don't we start with the question: do you want to be with me?"

Quinn nods.

"In what way?"

"In all the ways."

Rachel breathes out slowly, her fingers sliding into Quinn's loose hair. "This is crazy," she
murmurs, bringing Quinn closer.

There's a moment.

Fight and fight, or just let it happen.

They close the gap between them at the same time, mouths coming together in a hot, breathless kiss.

It might be crazy and unbelievable, but it is happening.

"What are you thinking about?"

Quinn breathes out slowly, a content sigh escaping her lips. "I'm thinking that I would really like to take that nap you were teasing me about."

"Do you want me to leave?"

Almost on instinct, Quinn's arm tightens around Rachel's waist, pulling her closer. "I was kind of hoping you could take the nap with me," she says. "Unless you have something else you'd rather be doing."

Rachel chuckles, snuggling further into Quinn's side as they lie on the blonde's bed. "Well, I suppose I could think of a few things," she murmurs, her tone dripping with innuendo, and Quinn's eyes snap open.

"Oh, really?"

Rachel presses a kiss to Quinn's shoulder, and then resettles. "We should nap."

"We should," she agrees as her eyes slip shut once more.

There's a beat of silence before Rachel breaks it. "I get my best sleep when I'm with you."

"I do, too," Quinn says, being more open than she's been with any other person. Even Tori didn't get this side of Quinn until at least a few years into their relationship. It took a sixteen-year-old attempting to seduce her nanny to get them to the kind of warmth Quinn is so willingly giving to Rachel.

Which reminds Quinn of just another thing they're probably going to have to talk about. Somehow, she just knows that conversation isn't going to go down well. Even allowing herself to think about it objectively makes Quinn cringe.

Maybe she can get away with not telling Rachel.

No.

She wants Rachel to know all of her, and she means it.

As terrifying as it is.

It's a knock on the door that draws Rachel from slumber. It's slow at first, and then she scrambles out of Quinn's arms in panic, suddenly afraid the person behind the door is just going to barge into the room.
But then she remembers that this is Quinn's room.

Nobody would do that.

Still.

Rachel shakes Quinn awake, resisting the urge to kiss her sleepy pout away. "Someone's at the door," she murmurs, and Quinn's eyes snap open. "Hey, Sleepyhead," she whispers, giving in and pressing her lips to Quinn's.

Quinn immediately smiles, and then tenses when there's another knock. Rachel has just enough time to rise off the bed and dart into the bathroom before the door does open slowly and Kurt pokes his head through the small opening.

Quinn blinks repeatedly, still half asleep.

"Hey," Kurt says, stepping into the room. "Sorry. Didn't mean to wake you," he says, looking apologetic. "Just wanted to see if you were back and say hello."

Quinn swings her legs off her bed. "It's okay," she says, even though there's a part of her that acknowledges it's not okay because Rachel is currently hiding in her bathroom. "How was home?" she asks anyway, refusing to be a bad friend on top of a bad... girlfriend. Are they girlfriends?

They really need to talk.

"It was good," Kurt says brightly. "My dad and I actually went to stay at this cabin by the lake. He took me fishing."

Quinn laughs at the grimace on his face.

"I'm not cut out for fishing, apparently."

"Too gross?"

"It's disgusting."

Quinn shakes her head in amusement.

"What about you?" Kurt asks. "I haven't seen Rachel buzzing about. Did you end up murdering her?" He laughs at his own joke, but Quinn frowns.

"Do people really think that about us?" she asks seriously.

Kurt soberes at her tone. "Yes. No. I don't know." He scratches his forehead. "Does it really matter what they think?"

"I suppose not," she concedes. "And, no, I didn't murder Rachel," she says. "It was actually a really good weekend. Her family is huge and loud and a little bit insane."

"So, you're basically describing every family," he teases.

"Yeah."

"Well, I'm glad no murders were committed and you two seem to be getting along," he says. "It'll definitely make things run a little smoother in this place, though I will miss the fights. You two can be awfully entertaining, sometimes."
"Har har," Quinn fakes a laugh.

Kurt rolls his eyes. "Anyway, I still have unpacking to do, so I'll let you get back to your nap."

"How kind," she deadpans.

He just laughs out loud. "I missed you, too," he calls over his shoulder as he heads to the door. "See you, Quinn."

Rachel waits another two minutes after Kurt has left before emerging from the bathroom, a pensive look on her face. "I think you're going to have to switch shampoos," she says. "That brand you're using performs tests on animals."

Quinn is still perched on the edge of her bed, and her eyebrows rise in question.

"Oh, I did a lot of reading of the backs of all your bottles while I was in there," she says, moving to stand in front of Quinn.

"Sorry," she says, grimacing.

Rachel waves off the apology. "Also, I think you're going to have to find some way to lock your door if we're going to be making out in this room."

Quinn scoots forward slightly, spreads her legs and uses hands on the back of Rachel's thighs to bring her forward into the space. "And, we are going to be making out?" she asks, resting her head against Rachel's abdomen, just below her breasts.

Rachel's fingers slide into her hair, thoroughly enjoying being able to touch and being touched in return. "I get this feeling you have a little obsession with kissing."

"I have a large obsession with your mouth," Quinn murmurs against Rachel's shirt. "It's just so talented."

"Indeed, it is."

Quinn tilts her head upwards to look at her face. "Are we together?"

Rachel sucks in a breath. "As in...?"

"In my head, I want to think of you as my girlfriend," she says, sounding particularly vulnerable. "Would that be okay with you?"

Slowly, a smile spreads across Rachel's face, and she bends slightly to drop a kiss onto Quinn's forehead. "I think I'd be okay with that."

"Yeah?"

"Definitely."

Quinn lets out a relieved breath. "What happens now?"

"Anything we want."

Quinn spends that first night in a restless state. She's constantly debating with herself, trying to
decide if this is really a good idea. Too many things can go wrong.

She could end up hurting Rachel.

Rachel could hurt her.

They're probably, definitely, going to end up hurting each other.

But Quinn wants her. She wants this and, as terrified as she is, the excitement and adoration and happiness she's been feeling outweighs the fear.

It's as simple as that, and Quinn is going to do everything in her power to hold onto it.

Rachel doesn't necessarily have such qualms, but her own fears are easily suppressed. She's just too happy to worry about anything in this moment and, if Quinn needs her to be the stronger one at this point in their relationship, then she'll do it.

She's ready to let Quinn hold onto her as tightly as she needs.

"Just tell me."

Rachel can't resist the urge to roll her eyes. "Britt, please, there's nothing to tell," she says. "I have to study, okay? Exams are literally around the corner."

Brittany ignores her, continuing to block the door and stopping Rachel's exit.

"Britt," Rachel whines. "I have to study. You can't keep me trapped in your room just because I'm refusing to answer your question."

Britt's eyes narrow. "I haven't even asked a question."

Rachel huffs. "I know what you're doing, and there's nothing to tell, okay?"

Brittany sighs. "Fine," she allows; "but just know that I'm on to you. There's something different about you, and about Quinn."

Rachel says nothing, just presses her lips together and waits.

Eventually, Brittany moves away from the door, stepping towards her former roommate. "Whatever it is, you know you can tell me, right?"

Rachel waits a beat before she nods. "I know."

Her face splits into a wide smile, and then she opens her own door. "Go on, then," she says. "I expect you to ace your exams with all the studying you've been doing."

There's a teasing lilt to her voice that gives Rachel pause. She's about to question the blonde, but Brittany winks, and Rachel shakes her head.

"You think you're so smart, don't you?"

"You're the one who keeps using that word."
Rachel playfully swats her arm. "I hate you a little bit, right now."

Brittany laughs out loud. "You love me."

Rachel is still shaking her head as she finally leaves Brittany's room. It's something to think about, of course, because it's almost as if Brittany already knows. She and Quinn have had conversations about several things but they've astutely avoided talk of... coming out.

Rachel's come to accept that it's not going to happen, and that's okay. She already has enough people talking about her for other things - that she accepts have always been out of her control - and she's definitely not going to pressure Quinn into doing anything with which she's not comfortable.

Now, though, Brittany suspects them, which means she'll know for sure sooner or later, and then what?

Rachel knows she has to discuss it with Quinn, and she makes a beeline for the blonde's room instead of her own. She's seen very little of Quinn now that exams are so close. Her girlfriend is very disciplined when it comes to studying, following her rigorous schedule with a certain intensity that is both sexy and frightening for Rachel.

Rachel has tried to get her to slack, but Quinn isn't against kicking the brunette out of her room if she gets too distracting. Rachel was definitely surprised when it happened the first time, and the next time was equally shocking because there was no way Quinn would oust her girlfriend a second time.

Or a third, really.

But, Quinn is focused and determined, and Rachel's sure there's a lot of psychology behind it, so it's just another thing they need to talk about. The list is growing.

She's planning for after exams are over.

It's what Quinn has promised her, anyway.

They finish exams, have three unnecessary days of school, and then they go on Winter Break.

Rachel's trying to follow her girlfriend's example. She's a good student on most days, but she gets easily distracted. It's one of the reasons Quinn is always hesitant to allow her to sit in her room while they're both supposed to be studying.

Sometimes, they both study in Kurt's room. It's the only time Quinn participates in a group study session, and it usually turns into Quinn tutoring them both in Calculus and whatever else her big brain knows.

It's easy to think she's just naturally smart, which she is, but she works hard at it.

Constantly.

Every day.

Still, even though Rachel knows Quinn's schedule - the blonde printed it out for her, so she would stop asking if she was free to cuddle - she still knocks on Quinn's door and immediately pushes it open. She's unsurprised to find Quinn at her desk, though she does baulk at the fact that the blonde is on her feet. She barely turns to look at Rachel, which is a good thing too, because Rachel is struck dumb by the sight before her.
It isn't even as if there's anything different about Quinn; it's just, well, there is. She's just standing there, legs spread as she bends to pore over an open textbook on her desk.

"What are you doing?" Rachel finds herself asking.

"I needed to stretch," Quinn replies, her eyes still on her textbook. "I've been sitting for hours."

Rachel steps forward to close the space between them, but she deems that a dangerous endeavour. Instead, she pauses, her eyes raking over Quinn's lean body. "Quinn?" she says.

Somewhat distracted, Quinn glances over her shoulder. "What's up?"

"Have you ever just watched someone move or talk or laugh and you're like, 'Wow, how the hell is everything you do just so fuck hot?'"

That definitely gets Quinn's attention and, in the next moment, she's turned away from her desk and is moving right into Rachel's personal space, intent clear on her face. For a moment, Rachel feels as if she's prey being stalked, but then Quinn's face splits into the most breathtaking smile.

And then her lips are actually physically taking Rachel's breath.

Quinn steps forward until Rachel's back hits the door with a thud. There are hands on her hips and her senses are being bombarded by everything Quinn Fabray. She can barely catch her breath, and Quinn gives her a slight reprieve by dragging her lips across her jaw, licking and sucking.

"You think I'm fuck hot, huh?" Quinn murmurs.

Rachel slides her hands over Quinn's back, feeling her muscles under her fingertips. "Among other things, yes."

Quinn pulls back slightly, a mischievous grin on her face. "Were you missing me?" she asks.

"I was," she confesses, her fingers drawing letters on Quinn's back. "You study way too much," she complains, which draws a chuckle from the blonde that she feels right through her entire body.

"So, what you're saying is you've come to distract me?"

"Exactly," she says, suddenly hopeful.

Quinn hums softly, deciding to allow them both to enjoy this moment. "Well, it's working."

"I thought it might."

"Sneaky," Quinn says, nuzzling Rachel's cheek and pressing tender kisses to her soft skin. It's slightly ticklish, but Rachel lets out a content sigh. She could definitely get used to this.

She is getting used to it.

"Quinn?"

"Hmm?"

Rachel's hands move to hold the sides of Quinn's face, and she lifts it slightly to get the blonde to look at her. "I know we kind of haven't discussed this at all, but how would you feel if Brittany knew about us?"
Quinn immediately tenses, her eyes snapping up to meet Rachel's. "What?"

"I - I didn't tell her," Rachel assures her. "She hasn't really said anything to me about it, but I think she's figured it out. I'm - I'm happier. I can't seem to hide it."

Quinn swallows audibly. "Rachel..."

"She won't tell anyone, Quinn. I promise, she won't."

"Not even Santana?"

Rachel can't answer that because she's not sure. She hasn't even really thought about Santana when it comes to her relationship with Quinn. The entire idea that Santana doesn't want to tell Quinn about her affections for Brittany because Quinn wouldn't understand is a pointless one, now that Rachel knows Quinn likes girls - as well.

It's almost amusing.

But, mostly, it's just sad.

"Not even Santana," Rachel says, because she knows Brittany would keep it from the Latina if Rachel were to ask. There's a loyalty to be found there that Rachel's never actually experienced before. "I still think the two of you really should sit together and talk."

Quinn shakes her head. "We've already discussed this, Rachel."

"I know," she replies, sighing. "And we're not going to stop discussing it. I'm working on the both of you because this is something we can actually fix."

"We have to want to fix it," she counters, and Rachel can feel her exasperated sigh against her skin.

"You do, though," Rachel says. "I know you do."

"Can we stop talking about this?" she murmurs. "Please."

Rachel hugs her close for the longest time, just soaking up the warmth and trying to offer as much comfort as she can. "There's something I should probably tell you, as well."

Quinn pulls back, so she can see Rachel's face. "I'm not going to like it, am I?"

"That depends."

"On?"

Rachel presses a chaste kiss to her cheek. "So, I may or may not have told my dad about us this morning," she confesses, and Quinn's eyes widen. "It went well," she immediately assures her. "He was very happy; even joked about how I should make sure to marry you so you can help him run the estate."

Quinn blinks repeatedly. "You said he was okay with it?"

"He was surprised, obviously, but, yes, he's actually excited for us."

"Is he - will he - " she stops, and Rachel can practically feel her fear. It's practically radiating off her skin.
"He won't tell anyone, Quinn," she assures her. "Except LeRoy, of course, but they have no secrets between them. I told you that you're safe, remember? I mean it, Quinn. You're safe with me, I promise."

Quinn buries her face in the crook of Rachel's neck, pressing soft, open-mouthed kisses against her skin until the brunette actually starts giggling. "I find that I suddenly hate our school uniforms," Quinn growls.

"Why is that?" Rachel asks, throwing her head back to give her better access.

"Your collar is in the way," she says, bringing her right hand up from Rachel's hip and working on the tie and first button. "I want to taste your skin."

Rachel actually shivers at the sound of that, and she drags Quinn's lips back to hers, kissing her fiercely. In the little over a week they've been 'together,' they've done little more than exchange a few sweet, gentle kisses. They've been feeling each other out, and it's what Rachel is used to. She's been careful with this kind of affection since -

Just, since.

But, well, now, all the care has been thrown out the window.

Quinn presses the length of her body against Rachel's, practically trapping her against the door as they kiss, a clash of teeth, tongues and lips. Rachel wants her closer, and she closes her fists around the fabric of Quinn's shirt.

She tugs, as if Quinn can become a part of her.

She's definitely going to try.

It's when Quinn reaches for Rachel's left wrist and drags it above her head that Rachel freezes, the action bringing back a flashback of being held and pinned down that's almost paralysing.

Quinn senses it immediately, suddenly knowing she's done something wrong and, as if she's been scorched, she releases Rachel and steps out of her space, dropping her own hands.

"Rachel," Quinn whispers, suddenly panicked. "Rachel, oh my God, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Rachel can see her but she's not seeing her, her own eyes clouded by him. All she can see are his dark, hostile eyes and all she can hear is his heavy, disjointed breathing.


Against her better judgment, Quinn risks reaching out to touch her cheek, her fingertips almost featherlight.

"We're here, safe at Dalton," Quinn says, "You're here with me. He can't touch you here. You're okay. Please, Rachel, come back. Come back to me."

It takes another thirty-five seconds of endless pleas and reassurances before Rachel seems to come back to herself, sucking in a sharp breath.
"Quinn," she cries, and Quinn immediately wraps her arms around her, holding her close. "God, Quinn."

"I'm here," Quinn whispers into her hair. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Rachel doesn't respond. She just holds on as tightly as she can, breathing in apples and cinnamon and feeling Quinn's beating heart under her fingertips. They're both trembling, but it slows the longer they hold each other.

Rachel shifts first, pulling back slightly to look at Quinn's worried face. "I didn't think..." she says, absently trailing off because she actually has no idea what she's going to say.

"No, it's my fault," Quinn argues, shaking her head. "I should have known."

"How could you have known, Quinn?" she questions. "I didn't even know." Rachel breathes out slowly. "I don't want either of us to be afraid of this," she says. Then, after a lengthy silence, she adds, "I hate this."

Quinn runs a gentle hand over her hair. "I know," she murmurs. "I'm sorry. I wish I could make it better... because I feel as if I'm just making it worse."

Without any preamble, Rachel closes the space between their mouths and loses herself in the feel of Quinn's lips against her own. The blonde is initially hesitant, but they both settle into it, gently sucking and nibbling. It's a tender, calming kiss, and Rachel is immensely proud of herself for thinking only of Quinn the entire time.

"We're not going to be afraid of it," Rachel says. "Just, you know, maybe don't touch my wrists when we're making out."

Quinn nods slowly, silently berating herself.

She should have known.

Rachel can see the conflict in Quinn's eyes. It's as clear as her affection and desire, so she just pulls her in close, in another attempt to have them occupy the same space.

It's her intention to kiss the conflict away.

It gets better, Rachel thinks.

Maybe their physical relationship will always be on a different level to their emotional one, but at least they're talking about it.

It's something she finds she feels comfortable doing: talking to Quinn.

Just, being with Quinn.

And, that, in itself, is everything.
"Quinn?"

The blonde looks away from the ceiling and squints at Rachel, who is sitting at Quinn's desk and messing around on her laptop.

"I - I need to tell you something," Rachel says, and Quinn immediately sits up, frowning slightly as she waits for her to continue. "I didn't tell you earlier because I don't want it to be a big deal or anything. I mean, it's just... a day."

Quinn's frown deepens, a sinking feeling settling in her gut. She's finding zero comfort from the floor, so she pushes herself up onto her knees and makes her way towards where Rachel has spun to face her.

Rachel audibly swallows, anchoring herself by placing her hands firmly on her knees. "Today is the anniversary of my assault," she says, slowly and carefully.

Quinn sucks in a sharp breath, but she neither says nor does anything, choosing rather to let Rachel dictate this moment.

"I almost forgot, you know," she says. "These past two weeks with you have just been so wonderful and perfect, and I was able to let it slip from my mind. I woke up this morning feeling blissful and content."

Still, Quinn waits.

"But then reality came calling," she says, shaking her head. "I've changed my number a handful of times since then, but people keep getting a hold of it, and they've never been afraid to let me know exactly what they think."

Quinn squeezes her eyes shut.

Rachel slips off the chair and moves to kneel in front of Quinn. She pinches the fabric of the blonde's school shirt between her thumb and forefinger, holding her in place. "I don't think anything they say is true," she says. "He was and will always be in the wrong, and he's paying for his actions. It's just that it hurts that people can be so cruel, but they're wrong about me."

Quinn opens her eyes, nodding her head. "They are, Rachel," she says.

"My mother called earlier," she says. "She said she was wondering about this green dress she bought for me because she wants to wear it to this event, but I know better. She was just calling to check in without saying it expressly."

Quinn offers her a small smile.

"They've all been doing that all day," she says with an affectionate roll of her eyes. "Very subtle, the lot of them."

"You love them," Quinn says.
"I do," she murmurs, sighing. There are tears in her eyes, but not enough to fall. "I just wanted to tell you."

"Why?"

"Because I want you to know everything about me."

Quinn breathes out slowly. "Doesn't that scare you?"

"Immensely."

"It scares me, too."

Rachel smirks at her. "Can't handle the pressure, huh, Fabray?"

Quinn just shuffles forward. "Can I hug you?"

"Please."

And, when Quinn wraps her strong arms around Rachel's trembling body, the brunette finally allows her tears to fall.

She's never felt so safe.

"I'm not saying I'm gay or anything, but you look fucking hot today," Quinn says, practically leering at Rachel in a way that sets them both alight.

Rachel looks perplexed for a moment, and then she bursts out laughing. "We're girlfriends, Quinn."

"So?" she asks innocently. "Does that mean I can't pay you a compliment?"

"I think you and I have two vastly different definitions of the word 'compliment,'" she says, smiling sweetly. "What brings you by?"

They're standing on the balcony of the Great Hall where Rachel is overseeing venue preparations for the upcoming exams. Students are shifting desks and chairs into position below them, Rachel directing them into perfect rows of eight.

"I wanted to see you," Quinn replies, her eyes solely on Rachel. Honestly, the world could be burning down all around them and she wouldn't even notice.

"You sure you weren't just checking to make sure I'm doing a good job?"

Quinn chuckles knowingly, stepping closer. They remain facing forward, but the warmth of proximity isn't lost on either of them. "Well, that too," she teases. "But I did actually want to see you. I didn't see you this morning."

"And, whose fault is that?" she counters immediately.

"My own," Quinn relents, sighing.

Of course, Rachel has to point out that Quinn woke up crazy early, went for an unnecessary run - that Rachel is still mad at her for - and ended up missing breakfast completely… because she's lost substantial fitness and her cast makes showering difficult.
Which really means she didn't see Rachel until the only lesson they share: AP English, and they barely even had a moment to chat before their teacher was demanding their attention.

Rachel can't help thinking that they definitely don't spend enough time together, and she risks brushing the backs of her fingers against Quinn's. "I missed you too, Lucy Quinn."

Quinn grumbles. "I'm pretty sure I told you not to call me that."

"I just really enjoy it when your nostrils flare and you get that cute crease in your brow," she says happily. "You're just so stinking cute when you get annoyed."

Quinn links her pinkie with Rachel's, dutifully keeping the locked digits hidden between the skirts of their uniforms. "Oh, so, that's why you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Annoy me?"

Rachel eyes are curiously. "Do I actually annoy you?"

Quinn shrugs, choosing not to let the conversation take a serious turn. They're in public; Quinn intends to keep it light. "I might be a glutton for punishment or something," she says; "Because I really like it." She breathes out as she drops into a chair and pulls Rachel down with her. "Or, I just really like you."

"I think that's definitely it."

"You're very likeable."

Rachel sighs dreamily, her hand sliding onto Quinn's thigh. They're safe in this position up here. Nobody can see their hands. "I really want to kiss you," she says on the exhale. "Do I get to kiss you today?"

Quinn rests her hand over Rachel's. "That's actually why I'm here," she says. "I've been thinking about it, and I want to take you on a date."

Rachel sucks in a surprised breath. "A what?"

"A date," she repeats. "We're going into the city this weekend, and I want to take you on a date." Quinn makes sure not to look at her because, yes, this is probably the scariest thing she's ever done. "I know I can't give you much, Rachel, but I can give you this."

Rachel turns her own hand over and links their fingers together, palm to palm. "I don't expect you to give me anything, Quinn."

"I know," she murmurs; "but I want to." She turns her head to look at Rachel now, eyes wide and hopeful. "I've worked it out, Rachel. We can call it a work date. We can go for lunch, maybe do some shopping. I just - I want to spend time with you that isn't here."

Rachel is definitely in love.

It isn't even a question at this point.

"Quinn," she breathes.

Quinn's eyes drop down to her lips for a moment, and then snap back up to her eyes. "Now, I really
want to kiss you."
"I'm almost done here," Rachel replies brightly. "Don't think I didn't notice that you managed to locate a key for your door."

Quinn chuckles lightly. "I managed to convince Mr Schuester it was a good idea because of some of the 'maybe sensitive' work I could be doing in my room," she coyly says, using her free hand for air quotes.

Rachel leans into her slightly. "Oh, I bet you were very convincing." She squeezes Quinn's fingers. "I swear, all you have to do is smile that smile and bring out those dazzling eyes, and I'm certain the world will bow at your feet."

"Or kneel," Quinn quips, grinning at her.

"Or kneel," Rachel allows, smiling right back. "You have fantasies about that, don't you?"

Quinn arches an eyebrow. "Rachel Berry," she says, her voice low. "The last thing you want to be doing right now is putting the image of your kneeling between my legs in my head."

Rachel does all she can not to react, but her body instantly heats up and the sheer mention of such a thing. "And why is that?"

Quinn doesn't respond to the question. Rather, she unlinks their fingers and rises to her feet. "You're slacking," she says, her voice carrying an air of confident superiority. "What kind of leader sits down while everyone else is working? This is unacceptable, and I expect better from you."

Rachel just raises her eyebrows.

"We're going to have to have a long discussion about this," Quinn says, continuing in that superior voice. "I'll be in my bedroom. Come find me when you're done here." And, with that, she turns and practically struts away without looking back.

Rachel can only watch her go, unable to shake the feeling that Quinn Fabray is going to be the life and death of her.

And she's going to enjoy every second of it.

Quinn tenses when she hears the sound of her door locking behind her, suddenly feeling nervous. She knows who it is without having to turn around. She didn't even hear the door open, but Rachel is here, and she's here to have a long discussion.

Still, Quinn doesn't move, keeping her eyes on the books on the desk in front of her. To her credit, she barely flinches when she feels Rachel's hands on her shoulders. They slide down over her chest, gently palm over her breasts, and then move back up.

Rachel's arms wrap around her neck and she presses a soft kiss to Quinn's neck. And then just below her ear. Her jaw, her cheek and her temple.

The moment Quinn sighs in content, Rachel releases her and moves to sit on the edge of her bed. She's wearing a satisfied smirk when she finally looks at Quinn's face, which is sporting a truly unimpressed expression.

"You wanted to see me?" Rachel asks innocently, and Quinn lets out a growl. "Something you'd
like to say, Quinn?"

For a moment, the blonde says nothing, and then she slowly rises to her feet. "You're tempting me, Rachel," she says, walking towards her girlfriend.

"I am," she murmurs, moving back onto the bed and kicking off her shoes. "What are you going to do about it?"

Quinn just shakes her head, looking decidedly amused. "What would you have me do?"

As carefully as she can, Rachel settles against Quinn's pillows and sighs. "It's just, well, you're all the way over there, and I'm over here. You're so, so far away."

Quinn raises her eyebrows. "So, you're saying you want me over there, huh?"

"Preferably, I'd like you all over me," she says coyly, and Quinn is on her in a flash. She shrieks in surprise when Quinn climbs over her, but she laughs a moment later to make sure Quinn doesn't recoil in panic.

They've been testing her responses to these situations, forcing her to her limits and chancing flashbacks in all the best and worst ways.

"Are you okay?" Quinn still asks, as she's been doing every time they're in this position, or something similar.

"I'm okay," is Rachel's usual reply and, as soon as the words come out, Quinn is kissing her, pressing her body down against Rachel's. Her own hands steer clear of Rachel's wrists. It's just not something she's willing to test in this moment because, right now, she wants nothing more than to kiss Rachel in this way.

She has a phenomenal mouth.

She has a phenomenal everything.

Rachel's hands start moving first, untucking Quinn's shirt from her skirt and sliding her hands over the skin of the blonde's sides. Quinn lets out a low moan, and Rachel uses the opportunity to pull back and breathe.

"You are so beautiful," Quinn says breathlessly, and it's the gentleness of her tone of voice that catches Rachel completely off guard. "So beautiful," she murmurs, kissing her again.

And again.

Rachel's nails dig into Quinn's skin, bringing her impossibly closer. She wraps her right leg around Quinn's left thigh, her heart racing and her stomach coiling.

She's never felt like this before.

Even before Justin Prescott, she never wanted to be with someone this way. Finn never brought out any of these feelings or sensations, and it's terrifying.

Quinn recognises the moment she loses Rachel, and she pulls away, concern etching her face. "Rach," she breathes, her brow furrowed.

Not wanting her to go too far away, Rachel cups her cheeks and forces Quinn to meet her gaze. "I'm okay," she says. "I'm okay."
"Are you sure?"

Rachel nods. "I just - I want you a little too much," she confesses. "I've - I've never felt this way before."

Quinn blinks. "Physically?"

"And emotionally," she says. "It's everything, Quinn. You are ever - " she stops suddenly, instantly flushing at the sound of what she was about to confess.

Quinn quirks an eyebrow, a slow smirk spreading across her face. "I'm what?" she asks, all too knowingly.

Rachel brings her face down for another kiss, hoping to distract her. It works for a while. This kiss is slower, more tender. It's sensual and deeply emotional, and Rachel feels it in her very bones.

Quinn eventually brings an end to the kiss, pecking her gently. "It's okay, Rachel," she whispers, lips pressed to Rachel's neck. "You are everything, too."

Rachel quietly seethes as they make the trip into the city that Saturday afternoon.

She's sitting between Santana and Brittany, who have decided to monopolise her time. Her initial plans with Quinn have been thwarted because Santana pulled the 'friend' card and guilted her into having lunch with them instead.

Rachel knows she can't make Quinn a priority without raising suspicion, so the two of them have had to adjust their plans. She'll meet Quinn afterwards, both of them sneaking away somewhere and just being.

It's still making her boil slightly. She wants to spend the entire day with Quinn, and not be the third wheel on a Brittana date. Seriously.

Grumbling under her breath, she digs her phone out of her pocket to text Quinn, who's sitting near the front of the same bus with Kurt and Blaine.

And Sam.

Rachel presses down on her screen with entirely too much force, her irritation spiking. She wants to be sitting with Quinn. She wants to be holding Quinn's hand, breathing her in and feeling her warmth. She just wants to be with Quinn, and she doesn't know how she's supposed to keep that a secret from everyone around them. Is it even possible?

Rachel: I don't like this.

The reply comes instantly, and Rachel looks towards the front to find Quinn peering over her shoulder at her, a sly smile on her face. She's completely dangerous in this moment. There's an arch of an eyebrow that Rachel witnesses, and then she looks down at her phone.

Quinn: Is there anything you DO like?

Rachel: Fishing for compliments, are you?

Quinn: I'm waiting.
Rachel: You'll be waiting a long time, Quinn Fabray.

Quinn: Need I remind you that MY waiting is YOUR fault.

Rachel bristles immediately, feeling her irritation spike. Quinn was predictably sympathetic to Rachel's plight, given the secrecy of their relationship, but she's been having a little too much fun teasing her girlfriend about it.

Rachel: Bite me.

Quinn: With pleasure.

Rachel lets out a shaky breath, her heart rate picking up dangerously. She's sure Quinn must be able to hear it from so far away.

Rachel: You're a dangerous one, aren't you?

Quinn: You keep saying that.

Rachel: And I mean it. Those eyebrows should be illegal.

Quinn: Just my eyebrows?

Rachel: Baby, we are not doing this right now.

Quinn: Why? Are you getting flustered?

Rachel: Are you?

Quinn: You should know by now that I'm always running hot. Have you seen my girlfriend? She's a definite looker.

Rachel: She's stunning, is she?

Quinn: I'm pretty sure that's not what I said.

Rachel: I'm sorry, I can't hear you.

Rachel can practically hear Quinn's growl, and she smiles to herself… which draws attention to herself. Brittany raises curious eyebrows, and Santana pokes her bicep.

"Something you care to share with the class?" the Latina asks.

"Nope," Rachel immediately says. "It's nothing."

Santana leans into her. "Is it the guy from back home?"

Rachel immediately tenses. "What?"

"You're obviously talking to somebody you… fancy," she points out, grinning at herself. "I would recognise that facial expression anywhere."

Rachel isn't sure how to respond to that, so she doesn't. She won't lie about Quinn, but maybe it'd be easier to pretend the blonde is actually someone else. It'll probably ease the scrutiny, and Rachel will be able to act like a lovesick teenage girl with an actual reason.
She thinks she should discuss it with Quinn first. Though, for Rachel, she doesn't know how she would feel if Quinn decided to invent a secret significant other from back home as an excuse for her… happiness.

Except, well, Quinn is able to hide it much easier than Rachel can, and Rachel isn't sure if she's relieved or disappointed by that.

Thankfully, before Santana can press Rachel any further; Brittany steals her attention, and the moment passes.

Frankly, Rachel is finding all this secrecy rather exhausting.

Though, she'll endure it.

Hell, she'll even embrace it, because her girlfriend is worth it.

Being with Quinn is always going to be worth it.

Her phone buzzes once more and she looks down, a stupid smile claiming her face. She can barely hide it, because it's Quinn.

God, she's in so much trouble.

Quinn: It's either you're going deaf, or the problem is you're sitting all the way over there.

Rachel: Just you wait, Fabray. In next to no time; I'm going to be sitting in your lap.

Quinn: Jesus.

Quinn: And you call ME the dangerous one.

"Do you have to go?" Brittany asks, pouting in Rachel's direction.

Rachel glances at her watch. She's already late meeting Quinn, and she's itching to leave her friends. She's been anxious about it for the last fifteen minutes, just wanting to lay eyes on her blonde girlfriend. It's a little irritating how much she actually misses her.

They definitely don't spend enough time together.

"I do," Rachel finally says. "I already told you this, Britt. Quinn is probably already waiting."

"So, let her wait," Santana says, and Rachel shoots her a glare. They've already talked about this. Why can't Santana just lay off? Seriously.

Trying not to react too strongly, Rachel just shakes her head and rises to her feet. "I'm surprised you're not ushering me out of here," she says. "I would think the two of you would want some time alone, together." She gives Santana a pointed look, and the Latina's cheeks actually flush.

"Get the fuck out of here," Santana says with a dismissive wave of her hand. "And, please try not to kill each other. It would just be completely inconvenient for us, you know."

Rachel rolls her eyes. "I hear you," she deadpans. "It's all about you."

"As long as you know."
Rachel chuckles lightly, bends to kiss Brittany's cheek, and then leaves the restaurant. She's supposed to meet Quinn in a book store on the second level of the mall, and she has to force herself not to break into a run. The more time she wastes with walking; the less time she'll get to spend with Quinn.

God, she's pathetic.

Rachel finds Quinn easily when she arrives at the book store. She's standing in between two bookshelves, an open book in her hand and her head bent, eyes focused and back ramrod straight.

Even seeing her just standing there reading has Rachel catching her breath. It's honestly not fair how perfect the girl is, and Rachel can't stop her smile when she remembers that Quinn Fabray is hers.

Rachel moves towards her, stopping at her side and staring at her profile. She stands for a while because Quinn is locked in her own fantasy world, barely noticing anything around her, and it allows Rachel the opportunity to study her outside of their school corridors. She's ridiculously stunning, looking slightly lighter and unburdened away from all the responsibility.

Glancing around and noting that they're alone between the bookshelves, Rachel slides her hand onto the small of Quinn's back, startling her.

Quinn actually yelps, and glares… and then chuckles lightly, her features softening.

"Hey, you," Quinn says, her eyes alight with laughter at herself. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Not long," she lies. "Did I keep you waiting?"

Quinn shrugs as she sets the book back on its shelf. "I've been waiting for you my entire life," she says casually, and Rachel's heart rate spikes. It's entirely too easy for Quinn to do this to her. "Was it easy to get away?"

"Not quite," she admits. "But I managed it, and I'm here now. I missed you."

Quinn cocks her head to the side. "Are we going to have issues with attachment?" she asks.

"Only if you can stand there and tell me you didn't miss me," she shoots right back.

"I can't do that."

Rachel is always struck by how easy it is for Quinn to say these things, as if she doesn't realise how much weight her words carry.

What was it she said?

_Dangerous._

Clearing her throat, Rachel asks, "Are you planning on buying anything in here?"

"Unless this book store has the dessert I promised you, the answer to that question is no," she says. "I actually saw a neat little bakery with some of the prettiest baked goodies I've seen in a while. You said you like cheesecake, right?"

"Quinn," she says.
"Yes, dear."

Rachel feels somewhat electrified. "I'm pretty sure everyone likes cheesecake, so that sounds great," she says; "but do you think we can pass by a… bathroom on the way?"

Quinn gives her a curious look, clearly not understanding her hesitation in asking her question.

Well, Quinn doesn't understand it until Rachel is dragging her into a bathroom stall and kissing her fiercely. Rachel barely gives her a moment to get her bearings before her tongue invades Quinn's mouth, exploring and claiming. Rachel's hands waste no time sliding under the fabric of Quinn's shirt and spreading across her warm skin.

"God, your hands are cold," Quinn murmurs, forcing away her panic at possibly being caught. Rachel picked a secluded bathroom, but they can't expect to be alone forever.

And, really, seeing two pairs of legs through the space in the door would surely raise some eyebrows.

Rachel must realise that, because she just kisses Quinn once, twice, and then retracts her hands and pulls away, smiling lazily. "Sorry," she whispers. "I just really wanted to kiss you."

"I'm not complaining," she says, and then chuckles at Rachel's questioning gaze. "It's just that your hands are freezing."

Rachel presses another kiss to her mouth, and then they walk out.

They remain close together as they make their way to the little bakery to which Quinn intends to take Rachel. Their hands brush against each other from time to time, and Rachel can't shake the feeling that it's not enough.

It will never be enough.

She has so many questions to ask, and she isn't sure she'll be allowed to bring them up to Quinn.

"Here we are," Quinn finally says, bringing them both to a stop by linking their pinkies.

Rachel smiles warmly at her, and then leads the way inside. They spend good, long minutes perusing the confectionaries, marvelling over the various treats and trying to decide. Once Rachel finally chooses a slice of lemony white chocolate cheesecake, and Quinn picks red velvet cheesecake; the blonde sends Rachel to find them a table while she places their order.

Rachel finds them a spot hidden in the corner, where nobody from the outside can actually see them. It's not as if she intends to do anything to or with Quinn, but she doesn't want their 'coffee date' to be misunderstood by any students who happen to walk by.

At least, if they come inside, Quinn and Rachel will be able to see them and act appropriately.

While she waits, Rachel watches Quinn with focused eyes. She wouldn't be able to look away if she tried, really. There's still so much she needs to know about this girl, but the emotions she's feeling are both exhilarating and terrifying. It's obvious to them both that Rachel is definitely attracted to Quinn.

Physically, it's undeniable - the girl is unfairly stunning - and Rachel hasn't yet been able to bring up the extent of her emotional attraction.
The level of her feelings for Quinn will probably send the blonde running.

"Hey," Quinn says, catching her attention as she slides into her seat opposite Rachel. If ever they get to go on an actual date, she'll never sit this far away from Rachel. "Everything okay?"

"Why are you so beautiful?" Rachel murmurs, and Quinn immediately blushes. "I think, if I could, I would just look at you for the rest of my life."

Quinn arches an eyebrow. "Just look?"

Rachel cocks her head to the side. "Maybe touch, as well."

Quinn audibly swallows, and leans forward, resting her elbows on the table. "When we get back to school, you're mine," she says, her tone offering no room for a rebuttal. "I've shared you enough for one day."

Rachel likes the feeling of… belonging to Quinn.

For a lot of her life, she's felt unwanted, passed between her parents like a burden, some kind of bargaining chip, and then treated like a nuisance by her fellow students.

But, with Quinn, even when she was actively denying Rachel; she's always felt wanted and appreciated, and she still doesn't know how or why that could be.

Sighing, Rachel says, "I kind of promised Brittany I would help her with choreography for our dance class."

Quinn stares at her for the longest time, her facial expression slightly pinched. Then: "Why?" she whines.

Rachel grins at her. "I'm sorry."

"Oh, sure, you definitely look it," she grumbles. "I suppose I should be flattered my girlfriend is so on-demand."

Rachel's breath always catches whenever Quinn says those magical words: my girlfriend. It makes her feel so… wonderful and alive and so many good things. "You should be, yeah," she says, and then leans back when a waiter brings them their drinks and desserts.

Quinn sips at her Cafe Latte as soon as they're alone again, and then adds half a sachet of brown sugar and stirs silently. She stays watching Rachel the entire time, existing in a state of disbelief. She's here with Rachel Berry, drinking coffee and having easy conversation.

In her mind, they're the only two people in the entire world, and it feels amazing.

It never felt like this with Tori. It was a secret like this is, of course, but Quinn was never as invested in that as she is in this. This is, somehow different.

Rachel is different.

"How is it?" Quinn asks, watching as Rachel takes a tentative bite of her cheesecake. She forces herself not to imagine what it would feel like to be able to feed her. Those are dangerous thoughts that she can't entertain while sitting in public.

"It's amazing," Rachel says, practically moaning. "Why have I never been here before?"
"Because this is the first time you've been out with me," Quinn says, sounding very serious. "I'm going to take you to so many places, Rachel Berry."

"Oh?"

Quinn nods. "I'm going to take you everywhere."

"Quinn?"

"Hmm?"

Rachel looks over at her girlfriend with curious eyes. "Why are you wearing purple skinny jeans?"

Quinn looks away from the stationery selection in front of her, a slight frown on her face. "What?"

"You wear a lot of purple," she says. "But I've figured out that you don't even like purple, do you?"

Quinn straightens her back, looking slightly distressed. "Why would you say that?"

Rachel isn't sure what to make of her reaction, but she doesn't ask. "It's true, isn't it?" She doesn't wait for a response. "Why do you wear a colour you don't even like?"

Quinn shifts her weight from her left foot to her right. "I wouldn't go so far as to say I don't like it," she says, sounding almost diplomatic. "It's just, well, my mother hates purple. With a vengeance. She detests it. Abhors it. So, I wear purple to - "

"Get under her skin?" Rachel offers.

"It's more to get her... attention," she quietly confesses. "Sometimes, I think that if I don't wear such... uh, hated colours; they wouldn't see me at all."

Rachel wants to take her in her arms, if only so she no longer has to see Quinn's lost expression. The last thing she wants is to be responsible for putting it there.

Neither of them moves.

"I hate this," Quinn admits.

"It's necessary," Rachel says for both of them because, yes, it is.

Behind closed doors, they can be whomever they want to be to and for each other, but their public personas are different, and it's a painful truth they're always going to struggle to accept.

"I'll make it up to you," Quinn says.

"Oh, I bet you will."

It doesn't take Brittany long to realise that Rachel is... distracted. She's obviously not paying any attention to what the blonde is saying, and the somewhat dreamy expression on her face is amusing to Brittany. She thinks she has an idea what's really going on, but she's decided to drop the subject, for now.

Rachel will come to her when she's ready.
"Rachel," Brittany says, getting her attention. The brunette's head practically snaps up, looking apologetic. Brittany smiles gently, knowingly. "I'm feeling a little tired," she says. "Think we can call it a night?"

Rachel blinks in surprise, and then slowly smiles. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," she says. "I think I might catch a nap." Then: "With Santana."

Rachel chuckles lightly, but the relief is easy to see. She doesn't put up much of a fight beyond that, and she immediately takes her leave.

She has a different blonde she intends to see.

Quinn is surprised when Rachel arrives at her room earlier than expected, but she's definitely not complaining.

Well, it isn't as if Rachel even gives her the opportunity to do so because, yes, now they're using their mouths for things other than talking.

And thoroughly enjoying the safety of a locked door.

Rachel slides her cold hands under Quinn's shirt, intent on touching warm skin. She just wants to feel every part of Quinn on offer, and she's going to take what Quinn willingly gives.

"I don't think it's fair that you're using me for my body heat," Quinn murmurs against Rachel's lips, stepping forward and pushing her back.

She wants her on the bed.

She wants her underneath her.

God, she wants her everywhere.

When the backs of Rachel's legs hit the bed, she drops down willingly, bringing Quinn with her. Their mouths stay attached because the thought of being separated is actually… painful.

Rachel settles on her back, and pulls Quinn closer, her hands snaking around her waist and forcing their hips together.

Quinn is a phenomenal kisser. She pays attention, using her lips, teeth and tongue to render Rachel speechless. She's probably the most talented person Rachel has ever kissed, though Rachel probably won't ever tell her that.

It'd go straight to her head.

It's when Quinn grinds her hips against her that Rachel's mind stops drifting, and she lets out a pleasurable moan at the sensation.

God, it feels so good.

"Oh, my," escapes from Rachel's lips as she gasps.

Quinn tenses, thinking she's done something wrong. "Are you okay?" she asks, breathless and needy. "God, please be okay. I don't know if I can - " she stops, her eyes tightly shut. "Are you okay?" she forces out.
Rachel can't help her chuckle, rumbling from deep in her throat. "I'm okay," she murmurs, threading her fingers through Quinn's hair. "I promise I'm okay. Just kiss me. It's okay."

Quinn doesn't have to be told twice, and her mouth descends on Rachel's with the intention of keeping them both occupied until neither of them can catch her breath.

What feels like hours later, Rachel finds herself sprawled across Quinn's body, her ear resting over Quinn's heart. She can feel it beating, practically racing as their collective breathing steadies and the heat in the air and between their still-clothed bodies dissipates.

Rachel's never really experienced this kind of make-out session before. She's hot and bothered and so deeply aroused, but, oddly, still satisfied. While Quinn pushes for more, she doesn't really push, and Rachel finds herself falling deeper and deeper in love with this girl who cares so fiercely.

"Quinn?" Rachel murmurs, sounding sleepy and content.

"Hmm?"

"I told myself I wasn't going to ask, but the curiosity has been killing me from day one," she says, suddenly wary of her next words. "Just, umm, who are the people in the picture?"

Quinn, predictably, tenses, and Rachel is quick to kiss the corner of her mouth in an attempt to settle her.

"You don't have to tell me," Rachel offers immediately, growing slightly alarmed when Quinn's breathing grows unsteady. "Baby, you don't have to tell me. It's okay. I'm sorry I asked."

Quinn is halfway to a full-blown panic attack when Rachel's hand slides under her shirt and splays across her abdomen. As if a switch has been flipped, she immediately settles, her breathing steadying and her heartbeat returning to a normal pace.

"It's okay," Rachel murmurs again before settling into the crook of Quinn's arm and decidedly not moving.

They're growing closer and closer every day, and Rachel just wants to know everything.

Still, even she recognises when pushing is a bad idea. Quinn almost hyperventilating is an indicator not easily ignored.

Which is why she's wholly surprised when Quinn chooses to divulge.

"It's a picture of me and my sister," she says, whispering the words.

Rachel immediately frowns because she knows Quinn is an only child. If there was a sister, then there isn't a sister any longer, and just the thought of that is heartbreaking.

"I didn't know her," Quinn continues, her eyes slipping shut. "Her name was Frannie, and I didn't even know she existed until I found that picture in the bottom drawer of my mother's dresser when I went looking for her jewellery when I was, umm, I guess I just turned seven."

Just from the tone of Quinn's voice, Rachel knows this isn't going to be a happy story.

"I didn't know who was in the pictures I found, so, automatically, I asked," she says. "I asked my mother, and I remember pressing that particular picture into her hand, and she immediately burst into tears. I didn't understand, you know, and then she started yelling at me, telling me not to touch
her things and to leave them alone. She kept saying it was my fault, and I - " she chokes on her words, the emotions overwhelming her.

"But, I was a persistent child, constantly asking questions, and I didn't quite manage to read the signs," Quinn goes on, managing to gather herself. "Looking back, I don't know if dropping the subject would have resulted in anything that different, but I've always believed that things that are meant to happen generally have a way of happening. So, I kept asking about the picture as any seven-year-old would, and I learned far more than I would have liked."

They exist in silence for the longest time, just breathing.

Rachel wants to say something to help or even offer her an out, but the words aren't coming. She thinks Quinn needs to talk about this because it's obviously affecting her, even all these years later.

"We were on a train when my mother snapped," Quinn says. "It was the last time we actually went anywhere as a family, and it was the last time either of my parents looked at me with any semblance of warmth. I've tried to accept that I must remind them of her, but - " she stops. "She died, Rachel, and we were on a train when my mother told me I was responsible."

Rachel does all she can not to react, but a small gasp manages to escape, and Quinn immediately tenses again.

"I - I didn't understand what she was saying at first," Quinn continues anyway, plowing forward. "It didn't make sense to my seven-year-old mind, but I remember her words. I'll never forget them. She said I killed her daughter. She said she wished I'd never been born because I proved to be useless. She never wanted me. She wanted Frannie, and I was the one who took her daughter away from her. She couldn't possibly love or care for someone like that, and she was a childless mother."

Rachel blinks rapidly, forcing away her tears.

God, what happened?

"I was so confused and distraught, and my mother was furious, so they sent me home. I went back to Hartford, where I spent the rest of the campaign with only my nanny. I remember crying for my parents every night, wondering if I'd imagined it all. I mean, I had no idea what I did, you know? So, I asked Mary. My nanny. She told me that Frannie was diagnosed with leukaemia when she was little, and it was... bad. And, in a last ditch effort to save her, they decided to have me."

Rachel's aware she's frowning, not really following.

"She needed new, clean cells, so they, umm, basically implanted me in my mother, so they could use the blood from my umbilical cord to save her," Quinn explains, suddenly sounding very detached. "I don't know the details - maybe I arrived too late or the cell count was too low, but it wasn't enough to save her. I wasn't enough to save her."

"Mary told me, before she retired, that my parents tried. They really did try to be the parents to me they needed to be, but they just couldn't. I think they were able to ignore the fact that I wasn't Frannie until I very rudely reminded them of it by unearthing that picture, and everything kind of fell apart after that. I don't think either of them can even look at me without seeing the person their daughter could have grown into and, once I outlived Frannie; they just... stopped... trying.

"It's the reason I don't really blame them," she says quietly. "The summer that followed that was... bad. My father's campaign didn't... go to plan, and... it was... bad."

There's a lot to be heard in those words, but Rachel can't quite make sense of it. Quinn is telling her
so much without actually telling her.

"I was - I was sent to boarding school the next school year, and I've been going through the motions ever since. I mean, it's the least I can do, right? I wouldn't want a daily reminder of the child I lost either. It all makes sense."

"Quinn, no," Rachel finds herself saying. "None of this - there isn't -" she isn't even sure what to say or where to find the right words. "Quinn, you were just a baby," she eventually says because, God, she wasn't expecting this.

"And, even then, I wasn't enough," Quinn practically parrots. "Nothing I do ever will be. Whatever I do. God, how can anyone ever even look past what I've done?"

Rachel sits up, her eyes on Quinn's face. "Stop it," she says. "Please, just stop. You have done nothing, do you hear me? You never asked for any of this, and you had absolutely no control over the outcome because, if you did, I'm sure we would be having an entirely different conversation." She takes a deep breath. "It's not your fault. I need you to believe that. It's not your fault. Please. Please, don't blame yourself."

Quinn's watery eyes meet hers. "If not me, then who?" she asks. "If not myself, who am I supposed to blame when everyone else seems to?"

And, really, Rachel doesn't have a response for her.

When it's time for Rachel to return to her own bedroom before curfew, she doesn't want to go. Quinn's grip on her waist is enough to inform Rachel about her own feelings on the matter, but they can't do this.

They're the Head Students.

It would send the wrong message, even if nobody ever found out.

"I have to go," Rachel whispers, her fingers threading through Quinn's hair. "Are you going to be okay?"

"I think so," Quinn replies, catching hold of Rachel's wrist and pressing a kiss to her palm. "Thank you for listening. Thank you for staying."

"I'm not going anywhere, Quinn," she returns, leaning forward and kissing her cheek. "I told you I'm not running, okay?"

Quinn sighs. "I'm not used to this," she admits. "I've never really met anyone who gets me. I've never felt comfortable enough with anyone to be vulnerable and honest this way."

"It's okay if you're scared, Quinn," she assures her. "I get scared too."

"You do?" she asks. "Of me? Of us?"

"Of a lot of things," she admits.

"I don't want to hurt you," Quinn suddenly says, sitting up so she can look at Rachel properly. "I don't want you to hurt ever again."

"I know, baby," Rachel murmurs. "But, sometimes, it's inevitable, you know? This world is a pretty nasty place, full of evil and cruelty and violence."
Quinn sighs. "I know, but that doesn't mean I want to be responsible for any of it,' she says. "Especially not when it comes to you."

"I know," Rachel agrees, and then leans in to kiss Quinn's mouth. It's all she can think to do to wipe away the suddenly dejected look on her girlfriend's face. She pushes Quinn back until she's lying down again, and Rachel climbs over her, their lips staying attached. "I know," she repeats. "You won't hurt me, and I won't hurt you."

It's not a promise she can safely make, but she does it anyway, punctuating each word with a searing kiss. It's a seal of sorts, trying to prove to Quinn that she means her words, right now.

This moment is all that matters, anyway.

Quinn pulls her mouth away and smiles. "You're going to make me fail all my exams."

Rachel smirks. "And you'll be happy about it."

Quinn's eyes flash with... something. It's both happy and sad, and her next words break Rachel's heart. "I wouldn't know," she says; "but I know this is the happiest I've ever been."
Chapter 14

Chapter Fourteen

"You are not coming to watch us sing."

Rachel is adamant, really, but Quinn just looks at her with that knowing smirk that always manages to make her feel hot all over.

"Why not?" Quinn asks, pouting ever so slightly.

"Don't do that," Rachel huffs. "Don't, Quinn. It's not going to work on me."

"It's not?"

Rachel shakes her head as she crosses the room towards her girlfriend. Quinn is sitting in her desk chair, spun around to face Rachel at the door, with an eyebrow arched in expectation. "Jesse just told me the Head Student organised for a bus to take students to Contreras to watch the ConChords perform at Sectionals this Saturday."

Quinn feigns innocence. "Fancy that?" she murmurs, shrugging slightly.

"Quinn."

"Rachel."

Breathing a sigh, Rachel settles her body on Quinn, straddling her legs and slipping her arms around her neck. "You are not coming to watch us sing."

"Uh, I think the fact my name is on the list proves otherwise," Quinn says, her hands finding purchase on Rachel's hips. "As students of this here establishment, you and your teammates deserve as much, if not more, support than any other sport or cultural at this school."

Rachel sighs dramatically. "But an entire bus, Quinn?"

She shrugs. "I had to do something. I couldn't really advocate for only myself going to watch my oh-so-gorgeous girlfriend light up the stage, now could I?"

Despite her slight indignation, Rachel blushes brightly.

Quinn runs a gentle hand along the left side of her body. "Why don't you want me to come?"

Slowly, Rachel meets her gaze, her bottom lip trapped between her teeth in thought. "I - I stopped singing after… everything," she begins to explain. "I couldn't bring myself to do it until the start of this year. I - I think it might have had something to do with you, but please don't let that go to your head."

"I won't," Quinn interjects.

"Starting with the choir this school year has been… good for me," she says. "The large ensemble has helped, and I couldn't pass up the opportunity to sing with the ConChords when Jesse asked. I just - " she stops. "This will be the first time I perform for an audience in more than a year, and I'm - " she stops again.
Quinn regards her carefully. "Are you nervous?"

She sighs, dropping her forehead to rest against Quinn's shoulder. "I'm Rachel Berry. I don't get nervous."

"That's not what I asked."

She swallows audibly. "I guess I am," she confesses. "A little bit, anyway."

"And it's making it worse knowing I'm going to be in the audience?"

Rachel doesn't want to say yes, but they're trying to be honest with each other, so she just nods. "Okay," Quinn says, her face not giving away any of her emotions. "I won't come, but there's still an entire bus of students going to support you. That part isn't negotiable because, frankly, I wouldn't even know how to explain that to Mr Schue. Particularly after I turned on the charm to get it in the first place." She hums in thought. "Did you know he used to be a show choir director at his old school?"

"No ways?"

"He told me himself."

Rachel lifts her head, visibly thinking. "I don't see it," she confesses. "He's so… stiff."

Quinn smiles softly, her lips pressing a gentle kiss to Rachel's cheek. "You should ask Santana to tell you her theory on that."

Rachel makes note of it with a gentle hum, and then proceeds to kiss the air right out of her girlfriend's lungs in an attempt to ease the sting of rejection Quinn will never show her.

Rachel doesn't get around to asking Santana about her supposed theory until two days later. It isn't as if she hasn't had the opportunity. In fact, she and Santana have seen a lot of each other, and Rachel realises it's because she's seen very little of Quinn.

Which, she suddenly knows, is probably by design.

Even though Quinn won't explicitly say it - not to her face, at least - Rachel knows there's a part of the blonde that feels a little hurt by Rachel's request for her not to attend the ConChord's performance. She saw it in the way Quinn's face gave nothing away when she agreed to stay away, and she's unsure how to make up for it without reversing her request.

There's also very little she can do when her girlfriend is avoiding her.

"Hey, San?"

Santana looks over at her friend, fully accepting the opportunity not to have to focus on her Biology textbook. She's sporting a bit of a headache, and she wants nothing more than to leave the library and curl up in bed with Brittany. It's cold enough for her to get away with it.

"What's up?" Santana says, cocking her head to the side.

"Quinn mentioned that you have this theory about Mr Schue," she says, and then laughs at the way Santana's face literally lights up. "Do you know why he gives off the vibe he's soulless?"
Santana snorts in amusement. "Why are you always so dramatic?"

Rachel ignores her. "Tell me."

Santana leans forward. "So, before he came to be Headmaster here, he used to teach at this school in Ohio, right? William McKinley."

"Do I even want to know how you found that out?"

"Probably not," she dismisses. "Anyway, he was a Spanish teacher there, which is just the funniest thing I've ever heard. Have you ever heard him speak Spanish?"

Rachel can't say she has, but she remains silent.

"We both know the only reason people pack up their entire lives and move to a new state is to run from something," she says, which is a truth entirely too close to Rachel. She practically did the same thing, though she's still in the same state - well, this time. "Obviously, I did my research - I'm actually rather good at it - and I found out that he was actually married."

Rachel's heart lurches, absently wondering if something terrible ended up happening to Mr Schuester's wife. That would be horrible.

"It turns out that his wife was pregnant," she says, which doesn't help with Rachel's sudden guilt for thinking so ill of him. No wonder the man is 'soulless.' "Well, that's what she wanted everyone to think, anyway."

Rachel frowns. "What?"

"Apparently, they were having marital problems, and she was convinced he was going to leave her, so she faked a pregnancy to keep him."

Rachel can't even believe what she's hearing. It sounds like something out of a soap opera.

"Of course, he eventually found out, and then they got divorced, and now he's here making all our lives miserable."

"You don't mean that," Rachel dismisses. "You like him."

She shrugs. "His wife did a pretty shitty thing, didn't she?"

"Yeah." She sighs. "Poor Mr Schuester."

Santana leans forward that bit more. "I think he's going to be okay," she says conspiratorially. "Between me and you, I think he has a thing for Miss Pillsbury."

Rachel's eyes widen. "Seriously?"

"Don't you see the way they look at each other?" She doesn't give Rachel a chance to respond as she says, "Oh, wait, that means you would have to look away from Quinn, and you're incapable of that."

Rachel responds by chucking her eraser across the table.

"Hey, Sam," Quinn calls out, stopping her fellow blonde in the corridor between classes. "Got a second?" she asks. "I have a favour to ask."
Sam, of course, comes to a halt and gives Quinn his full attention. It's no secret between the two of them that he's never quite been able to get over her, but they're both studiously ignoring that.

"What's up?" he asks.

Quinn bites her bottom lip for a moment, suddenly unsure if she should go through with her request. She's setting herself up for something here, but he's someone she trusts more than anyone else, which is mainly because he knows more than the others. "You're going to watch the ConChords this weekend, right?"

Sam nods, tilting his head to the side expectantly. It'd be cute if Quinn was into that sort of thing. "I am," Sam verbally responds. "Blaine is kind of forcing me."

Quinn recalls the two boys being roommates before this year, but she's only recently come to know Blaine through their leadership positions. Blaine is a part of the ConChords, along with Kurt and, not for the first time, Quinn is tempted to say fuck it and just attend herself.

No.

Rachel doesn't want her there, and she's going to respect and accept that.

As awful as it makes her feel.

It isn't even that Rachel's asked her not to come that bothers her the most; it's the reasons why. Quinn imagines that Rachel was outspoken and fiery and wanting to be showered in applause before. She likes to think, in another world, Rachel might have asked her to come watch an endless number of times, and Quinn would have resisted, just to see the brunette pout and huff and possibly even storm out.

But, not in this world.

In this world, her girlfriend is nervous and apprehensive and hidden. Quinn hates it. She positively hates it, but she's unsure how to make it better for Rachel. She decided a long time ago that she was just going to be there, but Rachel obviously doesn't want that. It hurts, but Quinn is going to respect it.

"Quinn?" Sam prompts when she's been silent too long.

She offers him a sheepish smile. "Sorry," she mumbles. Then, clearer, she asks, "Do you think you could record the performance for me?"

He tilts his head to the side.

"It's just that Mr Schuester doesn't think it's a good idea for both his Heads to be off campus at the same time this close to Exams. I wanted to go and support Kurt and Rachel myself, but that isn't going to happen. I would have asked Blaine, but he's also singing, and - "

"Are you and Santana still not getting on?"

Quinn immediately tenses. "Are you saying you won't do it?" she asks, ignoring his question. "Because I can ask someone else."

"I didn't say that."

"I don't want to talk about Santana."
Sam holds his hands up in innocence. "Sorry," he says. "And, yes, I'll be sure to record the performance for you."

"Thank you," she says tightly.

It's when she's turning to walk away that he says her name, and she looks back at him over her shoulder. "I think you should ask Santana, anyway."

Quinn just scowls, and then keeps on walking.

Dealing with Santana Lopez is the last thing she needs right about now.

Rachel debates endlessly with herself about whether or not it's a good idea to say goodbye to Quinn early on Saturday morning. She knows the blonde is back from her morning run, and she suspects she's already studying at her desk.

If she tries hard enough, Rachel can convince herself to leave her be, claiming that she doesn't want to disturb her, but Rachel really wants to see her.

So, almost steeling herself, Rachel crosses the corridor to Quinn's room. She knocks quickly, and then enters the room to find her girlfriend sprawled out on her carpet. She's still in her running gear, slick with sweat, and Rachel has to force herself not to get too close, just in case she's unable to leave this bedroom or this girl.

Quinn's head turns towards her. "Aren't you supposed to be on a bus right about now?" Her tone is flat, lacking emotion, but Rachel can still hear that she's smarting.

Rachel sighs. "I don't want you to be mad at me."

"I'm not mad at you," Quinn says tiredly, moving to sit up and lean against the side of her bed. "I'm not," she repeats.

"But you are something?"

"Yeah," she mumbles. "I'm something."

Rachel glances down at her school uniform for a moment, and then decides she doesn't care. She crosses the room and settles herself in Quinn's lap, straddling her legs and supporting herself on her knees.

The blonde just watches her amusedly.

"You have to know that I do want you there, Quinn," she tries to explain. "I just - I think I need to do this on my own first, okay? I need to prove to myself that I can do it without my parents, or my brothers, or… you."

"But not Brittany or Santana?" Quinn finds herself asking, unable to stop herself.

Rachel's fingers slide into her damp hair, ignoring the sweat. "Do you have any idea what you mean to me?" she murmurs. "Do you have any idea how important you are?"

Quinn doesn't say anything.

Rachel almost tells her that she loves her, but she stops the words from tumbling out. She doesn't want to say them in an attempt to be placating. They're supposed to be special. "I'm sorry, okay?"
she whispers. "I'm sorry." She doesn't know if Quinn would be receptive to a kiss, so she settles for pressing her lips to a warm forehead.

Sighing, she uses Quinn's uninjured shoulder as leverage to get to her feet but, before she can move away, Quinn's fingers clasp her own.

"I'm sorry, too," Quinn says. "I understand, I do. It just - "

"Sucks?"

Quinn shrugs. "I know you're going to kill it up there," she says. "Good luck, okay? Bring back a win for us."

Rachel grins at her, bending to kiss her lips when she offers them, and then starts to leave. Again, she wants to say those three words, but she settles for, "As if it's in any doubt."

"They were pretty good."

Santana looks over at Brittany, wishing she could refute the blonde's claim, but she can't. The first performers were decent enough, but the second ones were good. She knows the ConChords are borderline incredible, but it's still a worry. She's never actually heard them sing all together before.

Well, not since Rachel joined them.

Her attention drifts to the row behind her where Sam seems to be preparing his camera, and she smirks in his direction. "Did Blaine ask you to do that?" she asks.

Sam looks her way, puzzled. It takes a moment for his eyes to recognise her in the dark, and he mentally goes over what his next words are going to be. He doesn't want to lie, but he knows Quinn and Santana are at a very delicate time in their non-relationship.

"No," he eventually says.

"So, you're doing it for yourself?" she jokes. "Wanky."

Sam regards her carefully. "Right," he says, turning away.

Santana frowns, her gaze lingering on him for a long moment before she turns away. She feels unsettled for some reason, and she casts a quick glance back at Sam, but he doesn't seem to notice. She gets these feelings only when Quinn is involved, but she doesn't see how that could be.

The girl isn't even here.

"Introducing the ConChords, from Dalton Academy!"

Brittany literally bounces in her seat in anticipation, and Santana just smiles to herself. Whether it's because of Brittany or because of Rachel, she isn't able to tell, but she doesn't think it actually matters.

Now, Santana has heard Rachel sing before. When Rachel isn't being brought forward for a solo, they usually stand side by side in the school's main choir - they're kind of the same height, much to Santana's chagrin and Rachel's delight - so Santana almost knows what to expect.

She's wrong.
"Oh, my God," Brittany says from beside her the second Rachel takes centre stage - she's the soloist - and starts to sing.

It takes Santana a few seconds to recognise the song as Celine Dion's *It's All Coming Back to Me Now*, and her breath catches in her throat.

The entire auditorium grows still, and it's almost as if time freezes. As if it knows Rachel Berry is singing, and the entire world better stop and take notice because something magical is taking place.

Brittany reaches for Santana's hand and links their fingers.

Santana glances over her, forcing her eyes away from the girl on stage, and she's not surprised to find tears in Brittany's eyes. She wouldn't be surprised if she were to touch her own cheeks and find them wet.

Stupid Rachel and her stupid voice making her feel stupid things.

"She's amazing," Brittany whispers as Rachel goes into and holds the last note. Her voice gives away her emotions, but she keeps it together well, and it makes the entire performance that bit more.

When the song comes to an end, Rachel takes a small bow as the auditorium erupts in applause, and then steps back to get into position for the next number.

Santana is convinced whatever follows will pale in comparison, which, admittedly, isn't wildly inaccurate, but Kurt and Blaine's duet is pretty amazing. She doesn't recognise the song, but it's got a good tempo, and she finds her foot tapping along, which she will deny doing until her last breath.

The group number is equally spectacular, with nearly all the members being able to showcase their respective singing and dancing talents.

"I taught her that move," Brittany proudly says after Rachel does an intricate dance step with Blaine, and then proceeds to skip - yes, skip - across the stage. "And that one."

Santana just laughs softly as her fingers squeeze around Brittany's. "They're going to win, aren't they?" she asks the blonde.

Brittany smiles a dazzling smile at her, and it takes all her willpower not to lean across and just kiss her until neither of them can breathe. "Was it ever in any doubt?" Brittany asks, almost shrugging nonchalantly.

Santana is suitably charmed. "I suppose not, no."

Quinn isn't in her bedroom when Rachel goes looking for her as soon as she gets back to Dalton. She has news, and the first person she wants to tell is her girlfriend.

Only, said girlfriend is nowhere to be found, and Rachel finds herself returning to her own bedroom disappointed.

**Rachel: Where are you? (This is me pouting, by the way.)**

Huffing in mild annoyance, she throws her phone onto her bed and starts to change out of her
uniform and into something a little more comfortable for the weekend (and for making out with Quinn).

She practically dives for her phone when it vibrates, and then groans.

_Quinn: Mr S has me supervising afternoon detention. How did it go?_

_Rachel: I want to tell you in person._

_Quinn: So, you won, then?_

_Rachel: QUINN!_

_Quinn: What? (This is me playing innocent, by the way.)_

_Rachel: When are you done being all good Head Student and what not? (We both know you could pawn it off to someone else.) I want to kiss you!_

_Quinn: Is that all you want, huh?_

_Quinn: I'm not all that GOOD when I'm sitting here texting you, now am I?_

_Rachel: Well, I beg to differ on that, Miss Fabray._

_Rachel: And, no, I would like to do way MORE than just kiss you._

_Quinn: Oh yeah? Like what?_

_Rachel: Na ah. Get your cute butt to my room, and I'll answer you in person._

_Quinn: Your room doesn't have a key._

_Rachel: And why would we need to be in a locked room, Quinn?_

_Quinn: You may think you're cute when you're acting coy, but you're really not._

_Rachel: You take that back. I'm adorable._

_Quinn: And modest._

_Rachel: We totally won, by the way._

_Quinn: Twenty minutes. My room. I have to congratulate you in person._

Rachel drops her phone onto her bed and sighs, her smile blinding.

These are going to be the longest twenty minutes of her life.

Quinn barely has time to close her door before she's being pushed up against it. She lets out an 'oomph,' and has just enough time to suck in a breath before she's being thoroughly kissed, Rachel's mouth hot and demanding in a way it's never been before.

Quinn's hands settle at her waist in an attempt to hold her still because, yeah, the squirming isn't helping.
Rachel pulls away a breathless minute later and glares at her. "You said twenty minutes," she accuses. "It's been twenty-seven."

Quinn chuckles softly, her fingers closing around the fabric of Rachel's sweater. "I'm a girl on demand, it would seem," she says. "So, you totally won, huh? Tell me all about it."

Rachel slips her hand into Quinn's, and then leads them to her bed. She urges Quinn to lie on her back, and then she climbs on top of her, spreading her entire body over her girlfriend's.

Quinn lets out a steadying breath at the added weight, adjusting slightly, and then smiles widely. "Hi," she whispers.

"Hi." Rachel kisses her softly, rests her head on her chest, and then proceeds to tell her everything.

Quinn listens in silence, her fingers absently playing with strands of Rachel's loose hair. There's such a musical quality to Rachel's speaking voice, and Quinn finds herself closing her eyes as she soaks in every word the brunette is saying.

Her tone rises and falls, her excitement peaks, and her laugh is so infectious; Quinn feels as if her very heart is reaching out and introducing itself to Rachel's.

"It was amazing, Quinn," Rachel says, sounding breathless. "I felt amazing. Being back on that stage, it - it was like he couldn't even touch me. Not even in my mind."

Quinn smiles sadly, gently kissing the top of her head. "You did it, Rach."

"I did," she echoes, settling against Quinn again, her fingers tracing along the blonde's ribs.

"You really were wonderful," Quinn says.

"What?" she asks, lifting her head to look at Quinn's face.

"You were so amazing, Rach," she says, sliding her hands along Rachel's back.

"How do you know?"

"Besides the fact that you just told me?"

"Quinn."

She smiles mischievously. "I have my ways," she says, winking.

"Quinn."

She chuckles. "I had someone record it for me, and I watched it something like five thousand times, which is the reason I was seven minutes late meeting you. You were incredible. You are brilliant." She hugs Rachel closer and presses open-mouth kisses along her neck.

Rachel moans at the feeling, her eyes slipping shut as she tilts her head back to give Quinn better access. "Who did you have record it?" she just about manages to ask. She knows Kurt and Blaine were on stage with her, and Santana and Brittany definitely would have told her if Quinn asked either of them.

Quinn hesitates for a moment, her lips pausing. "Uh, well, I asked Sam."

Rachel pulls back slightly. "Oh."
Quinn eyes her carefully.

"Oh," she says again, sorting through her own feelings about the blonde boy she just can't seem to understand or escape. "Does - does he know about you?" she asks.

Quinn shakes her head.

"But you think he suspects something?"

Quinn sighs, dropping her head onto her pillow. "I try not to think about that," she finally says. "Particularly not when my girlfriend is literally lying on top of me."

"She's kind of hot, isn't she?" Rachel purrs, allowing them to cease the conversation about Sam.

"Kind of, yeah."

When Rachel sees Quinn emerge from the shed with her bicycle in tow, her answering grin practically splits her face, despite her own apprehension. Her girlfriend just looks happier and lighter than she's seen her in a little while.

Of course, though, Quinn can't actually ride, though she's started up with her running. Rachel has to admit that the physical exercise has made Quinn less tense but, then again, so have their make-out sessions.

Studies have shown that kissing can reduce stress, and Rachel is always willing to help Quinn with all the stress relief imaginable.

"Maybe we should just go for a run," Rachel suggests for the umpteenth time. She doesn't want to ride Quinn's bicycle when she can't. It just doesn't seem right, or something like that. "Please," she tacks on. "I just want to go on a run with you. And, possibly, I don't know, make out against a tree. I've always wanted to do that."

Quinn grins at her. "Oh, I see."

"It seems you do, Fabray."

Sighing dramatically, Quinn backtracks to return her bicycle to its home, and reemerges with a sly smile on her face. "Do you actually want to go on a run?" she asks knowingly; "or is this all some ploy to get me alone in the bushes?"

"What would you say if it were a bit of both?"

Quinn arches an eyebrow. "I'd say you were diabolical."

Rachel shrugs noncommittally. "I've been called worse."

Admittedly, Quinn isn't sure what to do with that information, so she says and does nothing. Instead, she steps towards Rachel, silently asking the question.

"I'm okay," Rachel says, smiling reassuringly. "Can we go?"

"Someone's eager," Quinn points out.

Rachel shakes her head. "Have you seen what my girlfriend looks like?" she asks. "Especially when she's wearing her running gear. I mean, she's just got these abs to die for, and the tightest
shirts imaginable, and I - "

"Okay," Quinn interrupts. "We'll go. Let's go."

As soon as she gets back to her bedroom after their 'run,' Quinn strips herself of her clothes, chucking the items into the laundry basket she keeps behind the door to her bathroom. She can still feel Rachel's hands on her skin.

And her mouth.

Quinn can barely suppress her smile as she switches on her shower, turning the temperature to scorching. Her skin is already flushed with exertion and bubbling arousal, and she's starting to think that maybe she should be having a cold shower instead.

She and Rachel haven't really discussed much of anything regarding their own physical relationship, past relationships and the future of their own relationship. They're existing in this wonderful little bubble that Quinn is terrified is going to burst in an ugly way.

So, she'll hold onto this thing they have. She'll hold on as tightly as she can and hope they can figure it out together.

Somehow.

Quinn is just pulling on one of her Dalton sweatshirts when her phone rings, the sound making her entire body tense and her breath catch. Why would her mother be calling? At this time, no less?

Taking a steadying breath, Quinn makes her way to her desk and lifts her phone. For a moment, she's tempted not to answer, but she knows the woman will just keep calling. She's even called the front office once before when she called while Quinn was on a run.

The conversation that followed that was not at all pleasant.

Slowly, she slides her finger across the screen and brings the phone to her ear. "Hello, Mother," she says, keeping her voice cool and detached.

She has learned from the best, after all.

"Quinn, darling," Judy Fabray says, and Quinn's stomach drops.

"How are you this evening?" Judy asks.

"I'm well," Quinn answers, as is part of the rehearsed formalities of conversations with her mother. "And, how are you? How is Father?"

"We're very well, dear," she says. "It's actually why I'm calling."

Quinn waits patiently.

"Your father and I have decided to take a vacation this Christmas," she says. "We're thinking somewhere abroad. Europe, maybe. Paris is good this time of year."

"I believe it is," Quinn says, playing the role of daughter well.
"Maggie is making the necessary bookings, and our plan is to leave this Sunday."

Quinn's features harden, but she says nothing. Sunday. That's before Quinn is scheduled to return home. In fact, school is supposed to close only the following Wednesday. "It's my understanding you will be returning to Hartford?"

"As far as I am aware, yes."

"I think that would be best," Judy says. "I suspect you've had a taxing semester, and you might like to have a good rest and recuperate in peace."

Quinn isn't naïve enough not to read between the lines. They're going on this vacation without her. Over Christmas.

Leaving her, alone.

She's smarting at the sting of rejection. It's not as if she actually wants to go on vacation with her parents, but she would appreciate the option. Is that so much to ask?

"Of course," Quinn finds herself saying.

"We'll be back for the New Year's Eve party, of course," Judy says, as if Quinn is even worried about that. "We'll see you then, darling."

"Of course," Quinn says again, feeling numb. "Travel safely," she adds a moment later. "Give my regards to Father."

"I will."

Quinn takes in a slow breath, and then sighs. "Goodnight, Mother," she says, and then hangs up.

There's a wave of utter hurt and frustration that washes over her, which is quickly replaced with insurmountable rage. It takes over everything and, before she knows it, she's spinning around and throwing her phone at the wall as hard as she can.

It shatters.

Quinn doesn't care.

Until this moment, she hasn't given much thought to her Winter Break plans. She was always going to Hartford. She's usually gone to Hartford, when she's not going home with Santana.

But, just knowing that her parents don't -

Quinn crumples, her legs giving out and she finds herself sitting on her carpet, her knees clutched to her chest and her mind spinning. She starts to rock back and forth, trying to wrap her mind around the idea that she deserves this.

It's part of her penance.

Rachel finds Quinn in that position, steps faltering when she sees her. It takes her a moment to survey the room, seeing Quinn's destroyed phone and the unfinished dressing of her girlfriend. She isn't even wearing socks, and Quinn is always wearing socks.

Shutting the door behind her and locking it, Rachel crosses the room towards the rocking blonde,
and kneels in front of her. She ducks her head, intending to catch Quinn's gaze, but she fails.

Even if Quinn is looking directly at her, she's not seeing her.

Risking contact, Rachel places her hands on Quinn's knees, her touch gentle. "Quinn," she whispers. "Quinn, please."

For the longest time, Quinn says nothing. They just stare at each other, one set of eyes pleading and the other unfocused.

Then: "Why do you like me?" Quinn asks, her voice barely audible.

Rachel breathes out in relief at the sound of her engaging, even if the question is so unexpected. "As in, you want a reason?" she asks for clarification. "The reason why I like you?"

Quinn nods, suddenly unable to look at her.

"There is no reason," Rachel says. "I believe there should be no reason. If you like someone because of a reason, what happens when that reason is gone? I don't intend for my heart to change, Quinn. I like you without a reason. I like you because you are you, and I realise that's difficult for you to believe, but it's the truth. I like you." She chuckles to herself. "Like crazy amounts, Quinn. This is crazy."

Quinn lifts her head and separates her knees, silently inviting Rachel closer, which the brunette readily accepts. "You keep saying that," Quinn murmurs.

"I'm falling in love with you," Rachel says, serious and oddly somber.

"Good," Quinn says, leaning forward and resting her forehead against Rachel's shoulder; "because I'm falling in love with you, too."

The last day of exams is also the day Quinn's cast is scheduled to come off. She's just walking out of her French exam when Sister Henrietta, the school's resident medical professional, comes to fetch her. She's made an appointment for them, which she failed to inform Quinn about prior to this very moment.

Quinn has been unable to prepare, which means she hasn't had any time to tell Rachel. Without a phone, she's stumped, and she has no choice but to allow the Sister to lead the way. It isn't as if Quinn can just stop a student and tell them to tell Rachel she's leaving campus to get her cast taken off, can she?

Surely she can, though.

Rachel is her Deputy.

It would make sense for the Head Student to pass on such information. The Deputy should know that she's been left in charge, right?

By the time Quinn's made her decision, they're already outside at Sister Henrietta's little blue car, and Quinn doesn't see another student in sight. Shit.

It's okay. She doesn't have plans to see Rachel until later anyway. Her girlfriend intends to nap for most of the afternoon, and possibly spend some time with Brittany and Santana before they all break up for the holidays.
It's okay.

Quinn will see her later.

This will be a surprise for Rachel.

Quinn doesn't expect it to take as long as it does. Despite their appointment, they have to wait, which just makes Quinn that bit more irritable. She wants the cast to come off now, and she wants to see Rachel.

It's simple; the only two things she wants.

She gets neither.

And then she gets one.

When Quinn and Sister Henrietta get back to school, it's well into the late afternoon and, after a quick stop at her own bedroom, Quinn goes in search of Rachel. If she's being honest, she half-expected to find Rachel asleep in her bed, and she's slightly disappointed to find the room empty.

It doesn't help that Rachel's room is also empty. It appears emptier than is the norm, and there's an unsettling feeling that descends on Quinn. For the nth time today, she curses the fact that she doesn't have a phone.

Where is Rachel?

Quinn knows she's probably somewhere with Santana or Brittany or both, which prompts movement in Quinn's legs. She'll face Santana if it means laying eyes on Rachel Berry. She'll face just about anything for her.

She goes to Brittany's room first, because it's closer and stops just outside the closed door. She can't explain the sudden rise in her heart rate, but she attributes it to having to interact with Rachel in front of her friends.

So, steeling herself, Quinn raises her hand to knock on Brittany's door. It's the first time she's ever visited her fellow blonde, because Brittany is firmly Rachel's friend.

And Santana's, she supposes.

"Come in," she hears from inside, and she immediately opens the door to reveal Brittany and Santana spread out on the blonde's bed. They're wrapped up in a way that reminds her of herself and Rachel, but she shakes that from her mind.

"Uh, hi," Quinn says, oozing awkwardness. "Sorry to bother you, but, umm, have you seen Rachel? I can't seem to find her."

Brittany sits up, disentangling herself from the Latina. "Have you tried calling her?" she asks.

Quinn flushes slightly, ducking her head. "Uh, I don't actually have a phone," she says. "It's a long story."

Brittany gets up off her bed and walks towards her desk to retrieve her own phone. "Here," she says, quickly dialling Rachel's number and handing the phone to Quinn.

Quinn stares at the screen for the longest time before she lifts the phone to her ear, trying not to
imagine the worst scenario. Why isn't she here? Where could she be, and why is she there?

"Hey, Britt," Rachel answers after the sixth ring, and Quinn's heart does a flip-flop. Because, yes, it's Rachel on the phone, so she's relieved, but there's something off in her tone of voice that puts Quinn on edge.

"Hi," Quinn says. "It's me."

"Quinn?" she says, and then immediately starts sobbing.


It takes her a full minute to calm enough to answer Quinn's questions. "I'm on my way home, Quinn."

"What? Why? Did something happen?"

Rachel takes a deep breath. "My dad had a heart attack," she says, and Quinn sucks in a sharp breath. "He's going to be okay," she continues before Quinn can ask any more questions. "Lee says they've got him set up at the hospital. They're letting him rest, because God knows he needs it. He never listens to me. I told him. I told him he had to take better care of himself, but he doesn't listen, and now look what's happened."

"I'm sorry," she says, and she means it in every way. "I'm sorry I wasn't here."

"Where were you?"

"I went to get my cast taken off," she says. "I didn't have time to tell you, but you'll be pleased to know I have a fully healed, somewhat sickly pale left forearm."

"Sounds sexy."

Quinn can't stop her blush, and she ducks her head, once more, out of habit.

Rachel hums. "Now, I can get really rough with you."

That does nothing to help with Quinn's blush. She takes a breath, clears her throat and switches topics. "What time will you be arriving?" she asks.

"Scheduled for seven o'clock."

Quinn sighs. It'll be dark by then. "You'll be careful, right?"

"Daniel's already waiting at the station, he says," she responds. "I think he just wants to get away from the hospital. I mean, I'm not even sure I want to arrive at all. When I get there, everything will be real and I'll have to deal with it."

"I'm sorry," Quinn says again, unable to find the words to make her feel better. "Rachel, I'm so sorry."

"I miss you already."

Quinn starts to say it back, but snaps her mouth shut with an audible clack of her teeth.

Rachel laughs at her expense. "Is Brittany standing right there?"
“Yes.”

“Then you should probably get off the phone,” she says. “We can email.”

“Okay,” Quinn agrees. “Are you going to be okay?”

“I think I’ll try to catch a nap, though sleeping without you just isn’t the same.”

“I wish - ” she starts and then stops, sighing.

“Me too, Quinn,” she says. “You have no idea.”

Quinn shakes her head, feeling frustrated. “Take care of yourself, okay?”

“You too, baby,” she says.

“And please let the family know I’m thinking of them, okay? Especially Hiram.”

“I will,” she assures her. “Thank you. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Bye, Rachel.”

“Bye, Quinn.”

Quinn isn’t sure what she’s feeling when the call drops, but she pulls the phone away and hands it back to Brittany. “Thank you,” she says.

Brittany regards her curiously, noting the lines of distress in her expression. “Are you okay?”

Quinn snaps to attention. “Hmm?”

“Are you okay?” she repeats.

“Oh, uh, yeah,” she says unconvincingly. “It’s just, well, it’s her dad. I’m worried about… them.”

Brittany gives her a curious look but, thankfully, she doesn’t question her further. “Will you be all right?”

Quinn’s smile is genuine when she hears the sincerity in Brittany’s voice. “I think so,” she says. “Thank you, again,” she adds, and then leaves before Santana’s gaze can burn a hole through her skin.

My dearest Quinn,

I miss you. I miss you A LOT. I wish you were here.

I just arrived at the hospital, and I saw my dad. He looks so much older than I remember, pale and weak. I hate this. I just hate this. But then I have to remember that, as terrible as this all is, it’s far better than what could have happened. I don’t even know who I am without him, you know?

Who am I in this family if he’s gone?

Skype later tonight? I want to see your arm, and I want to see your face.

Did I mention I miss you?
Love, Rachel.

Dear Rachel,

I miss you too. I wish I were there too. Just know that I'm thinking about you, okay? Every second of every day. I know I say this enough but, honestly, if exams weren't already over, I probably would have failed them all with my obvious and disastrous inability to concentrate on anything other than you.

I don't think you should think about things like that. Your father is going to be okay. You belong to that family in all the important ways. Believe me when I tell you that blood means very little. You are the very heart of that family. I've seen it with my own eyes.

Skype, definitely. Is nine o'clock okay?

Say it again, anyway.

Love, Quinn.

My dearest Quinn,

It was so good to SEE you. I definitely feel much better now. And, yes, your arm is supremely sexy. I can't wait to get my hands on it. And my mouth, actually.

I really wish we were spending our first weekend after exams together. I'm not prepared for the next few weeks without you. Sigh.

I'll say it as many times as you want.

Goodnight, my beautiful Quinn. Dream sweetly, and know that I miss you something fierce.

Love, Rachel.

Dear Rachel,

Waking up to your words was a nice surprise. Thank you, kindly. I like to hear that you're feeling better, and I like it even more knowing I had a little something to do with it.

And now I get to start my day with all sorts of dirty thoughts in my head. Thank you for that. I really do miss your hands, and your mouth.

And you, I suppose.

I'm not prepared either. But... I have an idea. Let me make a few arrangements, and then get back to you, all right? I'm going into the city, so I should be able to get a new phone today. It's doubtful either of my parents have tried to contact me, but I'd rather not deal with the fallout if they have while I've been phone-less.

So, you'll say it all the time then?

Love, Quinn.
My dearest Quinn,

You always know how to make me feel better. Just knowing you exist makes me irrationally happy, and I'm not just saying that. You're probably my favourite person in the world (who I'm not related to, I mean. Have you SEEN baby Lena?)

I like putting dirty thoughts in your head. I'm especially fond of when you act on those thoughts.

NOOO! Tell me. I want to know now.

So, I kind of had a fight with my mom. It probably wasn't an actual fight, but it was something. As you know, I'm supposed to be spending most of Winter Break with her, but my dad had a heart attack and I don't really want to leave him, so we're fighting. She understands, I guess, and I get what she must be feeling, but I don't know what I'm supposed to do. It isn't anyone's fault, and I can't help feeling as if she's, somehow, blaming me. That's not right, right? It doesn't feel right.

God, I miss you.

Love, Rachel.

Dear Rachel,

You're my favourite person as well. To be honest, my family doesn't even compare to you, and I hope that doesn't scare you. I think it should scare me, but it just makes me feel... right. It feels good, and I'm trying not to let it freak me out.

And no, it's not right, Rachel. It's the furthest thing from okay, and I don't know how to make it better for you. All I have is words, for now. Just know that I'm thinking endlessly about you, and I have a plan. It's a good plan, if I do say so myself.

I'm off to get my new phone now. I'll text you once I've got it all set up, and then we can talk more freely. I miss being able to talk to you whenever I want. I miss a lot of things.

Love, Quinn.

The text arrives well after lunch, and makes Rachel squeal and cry at the same time.

Quinn: Fancy some company this holiday?

It takes her an obscene amount of time to calm down enough to ask Quinn to tell her all the details. After that and a quick chat with LeRoy, her response settles both girls to the point of being pathetic.

Rachel: OMG! YES!
Quinn's next few days go slowly. Without her Deputy around, there really isn't much excitement to be found in anything. Now that exams are over, she has time to do other things.

But, most importantly, she has time to think.

For Quinn, being left alone with her thoughts hasn't always been a good thing. Just in the few days she's been without Rachel, she's managed to convince herself she doesn't deserve Rachel or what she represents.

She convinces herself that she can't have this happiness.

It's not hers.

Rachel and Quinn text endlessly, and then talk for hours in the evening. They don't talk about any of the things that Quinn is worrying about because it doesn't seem like a couple problem, and more of a Quinn problem.

In return, Rachel tells her all sorts of things about her day, about her family and all the wonderful things the baby is doing.

Quinn talks about the plans for the last few days of school. Kurt has taken the mantle as her second-in-command while Rachel is away, and they're managing to get things done without all the bickering.

Rachel exaggerates a gasp, which allows Quinn to shower her with compliments.

She's missed.

She's desperately missed.

And neither girl is afraid to say it.

"Is that Quinn?" Santana asks, frowning at the sight of a blonde head waiting with Kurt in the line for Bus Five.

Brittany follows her line of sight and squints into the sun. "I think it is, yes," she says.

"What is she doing in the line?"

Brittany shrugs, clearly not seeing the significance of this moment.

Quinn does not take the bus.

Ever.

It's not exactly something her parents… allow.

But, Santana knows that it's more than that. Quinn doesn't like the bus. In fact, she doesn't like any form of transport, and the fact that she's willingly getting onto the bus means something because,
even when she went home with Rachel for Thanksgiving, Quinn organised a car to take them to the station.

So, what's so different now? Isn't she supposed to be going home? Wouldn't that require the car? Where is she going? Is she going home with Kurt?

That part makes sense, because Santana knows Quinn's parents probably aren't going to be spending much time with her over Winter Break anyway - or any at all. She finds that she's relieved that Quinn won't be spending Christmas alone.

But.

Quinn doesn't end up getting onto the bus.

Santana just turns in her seat and watches as her bus drives away, leaving Quinn standing there, watching them leave her behind.

Santana has to know.

She has to, which is why she takes out her phone and texts… Who is she supposed to text? It's not as if she can message Quinn. Maybe Kurt?

Rachel.

Santana pulls up her contact and starts to type, just knowing that Rachel will know. There's something of a… friendship between them, and it makes Santana slightly uncomfortable. She can't be sure why exactly, but she worries about them both, for different reasons.

For whatever reason, she just knows one of them - or both - is going to end up getting hurt.

_Santana: Do you know if Quinn is going home for Winter Break?_

Santana doesn't have to wait long for a reply, and she frowns at Rachel's obvious deflection.

_Rachel: Um, I assume so. Are you on the bus yet?"

_Santana: So, you don't know?_

_Santana: And, yes. My bus just left. B got on the right bus, and she should make it home all right._

_Rachel: All I know is that Quinn will be in Hartford for her parents' annual New Years' Party. Oh, that's good. Are you excited to go home?_

_Santana: What aren't you telling me, Berry?_

_Rachel: Oh, Santana… SO MANY THINGS._

The second Rachel's eyes land on Quinn, she practically skips towards her. The blonde looks flushed, slightly traumatised and a little high from the trip, which makes Rachel's smile widen. Her girlfriend looks so stinking cute, and the way her face lights up when she spots Rachel steals the brunette's breath.

"God, I missed you so much," Rachel says when she's close enough, drawing Quinn into a
tempered hug. "Like, so much."

Quinn hugs her close, breathing in the familiar scent and feeling the part of her that's been twisted into a knot for days finally loosen. "I missed you, too," she murmurs into Rachel's hair before she releases her.

As much as Rachel wants to take Quinn's hand, she doesn't. Instead, she robs Quinn of the handle of her small suitcase, and she gets them walking. "So, how was the trip?" she asks.

"I really don't want to talk about it," she immediately replies, the dismissal clear to hear in her tone. It was traumatic. "I'm more interested in you, though? How are you?"

"Better now," she says, somewhat shyly. "It's been a strange few days, but I think everything will be better when my dad comes home."

"Tomorrow, you said?"

"If all goes well, yeah," she says. "They're going to run a few last tests tomorrow morning, and then they'll discharge him in the afternoon if he does well."

"Is he doing well?"

Rachel's steps falter, and she brings them to a stop. "He's a stubborn man."

Quinn risks a step into her personal space, which offers them both a moment of comfort. "It's going to be okay," she says, and she's saying it for the both of them. "I promise it's going to be okay, Rachel."

"You can't make those kinds of promises," she says.

"Maybe I should kiss you instead."

Rachel's eyes flicker with the challenge, but she eventually smiles. "Do you want to get a coffee in that coffee shop before we go to the hospital?" she asks. "There's kind of something I need to talk to you about."

Quinn's brow creases. "Is it something bad?"

"I just want to clear up some things," she says. "About us, and about the way we're going to approach my… family."

"When you say your… family," Quinn says; "you really mean your Uncle Jared, don't you?"

"Things have been… tense," she says. "I think he would get too much satisfaction knowing that - " she stops, frowning.

"Russell Fabray's daughter is gay," Quinn finishes in a whisper.

Rachel sighs. "I'm sorry."

"Why are you sorry?"

"I don't know," she says. "I just am."

"I don't want you to be sorry," Quinn says. "I won't apologise for what we have here, and I don't want you to either, okay?"
"Okay."

Quinn clears her throat. "So, coffee?" Then: "Well, tea for me. Caffeine and my meds don't really mix that well."

Quinn senses the moment the air around Rachel changes. The brunette grows tense, and Quinn is forced to duck her head to catch her gaze. "Hey," she says softly. "Is everything okay?"

Rachel doesn't immediately respond.

"Rach," Quinn whispers, leaning in. "Did I say something?"

It's that question that brings Rachel back to the present. "No, Quinn, it's not you," she says, sighing. "I just - I forget that people know who I am in Wallingford."

Quinn frowns. "Okay...?"

"I don't usually spend any time in town," she confesses. "It gives people the opportunity to - " she stops, sighing.

"Rachel?"

"There's a man sitting at a table twenty-five feet away from us," she explains. "His name is Jackson Prescott, and he's my attacker's brother."

Quinn's face twists into a heavy scowl, her protective instincts rising to the surface. "Is he allowed to do that?" she asks through clenched teeth.

"He's always been careful to keep his distance," Rachel answers, sounding utterly defeated. "The restraining order can only do so much, and the police sort of grow tired of constant complaints about violations. Particularly when they're coming from me."

Quinn growls in annoyance. "Do you want to go, then?" she offers, not wanting her girlfriend to be uncomfortable. "We can go."

Rachel wants nothing more than to do just that, but then she would be allowing him to win, and she's not about to do that. "No, we can stay," she eventually says. "Just, you know, maybe shift your seat slightly. I don't want to be able to see him, and I definitely don't want him to be able to see either of us."

Quinn doesn't have to be told twice. She's been dying to get closer to Rachel since they arrived and she slides her chair as quietly as she can. "Better?" she asks once she's settled.

"Having you closer will always make things better," she replies, and Quinn blushes. Then: "I'm never going to be able to escape it, will I?"

"I guess it depends on what you define as escape," Quinn says thoughtfully. "In this place, for now, people will remember, yeah. But, one day, it will just be something of the past."

"Do you really believe that?"

"I do," she says. "News comes and goes, so it'll be old eventually. But, if you're wondering if you'll be able to escape it inside of you, then that's something else entirely."

"Inside of me," she echoes. "Do you think there's a part of me that's tried to push it aside, rather
than dealing with it?"

"Only you can answer that," Quinn says, honest and true. "You know yourself better than anyone."

"I want to know what you think."

Quinn, admittedly, is wary. "I don't want to start a fight."

"You won't."

She shakes her head. "Look, I'm definitely not one to talk because I hide and bury things deep, deep, deep, but I do think there are still things you have to deal with. Leaving here and going to Dalton isn't going to magically fix everything. Believe me, I know. It's a constant work in progress, Rachel."

"Are you referring to the flashbacks?"

"Partly, yes," she admits. "I'm also thinking about the way you have yourself convinced I wouldn't want you in all the ways I've tried to assure you I do."

Rachel drops her gaze, absently trapping her bottom lip between her teeth. "Sometimes, I feel as if I'm untouchable," she confesses quietly. "Like, after knowing how dirty I am, nobody would want to touch me." She looks pleadingly at Quinn. "I don't even know if I even want to be touched."

Quinn stares at her for a moment, trying to formulate a response. "As your girlfriend, I'm not entirely sure there's a safe way to respond to that," she says, smiling gently. "I would want to, Rachel. I do want to, okay? You're going to set the pace. That's perfectly fine with me. I want you to feel safe and comfortable, with me and without me. I'm not going anywhere."

"Even if we never have sex?"

Quinn raises her eyebrows. "Is that your way of saying you'll never want to try?"

"I - I don't know," she answers, suddenly timid. "Definitely not any time soon."

"Then, okay," Quinn says. "I don't want to sound as if it would be only for my benefit but, even if we break up or whatever the future holds for you or me or us, I would still implore you to try, okay? All these things that scare you, your strength is found in facing them."

Rachel stares at her for a beat. "You know, life would be so much easier if both of us could just take our own advice."

Quinn laughs out loud, the sound almost melodic, and Rachel wants nothing more than to pull her close and kiss her senseless. But, they're in public, so she settles for patting her hand on the table, and then returning her attention to the hot chocolate in front of her.

Changing the subject, Rachel asks, "So, how does it feel having a fully functioning arm again?"

Quinn's grin is contagious. "It feels great," she says brightly. "I can't wait to get back to playing. I'm going to have to work on my fitness while I'm here. I think I'm losing definition in my abs."

Rachel rolls her eyes, because she sometimes forgets that Quinn can actually be such a jock. "And, I would expect nothing else."

Quinn cocks her head to the side. "Now that we're together, does that mean you're going to come watch me play?" she asks, genuine in her curiosity.
"If I can, I will," Rachel assures her. "I mean, we're always so busy but, if I'm free, I'll be cheering for you from the sidelines."

"You know, until Kurt, I never actually had anyone support me?"

She frowns. "Nobody?"

Quinn shakes her head. "My parents have never cared enough. I mean, I guess I've been in boarding school for so long, it shouldn't bother me, but sometimes it does."

"What about Sam? Santana?"

Quinn chuckles. "As a football player, Sam wouldn't be caught dead watching soccer, and Santana would much rather eat her own hair than sit for five seconds watching girls run around with a ball for ninety minutes."

"Why doesn't she play, anyway?"

"She prefers field hockey, I guess," she says. "She claims it's more of a contact sport. She gets to use a weapon."

"She's insane."

"But very good."

Rachel studies her face. "I'm guessing you've watched her play before?"

"I'm the Head Student," Quinn dismisses with a shrug. "I've seen everyone play."

"You can't hide from me, Fabray," she says, rolling her eyes. "You can pretend you don't care all you want, but I know. I see you."

Quinn's gaze meets her. "You do see me, don't you?"

"I kind of like what I see," she says.

"Only 'kind of'?"

Rachel desperately wants to kiss her, and her eyes drift down to perfect, pink lips. It's enough for Quinn to suck in a sharp breath, and then lean back. "We should get out of here," she says.

"Yeah," Rachel agrees, quickly downing the rest of her drink.

Quinn just laughs at her antics as she too finishes with her tea, suddenly feeling both light and heavy at the same time. It's a feeling she experiences a lot whenever she's with Rachel, and she's not yet sure if she should be afraid of it or not. "Rachel," she says gently.

"Yes, Quinn."

"I'm so glad I'm here," she says.

"Me too," Rachel says, a slow smile spreading across her face. "God, you have no idea just how much."
"I'll get the car," Rachel says, bumping Quinn with her hip. "You just wait here and look pretty."

Quinn shakes her head in amusement, and just watches her go, a small smile playing on her lips. She has missed being with Rachel, and she would really love to be able to kiss her, but they have to wait.

She can't help wondering if it'll ever get better for them; if they'll ever be able to be free to just be together; if they'll ever get it right.

One day, she's sure.

In the future.

After.

Quinn is still lost in thought when she feels a tap on her shoulder, forcing her to turn and come face-to-face with the very man Rachel pointed out to her. She raises her eyebrows in surprise.

"What are you doing with the Berry girl?" he hisses at her, and she steps back in actual shock. The man, looking sinister, shakes his head in disgust. "Be careful," he practically purrs. "She's going to ruin your life, if you don't watch out."

Quinn is left dumbfounded as he spins and walks away. It happens so quickly that she's not even sure it did. She takes a deep breath to keep herself calm. She has the sudden urge to lash out at him, but she keeps control of herself.

It's not right, and it's not fair.

What is he doing trying to ruin Rachel's name in this stupid town?

She's just able to push it from her mind when Rachel pulls up, and they share a smile once Quinn climbs into the passenger's side after putting her suitcase in the trunk.

Rachel immediately takes hold of Quinn's hand and links their fingers, loving the warmth. "Did I mention that I missed you?"

"Once or twice," she says, ducking her head in embarrassment.

"Well, I did," she says. Then: "Are you ready to see my dad?"

Truthfully, no, Quinn isn't ready to see Hiram - not after the last conversation they had - but she still nods her head yes.

She'll always say yes when Rachel asks.

Hiram is asleep when Quinn and Rachel arrive at his hospital room. Quinn managed to change out of her school uniform in the bathroom, and she gets less looks as the two of them walk through the corridors.

They're… just friends here.

Everywhere.

It's something they decided over hot beverages. Even in Rachel's home, they will remain just friends when they're not alone. Her brothers won't know, and Rachel won't confirm or deny any
claims made my Noah or Emily-Anne regarding what they think they know about her supposed feelings towards Quinn.

The same as with Brittany, she supposes.

Quinn and Rachel step into Hiram's room and sit comfortably in the two chairs beside his bed. In the safety of the room, Quinn rests her hand on Rachel's thigh, squeezing every few moments.

"I know we haven't had time to discuss it, but what are the plans for your birthday?"

Rachel looks momentarily surprised, as if she's managed to forget that she's turning eighteen on the eighteenth. "Oh."

Quinn cocks her head to the side. "Just so you know, I already bought your present, and I honestly can't wait to give it to you."

Rachel places her hand over Quinn's on her thigh, threading their fingers together. "I'm just glad I get to see you on my birthday."

Quinn glances at the slumbering Hiram. "Silver linings, huh?" she asks.

"We have to find them wherever we can."

Quinn nods her head, and then leans towards Rachel. "Tell me how you are," she whispers, risking pressing a kiss to Rachel's cheek. "I want the truth."

"I always give you the truth, Quinn."

Quinn kisses the corner of her mouth. "Tell me."

"I'm mad at him," she says. "I know, technically, I shouldn't be, but I'm just so mad at him." She sighs. "It's a lifetime of bad choices that have got us here, and he's treating it like it's a joke. Doesn't he understand how serious this is? If he doesn't get better and stay healthy, it's going to happen again and his heart is already weakened, and he won't survive it. He won't, and then what, Quinn? If he's not around, he won't get to see me graduate or sing on Broadway or get married or have babies." She's crying now, and Quinn wraps her in a hug, pressing kisses to her hairline in comfort.

Rachel sobs into Quinn's coat, inhaling the gentle scent of her girlfriend.

"I'm sorry," Quinn murmurs.

Despite herself, Rachel chuckles. "Was that too much truth?"

Quinn pulls back slightly, absently smoothing Rachel's hair. "You said babies," she says. "As in, more than one. Is that what you want?"

Rachel blinks in surprise. "Um, yes," she says, trying not to give too much thought to the fact that Quinn has chosen to latch onto that particular part of her honest ramble. "I spent a lot of years growing up as an only child, and I don't want that for my children." She audibly swallows, shifting out of Quinn's embrace and wiping at her eyes. "I want a big family."

Quinn shifts in her seat.

"Do you?" Rachel asks, suddenly nervous to hear what Quinn is going to say.

"I haven't really given it much thought," she admits. "I've been working at reaching one milestone
after the other, you know," she says. "As far as my parents are concerned, I'll have two-point-five children by the time I'm thirty."

"So, you don't know what you want now?"

"I do," Quinn says, her tone serious. "I just want to be happy."

It's an hour later when Hiram finally wakes, his sheets rustling and drawing the girls' attention. Rachel immediately rises to her feet, moving into his line of sight with a forced smile on her face. Despite the joys of having Quinn here, she just can't forget that her father is in the hospital.

Still, it definitely helps.

Just Quinn's presence helps.

"Hi, Dad," Rachel murmurs, catching her father's attention and drawing a smile from him.

"Hi, Sweetheart," Hiram says, hoarsely, and Rachel immediately gets him a cup of water, her eyes never straying from his face.

"Look who's here," Rachel says as she hands him the cup.

Hiram's eyes wander, and he sees Quinn for the first time.

In truth, Quinn isn't sure what to expect from the man, given their last conversation where he assumed Quinn wouldn't be receptive to Rachel's declaration about her feelings. It's almost expected for things to be… tense, but Hiram smiles easily, and Quinn feels herself relax.

Slowly, she rises to her feet. "Hello, Sir," she says, which draws two separate Berry eye-rolls. "It's good to see you."

"It's good to see you, too," Hiram says, and he sounds sincere. "I hope we're not dragging you away from your holiday plans."

Exchanging a look with Rachel, she places a hand on Hiram's forearm and says, "There's nowhere else I'd rather be." She's never meant words as much as she means those, and she feels Rachel's hand slide along her back, which draws Hiram's attention.

Slowly, the man smiles. "So, you two, huh?" he asks, and Rachel blushes.

"Dad," she says, shaking her head. "We already discussed this."

"I know," he says with a chuckle. "I'm just so glad I get to see it." His eyes drift to Quinn. "You make her very happy, Quinn."

Rachel turns her body to look at Quinn fully. "Please ignore him."

Quinn just grins at her. "I make you happy, do I?"

Rachel pokes her in the ribs. "Stop it, you," she says. "Don't encourage him."

Quinn resists the urge to kiss her by looking at Hiram. "How are you feeling, Sir?"

Hiram casts a nervous glance Rachel's way, before his eyes resettle on Quinn. "I've been better," he confesses. "Right now, I'd just like to go home and sleep in my own bed. This one is deathly
uncomfortable, and I miss my family."

Quinn nods in understanding. She's had her fair share of trips to the hospital, though only Mary and Tori know about some of those. "I hear we're busting you out of here tomorrow, though?"

Hiram chuckles heartily. "I'm not too sure about the whole 'busting' thing, but I'm definitely coming home," he says, before he looks at Rachel. "It's my understanding that LeRoy has done an overhaul of my menu?"

Rachel bristles slightly. "He has, yes," she says. "In fact, we've all decided to embark on this journey with you."

Hiram grumbles. "Why should we all be miserable?" he asks, and then looks at Quinn. "Do you want to be subjected to boiled food too, Quinn?"

Quinn, wisely, doesn't respond. She just places a hand on Rachel's hip and draws her into her side.

The movement prompts Rachel to reveal to her father that she and Quinn have decided it's best to keep their relationship on a need-to-know basis. With a lot of family expected to be around for the holidays, it's what makes the most sense. The chances of other people finding out are much too high when more and more people are in on the secret.

Also, Rachel is determined for her Uncle Jared never to find out. There's a hatred he carries for Russell Fabray, or just his particular brand of politics that sets Rachel on edge. She's determined to protect Quinn from it, because it's something, and she doesn't want her girlfriend to be subjected to it if she can help it.

"Are you sure?" Hiram asks them.

Rachel's fingers close around the fabric of Quinn's coat. "For right now, yes," she says. "We'll see how things go."

Quinn smiles in agreement, and Hiram just hopes that, one day soon, the two of them won't have to hide at all.

When Hiram sends them home, citing that LeRoy expects them on time for dinner, Rachel and Quinn leave, both of them feeling the effects of the long, emotional day. The fact that they've been apart for a few days definitely hasn't helped, and all Rachel wants to do is touch.

"Do you want to drive?" Rachel asks Quinn, an idea suddenly coming to her. "I mean, maybe it'll make the trip easier. You said it might be something about control, right? So, what if you had the control?"

Quinn casts a skeptical eye at her.

Rachel frowns slightly. "Baby, you do know how to drive, right?"

Quinn traps her bottom lip between her teeth as they come to a stop at the car. "I know how to drive," she says. "I just - well - "

"You don't have a license?" she questions, finishing it off for her.

"I don't have a license," she confirms. "The independence of women in my... social circle isn't really a priority. I don't even know if my mother has a license. For as long as I can remember, we've
always been driven places."

Rachel merely nods, and then crosses to the driver's side. She unlocks the car and climbs in, silently waiting for Quinn to do the same on the passenger's side.

Earlier, Quinn's medication was enough to let her endure the car ride to the hospital, but now it's twenty miles to the estate, and Rachel is slightly worried. She doesn't want to be responsible for any of Quinn's distress.

It's one of the things Rachel has been dealing with: how not to overwhelm Quinn with the depth of her love. They've barely been dating a few weeks, and she still doesn't know Quinn's history with… relationships with girls.

Rachel knows this isn't purely a physical thing. Quinn is definitely in the wrong place for that. What they have is deeply emotional, two damaged people determined to hold onto each other.

Breathing a sigh, Rachel reaches for Quinn's hand and gives it a gentle squeeze. "Just focus on me," she says. "Just me. I'm right here."

Quinn's fingers squeeze hers right back, and then she lets go, allowing Rachel to drive with both hands. "I trust you," Quinn says after a moment. "It's just - " she stops.

Rachel glances at her as they leave the parking lot. "I know it's not about trust, Quinn."

"Then what is it about?" she asks, and she sounds genuinely curious.

"I don't know," Rachel admits. "All I do know is I'm right here, and we're going to work on you, and on me, together, all right?"

Quinn nods. "All right."

Quinn can't actually remember the last time she really looked forward to the holiday season. Winter Break was always just another expanse of time during which her parents would be distanced and removed, and she would pretend she didn't exist beyond the familial obligations of keeping up the appearance of a happy, yuppy family.

She's never actually been excited over presents or even wanted to stay up late in case she sees Santa Claus. In fact, she barely believed in him when she was younger. As much as Mary tried to preserve her childhood, there was only so much the woman could do to make a lonely, neglected child's days… better.

Quinn didn't… believe.

In the Easter Bunny or the Tooth Fairy or any of those other fantastical creatures that are supposed to bring magic to children's lives. Besides her voracious reading, Quinn liked to ask questions, and Mary vowed always to tell her the truth. It was all she could offer this beautiful, inquisitive child, who would forever carry the weight of a life she would come to believe she didn't save.

For Quinn, asking about her sister once she learned of her existence was a natural progression, and Mary was the one to tell her all she needed to know.

Somebody had to.

And then, just months later - after what she would come to refer to as the 'Summer From Hell' -
Quinn was leaving for boarding school, purely lamenting her belief that she was never truly wanted. Just some baby that was supposed to save the child they did want, and ended up failing.

She failed, and now they all deserved to be miserable.

So, no, Quinn's holidays have always been particularly lacking, and Rachel almost starts crying when Quinn tells her all of that. There are no longer going to be secrets between them, and they are going to bear the burden with the other. They're definitely in it together now.

"You have a place with us, Quinn," Rachel says, as they're pulling up in front of the house. "Always."

Quinn glances at her. "Do you really mean that?"

"I know it must be difficult for you to accept my words, but I'm going to say them, anyway," she says. "No matter what happens between us, you will always have a place here, okay? My home is your home, and my family is your family. Believe me, there's plenty enough to share."

Quinn chuckles softly, and then sighs. "I've really missed you," she says.

Rachel's eyes linger on her face. "Let's hurry and get inside, so I can actually give you a kiss 'hello.'"

Quinn grins. "I think that's the smartest thing you've ever said."

Quinn barely has time to set her backpack down in Daniel's old bedroom before Rachel's hot mouth is claiming hers. There's a brief battle of lips, tongues and teeth before Quinn relents, and allows Rachel to press her up against the door. Her lips trail along Quinn's jaw, drawing a soft moan of pleasure from the blonde.

Rachel pulls back at the sound and grins at Quinn. "Welcome home, Fabray," she says silkily, and Quinn practically whimpers. They don't really have much time - LeRoy expressly said he wanted them back downstairs in exactly fifteen minutes - but Quinn is determined to make every second count.

As gently as she can, Quinn wraps her arms around the small of Rachel's back and lifts her up, forcing the brunette to hug her waist with her legs.

Without seeming too eager, Quinn crosses the room towards the bed, and gently lays Rachel down, climbing over her and settling her hips to align perfectly.

"Are you okay?" Quinn asks, her voice low.

Rachel runs both hands through Quinn's hair. "I'm perfect."

It's all the permission Quinn needs to fuse their mouths together, her tongue seeking entrance and establishing a dangerous tempo that has Rachel's nails digging into the small of Quinn's back. Rachel is the one who moves her hips first, grinding upwards, all thoughts abandoned in her search of any kind of relief.

To her credit, Quinn doesn't try to remove any clothing. Even her coat stays on, which is a good thing, too because, not even a few minutes later, LeRoy is yelling from downstairs, and the girls reluctantly pull apart.
"Later," Rachel promises, stealing one last kiss before disentangling their limbs. She feels sufficiently flustered, and she's hoping this evening goes quickly, so she and Quinn can get back to not talking.

One of LeRoy Holt's favourite things to do is feed his family. It wasn't something he especially did when he was younger. His wife was always the cook, and he worked too hard at the hospital to be of any use to her in the kitchen.

But then she passed away, and everything about his life changed. On Monday, he was an Emergency Room doctor with three wonderful sons and a beautiful wife, and on Tuesday, he was a widower with heartbroken children and the task of, somehow, surviving.

It wasn't easy.

At first, LeRoy attempted to do it all, but he was forced into leaving his post to be the father he needed to be. It was never a part of his dream to maintain the estate - his wife was the one who handled the business of the vineyard with his brother, Jared - but he took to it the way he did everything else.

Getting involved in the business is how he first met Hiram.

Everything happens for a reason, he believes.

Everything has its own time, and he's never been more sure of that when he sees Quinn Fabray roll the olives from her salad onto Rachel's plate. There's a certain easiness between them that LeRoy wasn't expecting to see.

From their Thanksgiving visit, it was obvious they were both rather guarded, hiding secrets and unwilling to share it all, but that seems to be gone now. It's almost as if they've both made this mutual, yet silent, decision to give everything of each other, wholeheartedly.

It's a beautiful thing. Scary and terrifying, of course, but still beautiful. They both still have so much to overcome, and he worries. How can he not worry?

This life they live; it's not for everyone.

And those people are much closer to home than he cares to acknowledge.

After dinner, Rachel settles on the couch in the living room with baby Lena in her arms and Quinn pressed against her side. It looks friendly enough, but Rachel just wants her girlfriend as close as possible. If she could help it, Quinn would never be more than a yard from her ever again. Always within touching distance.

Except, maybe, when either of them has to use the bathroom, she supposes.

"What are you thinking about?" Rachel asks, her eyes drifting from Lena's tiny face to Quinn's smiling one. Hazel eyes are shining with the kind of affection Rachel's never seen before, and it stills the breath in her airway.

"I'm thinking that the idea of you with a baby is… very appealing," Quinn whispers, practically right into Rachel's ear.

Rachel swallows audibly. "Oh, really?"
"It's ridiculously sexy, actually," Quinn says, and then frowns. "I don't know what that says about me. Does that mean I'm attracted to mothers?"

Rachel giggles. "I think it means you're attracted to me as a mother," she says.

"That makes more sense," Quinn agrees. "I'm definitely attracted to you."

Breathing a sigh, Rachel relaxes further into the couch, and into Quinn. "I'm so glad you're here," she says dreamily. "I would have hated to spend the entire Break without even getting to say goodbye to you, and now I actually get to see you on my birthday. I get to kiss you on my birthday."

"You get to kiss me whenever you want," Quinn says, her voice dipping in register, and Rachel does just that. Their mouths meet in a slow, languid kiss, and it's Lena's protests from being shifted that make them break apart, mutual laughs escaping from their lips.

It's just in time, too, because Daniel and Emily-Anne walk into the living room at that exact moment, and the laughter dies on Quinn's lips.

"What's so funny?" Daniel asks.

Rolling her eyes at Quinn's antics, Rachel is the one to respond. "Oh, just one of Lena's reactions," she says, which is partly true. It seems baby Lena has something to say about two girls kissing. Rachel makes a mental to keep an eye on that as she grows older.

Or, really, maybe Lena was trying to warn them that her parents were coming.

Emily-Anne plops herself down beside Rachel, just as the brunette blows a gentle raspberry against Lena's cheek. She laughs at her sister-in-law's antics, and then looks past her at Quinn, whose eyes are on Rachel. There's something heavy in her facial expression that both frightens and delights Emily-Anne.

She's not naive enough not to have noticed a certain shift in their relationship, but she's decided not to say anything. Rachel will tell her if she wants to and, until then, she'll try not to feel hurt that the trust she thought they shared couldn't extend to this.

"Quinn," Emily-Anne says, and her fellow blonde snaps to attention, offering her a sheepish smile. "It's good to have you back, you know?"

"For your sanity?" Quinn questions cheekily, and Rachel swats her leg playfully.

Emily-Anne smiles at Rachel. "Did I mention that I like your friend?" she says, and Rachel quirks an eyebrow.

"I like her too," the brunette eventually says, returning her attention to Lena.

Emily-Anne just smiles to herself, and then feels Quinn's eyes on her. For a moment, their eyes lock, and Emily-Anne can see every fear imaginable.

Oh.

It has nothing to do with trust between her and Rachel.

It's about Quinn.

Of course, it is.
Emily-Anne just smiles, trying to and hoping she can convey _something_.

If Quinn sees it, she doesn't show it. She does look away from Emily-Anne, her eyes on Rachel again. She can see this in her future. Rachel and… their baby.

_Their_ baby.

For now, though, she's going to enjoy this moment. Sliding a hand over Rachel's on Lena's back, the brunette gives her a curious look.

"You and your cold hands," Quinn murmurs, and Rachel bursts out laughing.

The last thing LeRoy wants to do is have _this_ conversation, but he feels it's necessary. It would be different if Quinn were a boy, of course. He doubts he would be this uncomfortable or nervous.

In fact, if Quinn were a boy, he would have been his usual intimidating-LeRoy. Oddly enough, he thinks it would have little effect on Quinn.

Definitely not like it did on Finn.

But, then again, they probably never would have allowed Finn to spend the night in their house. This is new territory for all of them.

Predictably, LeRoy doesn't find Rachel in her own bedroom when he knocks. Sighing at how predictable his daughter is, he goes to Daniel's old room, which has been dubbed Quinn's for the duration of her stay. He hovers for a moment before he lifts his hand to knock on the door.

"Come in," a voice calls from inside, and LeRoy opens the door, unprepared for what he finds. Quinn is sitting on the floor, crossed legs, with Rachel sitting on the bed behind her.

Rachel is… brushing Quinn's hair.

Okay…

"Hi, LeRoy," Quinn says, tilting her head slightly at the slight shock his face is sporting. "Everything okay?"

LeRoy stands awkwardly in the doorway for a moment as he attempts to school his features, and then enters the room and closes the door behind him. "Are you two all right?" he asks.

The girls exchange a look, and then they both nod. "We're good," Rachel says.

LeRoy shifts his weight from his left foot to his right. "Do you need anything?"

Another look is exchanged, and then Rachel sets the hairbrush down, giving LeRoy her full attention. "Lee," she says seriously. "Is there something you want to talk to us about?"

"Well, I mean, Hiram mentioned that you two are, umm - "

"Together," Rachel finishes for him. "Quinn is my girlfriend, yes."

At the sound of that, Quinn rests her head against the inside of Rachel's knee while Rachel threads her fingers through strands of blonde hair, and LeRoy feels as if he's witnessing something special; something of which he should take note.
LeRoy clears his throat. "Rachel, Sweetheart, is it your intention to sleep in here?" he asks. "With your girlfriend?"

Rachel's fingers fall still in Quinn's hair. "If you're worried that we're having sex, we're not," she says, and Quinn groans at the same time LeRoy's jaw drops. "We're just going to sleep, Lee. I promise."

LeRoy looks at Quinn, who's smiling at him. It's the sincerest, gentlest look he's ever seen on her face and, yes, everything about this moment is important. "Oh, okay," he says. "Just, you know, behave."

Quinn flushes at the sound of that, and Rachel just laughs.

"Goodnight, girls."

"Goodnight," they echo together, and he leaves a moment later, unsure how he feels about any of this.

As long as Rachel is happy, he reasons.
As long as they both are.

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"I thought you said you were going to behave," Quinn pants as Rachel uses the skin of her abdomen to warm her cold hands.

"No, I didn't," Rachel murmurs, lips against the skin of Quinn's neck. "I didn't say anything, if you recall."

Quinn chuckles lowly, her own hands sliding under Rachel's t-shirt and caressing her back. "You're sneaky, aren't you?"

Rachel just hums, and then drags her lips back up to Quinn's mouth. They kiss for the longest time, Rachel's entire body draped over Quinn's. It's honestly the most comfortable position she's ever been in, and she spent hours resting on her father's chest when she was little.

Quinn brings her closer, sliding her hands downwards and cupping the curves of Rachel's ass. She squeezes the flesh, and Rachel moans into her mouth, which makes Quinn smile.

"You have to be quiet, dear," Quinn murmurs.

Rachel just kisses her harder, drawing moans from them both. One of these days, Rachel knows she's going to end up saying the words 'I love you' and then they're going to have to deal with that.

But, for now, she's just going to enjoy the taste of Quinn and hope this feeling never disappears.

---

Rachel wakes first, which is odd, because Quinn is usually up before her, already on a run or just floating around the room in that graceful way that makes Rachel both jealous and love her that bit more.

So, it's a surprise to her that Quinn is still asleep, stretched out on her stomach with a peaceful look on her face. Rachel wonders if she's been getting any good sleep lately, and her heart hurts a little at the thought that this is the first good night she's had since Rachel left Dalton.

Quinn's fingers are loosely clasped around her wrist. In any other situation, the position would be
too difficult to accept, but there's a gentleness about Quinn in this moment. There's a certain innocence about her that makes the light grip endearing, as if she's just holding onto Rachel, afraid she might float away if her fingers fall away.

That thought hurts as well, and Rachel has to accept that loving Quinn is going to come with a little pain as well, whether she likes it or not.

Breathing a sigh, Rachel rolls onto her side and shifts in closer to the warmth of Quinn's body. The blonde squirms in her sleep, her brow creasing, but then she relaxes again.

"Quinn?" Rachel whispers, checking to see if she's actually awake. "Quinn?" When she's satisfied with her girlfriend's slumber, Rachel says words of which she's terrified. "I love you," she says. "I love you, Quinn Fabray, and I don't know what I'm supposed to do with that."
Chapter Sixteen

Quinn's first day of Winter Break in the Holt-Berry home is spent relaxing, mainly.

They prepare for Hiram's arrival through the morning, and then Daniel and LeRoy leave to fetch him from the hospital. Emily-Anne and Rachel commandeer the kitchen to bake wholegrain bread while Quinn occupies herself with Lena. Grandpa and Grandma Holt are in their cottage, spending the day in front of the television.

It's an easy, simple day, as they wait for the rest of the family to return. Levi and Eric are only getting in the following day, both of them unable to get away until the start of the holidays. They'll be home just in time for Rachel's birthday, which she insists is going to be a small affair.

Rachel doesn't think many people would come anyway.

"Are you going to invite Finn?"

It's Emily-Anne who asks the question and, admittedly, Quinn is also curious. She keeps her attention on Lena, but she's definitely listening.

"I haven't decided," Rachel replies diplomatically. "We haven't really talked since the... incident. He apologised, and I've forgiven him, but I don't want there to be any level of discomfort or awkwardness. Particularly for Quinn."

Quinn feels her heart rate rise.

"And why would it be awkward for Quinn?" Emily-Anne presses.

"You remember that they exchanged words," Rachel says, bypassing Emily-Anne's attempt at pumping for information on the state of the girls' relationship. "Quinn is a master at holding grudges."

At the sound of that, Quinn smiles to herself, absently nuzzling Lena's soft tummy.

"Do you want Finn here?" Emily-Anne asks.

"Not really," Rachel admits. "I suspect I should, but I just want Noah and Tina, really. Maybe Mercedes and Mike, if they're free. I want something small, just the family, you know? We're already going to have to deal with the Holt clan descending on us for Christmas, so it'd be nice to have some calm before that storm hits."

Quinn wonders if Rachel is pushing for something small because of her. She remembers feeling overwhelmed by the sheer volume of Rachel's family.

"And, plus, Dad would only be home a few days, and I don't want to stress him out."

Oh.

Quinn feels a little silly for thinking it has anything to do with her.

"And a lot of people can be overwhelming," Rachel adds a moment later. "I want Quinn to be comfortable, and that is what I want."
Quinn manages to steal Rachel away just before Hiram arrives, and she wraps her in a warm hug, kissing her tenderly.

"What was that for?" Rachel asks, feeling slightly dazed.

"No reason," Quinn says, shrugging. "Just felt like it." She pecks Rachel's lips once more, and then rushes out to meet Hiram, LeRoy and Daniel.

Hiram could get used to this.

He's been home for a few hours, and his family hasn't stopped buzzing around him, constantly asking if he's okay or if he needs anything.

Rachel especially, who's been unable to sit still for more than a few minutes at a time. Quinn even had to tug on her sweater and force her to sit on the couch with her.

Admittedly, Hiram wasn't sure what to expect when he was faced with the very real truth that the girl he requested to be gentle with his daughter took the advice and rode with it. He was apprehensive because, yes, he didn't get any indication that Quinn was, well, so inclined, but it's so obvious now.

The way she looks at Rachel as if there's nobody else in this entire world makes Hiram feel -

He's not sure what he feels about it, in all honesty.

All he knows is that Quinn looks at Rachel as if it hurts, and he isn't sure what he's supposed to do with that.

When Levi and Eric get home, the time that Quinn and Rachel can spend alone and together diminishes exponentially. If someone isn't looking for Rachel, they're looking for Quinn, and all Rachel wants to do is wrap her limbs around her girlfriend and just hold on.

They've resorted to sneaking kisses in bathrooms and getting handsy whenever they have a few seconds alone. It's bound to get them caught, but Rachel just wants to be able to touch Quinn whenever she wants to.

Surely, as her girlfriend, she's earned that right.

Like, right now.

Eric and Daniel have just walked out of the kitchen, and Rachel's hands are immediately on Quinn's hips, tugging her close. Quinn has only a moment to register her surprise before there's an insistent tongue in her mouth. She punctuates the intrusion with a pleasurable moan, and draws Rachel closer by wrapping her arms around tiny shoulders.

"Do you think that, if we disappeared upstairs for, like, an hour; they would miss us?" Rachel asks, already breathless.

"Probably," Quinn murmurs, pressing kisses to Rachel's cheeks. "You're very missable."

"But why?" Rachel whines. "I don't want to be missable. I want to be able to sneak away so I can
do naughty things to you."

Quinn's breath catches. "What if we say we're catching a nap?"

"Together?" Rachel questions. "We may as well just have signs on our foreheads that tell everyone we just really want to make out."

"For hours," Quinn adds, and Rachel's decision is made.

Steeling herself, she grabs Quinn's hand and drags her out of the kitchen. When they walk past the living room, Rachel calls out. "We're tired. We're catching a nap. See you in a few hours."

Quinn has to hold back her giggles as Rachel almost pulls her shoulder out of her socket to get her up the stairs. This time, they go to Rachel's bedroom - it has a working lock - and their mouths meet the moment said lock is engaged.

"Oh, my God," Rachel moans, her fingers immediately sliding into Quinn's hair as Quinn pushes her back towards the bed. She wants them in the position they've both come to enjoy: Rachel squirming, and Quinn in control above her.

It constantly tests Rachel's trust, and it forces Quinn to remain aware.

Who knows what would happen if ever either of those things changed?

Before long, Quinn has Rachel exactly where she wants her, and then Rachel is tugging at Quinn's shirt, lifting it up with the intention of removing it completely. It's a step for them, and Quinn's hesitation makes Rachel pause.

"It's okay," Rachel tells her, acknowledging Quinn's desire to keep her scars hidden. "It's okay, Quinn. I know they're there. I've felt them."

Quinn looks away, embarrassed.

"Hey," Rachel soothes. "Look at me. Look at me." Her breath catches at the conflict and indecision and fear in hazel eyes, and she reaches up to press a tender kiss to the corner of Quinn's mouth. "I won't look if you don't want me to," she whispers. "I just want to touch everything I can."

Quinn drops kisses to the skin of Rachel's neck, sinking lower as her fingers work on unbuttoning her shirt. She wants more skin, and Rachel allows her this moment. They'll do it together.

Before long, they're both wearing only bras on their upper bodies and jeans below. Rachel's hands are on Quinn's back, smoothing over the scars she can feel but cannot see. It's not something they've spoken about, and she doesn't think either of them is ready for that conversation, so she's content to lie here and lose herself in the feel of Quinn Fabray.

"I could probably do this for the rest of my life," Quinn says, punctuating her words with a significant roll of her hips.

"What?" Rachel pants; "suffocate me?"

Quinn recoils, gasping. "You take that back."

Rachel pulls her back down with a giggle and kisses her again. These kisses are heated, accompanied by low moans and the drag of nails across tender skin. Rachel thought she knew about desire, but she definitely didn't.
Not at all.

Now, though, she thinks she has a better idea.

Does this make her more gay than straight? Is it just the fact that it's Quinn? Has it just been so long since she's allowed herself to enjoy it? It isn't as if she hasn't wanted this; she just doesn't trust herself enough.

Over the summer, she and Finn exchanged a few kisses, but everything felt like too much with him. She toyed with the idea that her experience had ruined boys for her, but she still finds some of them attractive. Just, nobody makes her run hot like Quinn Fabray, who is currently licking her way down Rachel's abdomen.

Rachel can only watch the gorgeous creature that is her girlfriend descend past her breasts and down to the waistband of her sweatpants. Quinn presses a littering of kisses there, before she makes her way back up.

Maybe it's the wrong time to ask this question, but it's out of her mouth before she can stop it.

"Quinn, are you a virgin?"

Quinn freezes, somewhat expectedly, and her eyes meet Rachel's. "Uh, no," she says, pressing one light kiss just below Rachel's left breast before settling and growing still on Rachel's body. "I'm not a virgin, Rachel."

"Sam?" she finds herself asking, hoping and praying that she's wrong.

Quinn chuckles softly. "No, I've never slept with Sam," she says. "I've never actually slept with a boy; try as they might."

"So, a girl?" Rachel's fingers slide into Quinn's hair, absently playing with the strands as is one of her favourite things to do.

Quinn hesitates. "Define girl."

Rachel frowns. "Um, a female?"

"Okay, then, yes," Quinn says.

"Quinn?"

The blonde drops her head, resting her forehead against Rachel's collarbone. "She's older than me," she eventually says.

"Okay?"

"Ten years older than me," Quinn clarifies, unable to look at Rachel. "Her name is Tori, and we've known each other since I was twelve years old. She was my first real girl crush. My first girl kiss, and the only person I've ever had sex with."

Rachel, frankly, is unsure how she's supposed to respond to all that information.

Quinn ends up continuing with her explanation, and some of it sounds like a justification to her own ears, but she can't bring herself to stop talking. "When Mary retired, Tori was just graduating college, and she needed a summer job. Well, I mean, she didn't need it, but she needed work experience or something, so she came to live with us, and she was great. Being a child starved of
"I guess it all started with Sam. I just wasn't attracted to him. He's sweet and nice and obviously good looking, but I just didn't like him the way I knew I was supposed to. But, I forced myself, though, and, eventually, if I just imagined I was kissing someone else, I could get through it.

"I freaked the fuck out when I started imagining kissing Tori. Like, majorly. I mean, I've always been more open than my family, and I'm accepting, but being gay was just going to be another thing to create this divide between me and them. I was resigned, back then, to turn out exactly the way they wanted and expected. I was going to become the lawyer they want and let them marry me off to whichever family will gain us the highest status politically, and live out my life in relative obscurity. I convinced myself I could do that.

"But then I figured out I liked girls and that all went to shit. I know what my father thinks about gay people, Rachel. I've heard his words and seen his actions. He believes they're the scum of the earth. He doesn't think they deserve to live; that they're soiling everything God built for us, and hearing him preach about how they're all abominations is so…" she trails off, not really wanting to explore that right now.

"So, I needed to be sure," Quinn goes on, needing to get this out. "I needed to be sure it wasn't just some passing phase; something that I just needed to get out of my system. I couldn't tell anyone about it, of course, but I needed to know. So, the summer after sophomore year, I started to look at Tori objectively. She was the safest, and I knew she would keep my secrets. I'm sure you can imagine my surprise to find her looking right back. Looking was fine, you know. As long as we were just looking.

"But, it wasn't enough. I was young and inexperienced, and I stupidly tried to seduce her." Quinn closes her eyes, her breathing surprisingly steady and even, despite the topic of discussion. "She laughed at me, you know? Like, legitimately laughed in my face, called me insane and delusional, and what the hell was I thinking trying to get her into bed?

"I remember, one minute we were fighting about it, yelling at each other, and then, the next, we were kissing. All we did was kiss at first, and it was everything I ever imagined, Rachel. It was… magic, you know? I know it sounds silly, and you must think I'm such a nerd, but being with her felt like I imagined it was supposed to feel with a boy."

Rachel's fingers haven't stopped playing with Quinn's hair. It's the only thing she's focusing on as Quinn tells her tale. The brunette is unsure how she's supposed to react when it's over. She's definitely affected, and she doesn't want to hurt Quinn with just how affected she is.

"We spent the summer together. It was all it was ever going to be. She's in the same boat I am. Her parents expect things from her, and I thought, maybe, maybe we could get out together, or whatever." Quinn sighs, her breath warm against Rachel's flesh. "I'm gay. I'm very gay, and I don't think I could survive the life they want for me. I would much rather die than do that."

Quinn sounds so serious, and Rachel feels her heart twist at the honesty in that last sentence.

"Tori's giving in," Quinn says. "She's getting married to the man her parents practically chose for her, and it makes me sick. It disgusts me that this is the life we're living. She's going to do it, and I don't know if I can.

"So, I've been making plans. I'm going to get out, somehow, Rachel. It'll probably be ugly and scarring, but I can use the one thing they value most against them. Appearances. They'll want everything to be hidden and quiet; behind closed doors. I know I can do this. We can just… part
ways, or whatever. Once I turn eighteen, I won't need them anymore. Once I'm of age, I'll have access to my trust fund and they won't have any rights over me, and we'll never have to see one another again. I'll - I'll get to be happy." She sucks in a shuddering breath. "With you."

Quinn has said so much, and the only response Rachel can think - or not think, in hindsight - to say is, "I love you."

Quinn's head snaps up, her eyes wide as she meets Rachel's gaze. "Y-you what?"

Forcing away her sudden panic, Rachel repeats her words, stronger and more confident. "I love you, Quinn."

"Do - do you really mean that?"

"I do," Rachel says, seriously and confidently. "I really do."

"Good," Quinn murmurs, dropping her head once more; "because I love you too."

If Rachel expects things to be awkward after their declarations of love - and the revelation of Quinn's relationship with her nanny - she's right. Things are awkward.

On some other kind of level.

Rachel knows they're going to have to talk about it, but, the moment she's awoken by a squealing Declan on the morning of her birthday; she knows that finding free time with Quinn is going to be nearly impossible. She's expecting a full house of family and friends… and Uncle Jared, but she's decided it's best not to think about that right now.

She's just relieved that her youngest cousin hasn't seemed to have noticed that she's not actually in her own bedroom. How would she even explain that… in a way that won't see him blabbing to everyone he meets?

With a frustrated sigh at the fact that Quinn seems to be gone, Rachel allows Declan to commandeer her attention. After a quick stop in the bathroom, she allows him to drag her downstairs where she is showered in hugs and kisses and well wishes by all the family present.

Except, well, her father and girlfriend are missing.

LeRoy must notice her scanning eyes because he bumps her with his hip and hands her a glass of freshly-squeezed juice. "Quinn took your dad out on a walk," he explains quietly. "She's determined to get him active, and I love her for it. He knows how to get out of it with me and you, but he's not as well-versed on Quinn's tactics, and she really doesn't take no for an answer."

Despite how unsettled Rachel feels about the state of peace in her secret relationship, she finds herself smiling. She knows Quinn is doing it for her. Hiram just doesn't listen, and he's not doing any of the exercises the doctors prescribed for him.

Quinn isn't going to let him slack, and Rachel's sure she loves the blonde that bit more.

Every day, she's falling more and more in love with her.

God, she hopes she never stops.
She's always had this theory that 'love' exists as this bottomless pit that you fall deeper and deeper into and, it won't matter how long you've known someone or how much you time you've spent together; you'll keep falling.

As yet, she's still working on the part of her theory that allows for... the opposite direction. Falling out of love. Perhaps, one has to claw his or her way out of the pit for that to happen. Maybe someone else sends down a rope, and you're able to pull yourself out.

Rachel forces the thoughts from her mind because she's supposed to be happy and light today. It's her birthday, and LeRoy is making her special vegan waffles. She's not even sure why when she's really not a vegan anymore. She barely passes for a vegetarian these days. She's actually more worried about her figure than her conscience.

It's ten minutes later when Hiram returns to the house. Alone. Rachel has only a moment to wonder where Quinn is before Hiram is wrapping her in a bear hug and squeezing the air right out of her lungs. He seems more excited about her birthday than she is, and he makes sure to sit right beside her as she eats her specially-prepared breakfast.

"Where's Quinn?" is the first thing she asks when she can get a word into his rambling. It's not a wonder where she inherited it from, though she's managed to curb that part of her personality.

Many things have changed about her in the last year.

Hiram laughs, all too knowingly. "Well, after our little walk, she went on a run," he says. "She's rather fit, isn't she? She was running circles around me. Made me a little dizzy, really."

Rachel can't help her smile. Quinn is fit. Rachel would know because she's had hands and lips on those perfectly defined muscles, sweat and all. Gosh, even thinking about it is making her blush.

LeRoy gets their collective attention with a bang of a wooden spoon against a pan. Completely unnecessary, if you ask Rachel. "Okay, so, party starts at four o'clock," he says. "I imagine people will be arriving in waves between now and then. Food's being prepared. Help yourselves. Please try not to make a mess. Levi, I need you to make a run into town because somebody - we won't mention names but it was Daniel - forgot to buy cans of fruit cocktail for the fruit salad."

Rachel loves the chaos of her family.

The kitchen is literally buzzing with activity, and she adores it. It's what she wants for her life. She wants a large, ginormous family that's full of life, and she can't stop herself from thinking she wants it with Quinn.

Who, incidentally, finds this all a little overwhelming. It's not as if Rachel blames her. The family can be a bit much, but Rachel thinks Quinn secretly likes it. She'll get used to it eventually.

Rachel did.

When Quinn finally gets back, she's breathing heavily and slicked with sweat. Her face is flushed, and there's just so much skin.

Rachel isn't the only person who stares.

Under the scrutiny, Quinn awkwardly mumbles something about an asthma inhaler and a shower, and then bolts from the kitchen. Rachel has to shake her head to clear it, and LeRoy says, "Close your mouth, Eric. You'll catch a fly."
Rachel's eyes drift towards her brother, who, yes, looks equally as struck dumb as she feels. It's okay for her, because Quinn is her girlfriend, but she really doesn't want her brother ogling her blonde. There are just too many things wrong with that. On any number of levels. She's not even sure how she's supposed to address that.

And, really, by the time Quinn emerges once more, Rachel is at even more of a loss as to what to do. Quinn isn't exactly… acting normal. Besides the 'Happy Birthday' hug - which was stiff and awkward - she bestowed upon Rachel; she's steered clear of the brunette.

Things are also that bit more tense because they all know that Jared is going to be arriving at some point in the afternoon, and nobody wants to deal with that.

Robert explained that he had a stern talking-to with his father - Quinn is his latest crush - and the man promises to be on his best behaviour. They've toyed with the idea of his apologising, but Rachel thinks it's best if Jared and Quinn just don't talk. At all.

Or, ever.

Okay, no. If Quinn is going to be in her life for as long as Rachel wants her - for forever - then their family is going to have to learn to get along. Right now, though, they're working at Quinn's pace, and Rachel quite likes that pace. It's nice to have something that's just theirs, and nobody else's.

Even if things are supremely awkward right now.

"Are you and Quinn fighting?"

It's Emily-Anne who asks the question, and Rachel is relieved by that for only a second because, well, she doesn't know if they are fighting. They're definitely something, and she's clearly been unable to hide it well.

"Something just feels off," Emily-Anne elaborates. "Did something happen?"

Rachel contemplates her next move. She supposes she could try to talk to her sister-in-law without actually talking to her. Maybe she can offer some advice on how to approach the situation.

Carefully, Rachel sets down her glass of freshly-squeezed juice and turns to look at Emily-Anne. They're sitting in the living room, Lena asleep on the floor on a mat on the carpet in front of them. She's tucked away nice and tightly, and Rachel keeps catching herself staring at her serenity when she's supposed to be paying attention to conversation.

"We're not… fighting," Rachel starts. "It's just that Quinn kind of told me something, and I don't think I've handled it well. At all. In any way, really."

Emily-Anne keeps her eyes on Rachel, searching her face for something. When she doesn't find it, she asks, "Are you ever going to tell me that you're actually together?" She tries really hard to keep the slight hurt out of her voice, but she must fail because Rachel tenses in response.

Breathing a somewhat defeated sigh at being so easily caught out, Rachel shifts her gaze to Lena. "To be honest, I'm not sure I was planning to," she confesses quietly. "After everything that happened with Uncle Jared, and Quinn's crippling fear of being found out; I was quite content for us to exist behind closed doors."

If Emily-Anne is hurt by that, she doesn't show it. "Since when?" she asks instead, her need for details pushed to the forefront of her mind.
"The day we left after Thanksgiving," she says. "I just couldn't hold it in, you know? I had to tell her, and then face the consequences, whatever they were going to be."

"She surprised you?"

"She's constantly surprising me," Rachel says, and her expression predictably turns dreamy, which makes Emily-Anne smile. "We haven't told anyone," Rachel says, suddenly sobering. "Just Dad and Lee, really. I haven't even told Britt, though I suspect she already knows."

"It's easy to see if you know where to look."

Rachel raises her eyebrows. "And just what are you seeing, Mrs Holt?"

Emily-Anne smiles knowingly. "You, my dear, are in love."

Rachel, to her credit, doesn't even attempt to deny it. "I am," she says. "I told her for the first time last night."

Emily-Anne blinks. "Is that why you're both acting so weird? Didn't she say it back?"

Rachel chuckles somewhat darkly. "That's just the thing," she says. "She did say it back."

"I don't understand."

"You and me both, Em," she says. "All I know is that I'm so dangerously and ridiculously in love with her, and you are the second person who will ever know."

Emily-Anne leans towards her. "Why are you hiding?"

Rachel stares at her, incredulous. "Are you seriously asking me that question, right now?"

"Yes," she answers, completely unfazed by Rachel's reaction. "I would like to know the reasons."

Rachel sighs. There are so many. It would be a miracle they came out, at all. "Well, obviously, there's already stigma attached to homosexuality," Rachel starts. "It would be exponentially worse because I have two fathers, and let's not even get started on Quinn's family. Her father is a politician, who openly despises gay people."

Emily-Anne nods in sympathy. "Okay… that's the public," she says; "but you're at home now."

"And how welcoming was 'home' the last time we were here?" she asks pointedly, actually shuddering at the memory of her uncle's hatred and ire. She still hasn't spoken a word to him since then, and she has half a mind to ask him not to come to her party, but that would just create unnecessary tension, and she knows Quinn will be even more uncomfortable with that.

"Uncle Jared won't say anything," Emily-Anne weakly defends. "He knows about you, remember? And it shouldn't matter who you date."

"It's not that," she says, because it really isn't. "It's not that I'm worried that he'll… disapprove of my choice of romantic partner," she says. "I'm more concerned about how he'll use it."

"Oh."

Rachel's sure she doesn't have to explain further.
Rachel is able to accept and plow through Quinn's apparent aversion to her because she's too busy being 'passed around' and handed well wishes. It's her birthday, and she's the centre of attention.

The more and more people arrive; the less times she sees Quinn. Even though the blonde doesn't say anything to her, it doesn't stop her from looking, and Rachel can practically feel hazel eyes tracking her movement as she makes her way through the living room with Tina attached to her arm.

Rachel misses her friend. They're not very good at the entire communication thing - Tina is notoriously bad at replying to texts or returning calls - but they can spend every single second of every day of the holidays together.

She's also so happy to see Noah, whom, she learns, is actually dating a girl. He blushes when he tells her, and Rachel knows this one is going to be different. Noah Puckerman does not blush.

"You'll probably meet her before you go to New York," Noah tells her, popping three jalapeño peppers into his mouth at once.

Rachel cringes at the display, her fingers curling around her cup of hot chocolate. They're standing in a corner of the main living room, and she feels oddly at ease with all the hustle and bustle of this get-together. She knows it would be much better if Quinn was actually talking to her, but she'll take her victories where she can.

And, right now, she's just relieved that Uncle Jared is behaving, and that Finn isn't here. Apparently, the boy is away for the holidays, and Rachel feels unmistakably relieved by that. It's one less thing to worry about.

"What's her name?" Rachel asks, her eyes on Noah, even though she can feel Quinn's on her from across the room. There's a certain thrill she feels whenever she knows Quinn is looking at her. It's one of those things she hopes will never lose its appeal.

"Jennifer," Noah says after a moment of hesitation. "She works at Proof."

Rachel automatically grins. "Does that mean we get free croissants?"

"It doesn't," he replies with a laugh. "I've asked and begged, but employees don't get free stuff." He looks thoughtful. "Though, everything they don't sell at the end of the day is kind of a free-for-all."

"Now, I see why you like her," she teases and, instead of contradicting her about the obvious allusion to his feelings, he just blushes again.

Well, well, well.

It seems a lot has happened since Thanksgiving.

They're both in relationships.

Rachel wants to tell him; she really wants to, but she's uncomfortable enough with the number of people who already know, and Noah's not known for his secret-keeping. She hasn't forgotten that he's the one who revealed to Finn that they once kissed, while he was drunk. She still hasn't forgiven him for it either, because that had been one long, awkward week.

Speaking of awkward.

Rachel's eyes drift towards Quinn, and she sighs.
This is definitely some birthday, indeed.

Finally getting tired of the blatant and somewhat hurtful awkwardness, Rachel just plucks Quinn out of a conversation with Eric and Robert and drags her by the hand up to her bedroom. They need to talk, and they need to talk now.

Rachel can't stand the avoided gazes and charged silence.

"I told you I love you," Rachel says as soon as they're behind the closed door. "Is that why you're freaking out?"

"I am not freaking out," Quinn says slowly, carefully removing herself from Rachel's grip. "And, if I recall correctly, I told you I love you too."

Ignoring the flutter in her chest at the sound of those repeated words, Rachel asks, "Then, what is so wrong?"

"Why do you think something is wrong?"

"Because you can barely look at me, right now," she points out. "Why can't you look at me, Quinn?"

"Why can you?" Quinn eventually blurts out.

Rachel frowns in confusion. "What? What does that even mean?"

Quinn rounds on her, looking at her in disbelief. "I told you that I - I slept with my nanny, repeatedly, and you've said nothing. I don't know what you expect me to do with that."

Rachel breathes out slowly. "I wasn't aware there was something you wanted me to say, Quinn."

"There isn't!" she bursts, her arms flailing. "I don't know, okay? I just - I mean - it's not normal, is it? There's something wrong with it, right? That's what you're thinking."

"That's not what I'm thinking, Quinn."

"Then what are you thinking?" she asks, her tone of voice almost desperate. "How am I supposed to know when you haven't even told me."

Rachel sighs. She knew anything she did or didn't say would end with something like this. Still, it's better than the awkwardness, she supposes. At least Quinn is looking at her, let alone talking to her.

"I'm thinking that I love you, Quinn," Rachel says carefully. "It's what I was thinking yesterday, and it's what I'm thinking right now. It's all I've been thinking about, actually."

Quinn just looks at her, helpless, and Rachel realises Quinn wants more than that. She wants to hear Rachel absolve her of any wrongdoing; she wants Rachel to tell her it's okay that she experimented with a woman who kept her a secret, is ten years older than her and eventually left her to be with a man she does not love.

Quinn wants Rachel to tell her it's okay to be gay.

As cautiously as she can, Rachel reaches out for Quinn. The fingers of her left hand gently touch Quinn's cheek, and the blonde lets out a quiet whimper. "What did you think would change when you told me?" she asks.
"I don't know," Quinn admits. "But I definitely didn't think you would tell me you love me."

Rachel smiles softly, warmly, trying to reassure her girlfriend. "You're thinking the worst," she says. "Stop, okay? The past is the past. However you got to this point in your life... it all happened. There's nothing either of us can do about that." She takes a deep breath, searching for the words. "I can't say I'm particularly happy with what transpired. I don't know how I would react if ever I were to meet this Tori. You were a child. She should have known better. It's illegal."

Quinn's breath catches.

"But, it happened," Rachel says, her palm flat against Quinn's cheek. "It happened, and I'm sorry that you were hurt by it."

Quinn blinks. "I wasn't hurt," she defends.

"Oh, baby," Rachel murmurs, stepping closer and feeling the way her girlfriend is trembling. "It's torn you up."

"No, it hasn't," she argues.

Rachel doesn't want to fight, so she just draws Quinn into a hug, pressing her body close, so Quinn can feel all of her. "Just know that I love you, okay? What happened with Tori changes nothing for me. I still want you. Literally, all the time."

Quinn lets out an amused breath. "I think you would be insatiable, wouldn't you?"

"My girlfriend is hot."

Quinn tilts her head, leaning into Rachel's hand. "I'm sorry I've made your birthday so... awkward."

Rachel chuckles. "Don't you know by now that I love awkward?"

Quinn leans forward and presses her lips to Rachel's. It's supposed to be a short kiss, quick and sweet, but Rachel chases Quinn's mouth when she pulls away and, before either of them knows it, Rachel has Quinn pressed up against the door with her tongue in her mouth and her hands under her shirt.

"There is an entire party going on downstairs," Quinn hears herself say, but she doesn't try to stop Rachel from tugging on her shirt. Instead, she lifts her arms up and Rachel immediately divests her of her upper garment.

Rachel immediately attacks Quinn's neck, sucking the skin into her mouth before she bites down, knowing she's going to leave a mark. She can't bring herself to care.

Quinn's head drops back against the door, and she pants helplessly. She knows she should tell Rachel to stop, but the words don't come. Instead, she closes her eyes, forces her breathing to slow, and then accepts whatever is happening.

Rachel notices the moment Quinn stops fighting, and she smiles to herself when she feels Quinn's hands slide over the skin of her back, tugging her closer. They kiss again, mouths hot and wet, and Quinn uses the opportunity to lift Rachel off the ground, turn them around and press Rachel against the door. The brunette wraps her legs around her, letting out a long moan when Quinn's hips press against her centre.

"Rachel," Quinn murmurs, lips dragging along Rachel's jaw and latching onto her neck. She feels a
tug on her hair, and she pulls back, panting. "What?" Then: "Shit. Are you not okay?"

Rachel answers with a long kiss that leaves them both breathless. "I'm okay," she says unnecessarily. "I just - I just really love you."

Quinn smiles this lazy, content smile that tugs at Rachel's heartstrings and sends a pool of heat southward. "Happy birthday, Rachel Berry," she whispers, and then kisses her again. The heat has gone out of their kiss, and it's now slow and tender, their bodies pressed tightly together.

Rachel wants her closer, which is near impossible, but the thought still makes her smile as she slowly ends the kiss, resting her forehead against Quinn's and tightening her arms around her neck. "Are we okay?"

"We were always okay," Quinn automatically replies.

Rachel's eyes close, wondering if Quinn actually believes that. Maybe, a part of her does, but Rachel's not going to call her out on it now. They still have plenty to talk about, sure, and Rachel's going to make sure they have all the time in the world to do so.

Chuckling lightly, Rachel presses kisses to the edge of Quinn's jaw. "Do you know how hot you are?" she asks, shaking her head in disbelief. "You're like so hot that people would probably walk into traffic looking at you."

Quinn frowns, though she's clearly very amused. "That doesn't very sound safe."

"Who cares?" Rachel says with a shrug. "They'd die happy."

Quinn steals a kiss, a smile spreading across her face. "How much longer do you think we could get away with staying up here?" she asks.

As if someone has heard her question, there's a knock on the door. Quinn freezes, and Rachel gasps, before they both burst out laughing uncontrollably.

"Rachel?" LeRoy calls through the door. "Sweetheart, is everything okay?"

Rachel tries to stem the flow of her laughter. "Everything's fine, Lee," she manages to say. "We'll be right out. Sorry."

"Okay," he says. "We're about to cut the cake and open presents."

"We'll be down in a minute."

Quinn is still laughing into Rachel's neck when they hear LeRoy shuffle away. "You are so naughty."

"Oh, my dear, you've seen nothing yet."

It's the feel of Quinn's hand on the small of her back that makes Rachel know this has to be the best birthday she's ever had. Quinn is sitting beside her on the couch in the living room, and everyone else is situated all around them, watching as Rachel opens her presents with enthusiasm. She gushes at all of them, even the embroidered set of towels she receives from Uncle Jared and Aunt Edith.

When Quinn risks the intimate gesture, Rachel automatically relaxes, leaning into her touch and wanting nothing more than to turn her head and steal a kiss from her stunning girlfriend.
She doesn't.

She does smile, though, and her eyes drop down to Quinn's lips.

The blonde grins right back, her eyes *knowing*, and it's almost as good as a kiss, Rachel decides. She's vaguely aware of someone snapping a picture, and she reluctantly returns her attention to her gifts.

Tina is sitting on Rachel's left side, absently taking notes of the presents for Rachel's 'Thank You' cards she's probably going to spend hours writing later. She's nothing if not grateful for all the family and love with which she's surrounded.

Rachel Berry is nothing if not polite.

Forcing herself not to kiss Quinn when she opens the blonde's present takes every ounce of strength Rachel doesn't even know she has. When she reveals the pen drawing of her own face, she bursts into tears, and then covers her face with her hands in an attempt to hide it.

Quinn's eyes widen in alarm. "Rachel," she squeaks, her hands automatically reaching out to remove Rachel's from her face.

Ignoring her best friend's dramatics, Tina lifts the drawing from Rachel's lap and studies it closely. "Wow," she eventually declares. "Did you do this, Quinn?"

The blonde blinks, suddenly aware that the entire room is now staring at her. She definitely should have gone with the other part of the present for public viewing instead.

But, jewellery has to be more intimate than this, surely.

"Quinn?" Tina prompts when the blonde is silent for too long.

"Oh," Quinn sounds, clearing her throat. "Um, yeah, it's just something I, umm, put together one afternoon," she explains.

"You did that in one afternoon?" Eric asks, looking at the drawing over Tina's shoulder.

Quinn blushes, ducking her head. "It was a pretty boring prefects' meeting," she says, as if it's all the explanation anyone needs.

Rachel looks at her, incredulous. "Is *that* what you were doing?" she asks. "I thought you were taking copious notes. I was convinced I was doing something wrong."

Quinn chuckles softly, and then soberes slightly. "Do you like it?" she asks softly, mostly for only Rachel's ears.

"Oh, Quinn," Rachel says with a shake of her head. Unable to stop herself, she throws her arms around her girlfriend's shoulders and squeezes her tightly, pressing her face into the crook of her neck. She risks a quick press of her lips to warm skin, and then pulls back. "I love it," she declares. "It's beautiful." She suddenly looks at LeRoy. "We have to get it framed."

"Of course, Sweetheart," he immediately says, which prompts Tina to pass the drawing around the room.

Quinn turns bright red under all the praise, and she can barely look any of them in the eye. Her ability to draw isn't something she showcases at home. In fact, the only person in Hartford who
even knows she has any semblance of talent in that department is Tori. Her parents would probably tell her she's wasting her time with such frivolous hobbies.

"You're really very good, Quinn," Levi says, looking thoughtful. "Do you do a lot of these?"

It's Rachel who responds, her spine straightening and her hand resting casually on Quinn's knee. "Oh, yes," she says. "Pens and pencils and paints, you name it. She can do it all."

Levi nods thoughtfully. "Maybe you can show a few things to Kelsey when she gets here," he says. "She's all arty, and all that."

Quinn's blush hasn't let up once and she doesn't think she could speak if she tried, so she just nods her thanks, and urges Rachel to open her next present. She needs the attention off the drawing, and she can only be immensely relieved that nobody has actually commented on the fact that she drew Rachel's *face* in such startling detail.

Quinn now knows every little nuance of her girlfriend's perfect features.

She can practically draw them from memory.

Between all the presents, the food and the people, the next time Rachel and Quinn get a moment alone is when they finally call it a night. Quinn bids everyone goodnight first, reluctantly submitting to a few hugs, and then disappearing upstairs.

Rachel waits fifteen minutes before she exaggerates a yawn and clambers over Levi's outstretched legs. The only family left in the living room are the members that actually live in the house, so she doesn't feel too rude about wanting to go and thank her girlfriend for her present *properly*.

Rachel hugs everyone, kissing cheeks, and then grabs a few things from the kitchen before heading upstairs to her bedroom. She spends endless minutes getting ready for bed, and then she gathers her things and heads to Quinn's room - she's not going to refer to it as Daniel's old room anymore because, yes, she has every intention of doing dirty, dirty things to her girlfriend and she would much rather not be thinking about her brother.

It's a surprise and also not when Rachel opens the door to find Quinn Fabray already fast asleep, practically dead to the world. She's still in her glasses, a book resting facedown on her chest, and a little blue box at her side. It's obvious she *tried* to wait up, but Rachel took too long, apparently.

Smiling at her girlfriend's adorableness, Rachel pads across the carpet to Quinn's side. As carefully as she can, she removes Quinn's glasses and book from her person and sets them on the nightstand. The little blue box comes next, and it takes all her willpower not to look inside. She *knows* it's for her, but she's going to wait for Quinn.

She'll wait forever for this girl.
Chapter Seventeen

Quinn wakes to a hand pressed against the side of her neck and a leg caught between both of her own. Said hand is cool, and she shivers as she comes to her senses and fully opens her eyes, only to see a puddle of long, brown hair.

She smiles immediately, and her heart pumps a little faster.

Rachel.

Quinn lifts her free arm - the one Rachel isn't currently crushing - and shifts some hair out of her girlfriend's face. She just wants to see her, and she's entirely too stunning for it to be fair. She's... gorgeous. Almost painfully so, and it practically hurts to look at her.

Rachel shifts slightly, pressing her body tighter to Quinn's, and the blonde bites her bottom lip in an attempt to remain silent. Rachel's leg really shouldn't be where it is, right now.

Well, it should.

Quinn lets out a shaky breath and allows her body to relax. This is okay. She's okay. Rachel is okay, and that's all that matters. Nothing even comes close to the way this feels.

Quinn hasn't really allowed herself to dwell on Tori or how that relationship has defined several aspects of her life. For so long, she was convinced she was in love with the woman, but it never felt like this. There was no bliss or contentment or... ease.

With Tori, it was hidden and a secret and, if she's being honest with herself, dirty. What they had never could have blossomed because it started poorly, and Tori never cared enough to nurture it enough to let it grow. It hurt then, and it sometimes hurts now, but Quinn can accept that some of it was necessary. If she didn't know that, how could she know to appreciate this?

Rachel shifts again, her left hand trailing along Quinn's right side and coming up to cup her breast. If that's not a sign that she's awake, then the soft kisses she places against Quinn's neck definitely are.

"Can I wake up like this, every day?" Rachel murmurs, her voice thick with sleep.

Quinn lets out an amused breath. "I think you and I are going to have to have a little talk about personal space."

Rachel nuzzles Quinn's neck. "I'm sorry, but is that a complaint I'm hearing?"

"You'll get no such thing from here," she says, shifting slightly and pressing a kiss to Rachel's hair. "How did you sleep?"

"Wonderfully," she confesses, her eyes still closed. "Though, it did take me a while to fall asleep."

"Why?"

"I was all excited to spend the evening with you, only to find you'd fallen asleep on me."

Quinn instantly blushes. "I tried to stay up, but you took too long."
Rachel hums, her left hand squeezing Quinn's breast, which forces a whimper from the blonde's lips. She wastes barely a second to roll onto Quinn, her weight pressing down exactly where Quinn wants it.

"Oh, my God," Quinn gasps, her hips canting automatically.

Rachel just chuckles softly as she shifts Quinn's t-shirt out of the way and kisses along her collarbone. She tastes a pleasant mixture of salty and sweet, and she's tempted to spend the day exploring the entirety of Quinn's body with only her mouth. That sounds like a productive use of her time.

But then Quinn is gently pushing on her shoulders, and she lifts her head, looking puzzled. The smile on Quinn's face is the only thing that doesn't bring a disappointed pout to her face.

"I didn't get to give you your birthday present," Quinn says, looking slightly sheepish. "You didn't sneak a look, did you?"

Rachel exaggerates a gasp. "Quinn Fabray. I would never."

Quinn eyes her carefully, trying to decipher if she's telling the truth or not. Satisfied with what she sees, she shuffles a bit, making Rachel squirm, and reaches for the little blue box that's now sitting on the nightstand. It's a bit of an awkward angle, and she has to bend her arm unnaturally because Rachel isn't rolling away.

Quinn huffs as her fingers fail to grasp the little box. "Rachel," she says, her laughter bubbling out of her. "Get off me so I can get your present."

Rachel pouts. "You want me to… get off?"

Quinn groans at the double entendre, and she's tempted to abandon her attempts to retrieve the little box completely. Who in his or her right mind would want Rachel Berry anywhere but on top of them? Seriously?

Making the decision, Quinn lets out a grunt of displeasure, and then abandons her attempt to get the gift. She sucks in a breath, and then immediately rolls them over.

Rachel lets out a shriek in surprise, which is swallowed up by Quinn's soft lips. She doesn't attempt to deepen the kiss because, yes, morning breath, but she does drag her lips along Rachel's jaw and down the column of her throat.

Before her hands start exploring, Quinn pauses to ask, "Are you okay?"

With a quick nod, Rachel tugs her closer, absently lifting one leg over Quinn's hip and drawing her closer. They're pressed together so delightfully that Rachel is unable to hold back her sudden moan of pleasure.

Quinn laughs against her skin. "Baby, do you want to get us caught?"

Rachel's fingers slide into her hair, the soft strands practically a magnet for her roaming digits. "I'm not the one with the insanely talented mouth."

"I'm going to remember you said that."

Rachel's one hand slides under Quinn's t-shirt to explore the skin of her abdomen, and the blonde hisses.
"Jesus, Rach," she says, arching away from her touch. "How the hell do you have cold hands right now?"

Rachel laughs gloriously. "It's because they're not on your body."

"So, it's my fault?"

Rachel shifts beneath her, her nails dragging against soft skin. "Well, I have to blame someone."

Quinn gets tired of not being able to kiss her first, and then skulks off to brush her teeth. Rachel uses the opportunity to sneak into her own bedroom and deal with her own dental hygiene.

It's really such an inconvenience, but she forgets all about that the second she gets back to Quinn's room and immediately gets to taste Quinn's minty fresh mouth. They have only a few days left of being able to do this unabashedly, and she's going to soak up every moment of it as possible.

Quinn pulls away first, slowly retracting her hands from under Rachel's t-shirt. "Now, please will you let me give you your present? I put a lot of thought into it."

Rachel sighs dramatically. "If you must."

Quinn presses a chaste kiss to her lips, and then removes herself from the embrace immediately. She's aware of Rachel's pout as she moves towards the nightstand and finally picks up the little box. "I guess, you know, the good thing about being a Fabray, is the savings account," she says with a slight shrug. "I wanted to spoil you."

"You spoil me enough," Rachel immediately says.

Quinn ignores her. "I also wanted to - " she pauses. "I wanted to be able to look at you and know you're mine."

Rachel tilts her head to the side, carefully regarding the blonde in front on her. "Did you buy this gift knowing you already loved me?"

Quinn seems to think about it. "Maybe," she admits, thoughtful as she approaches Rachel standing in the middle of the carpet of the room. "I've known for a while."

"How long?"

"Subconsciously…" she says, trailing off. "Probably before last summer."

Rachel's mouth drops open. "What?"

Quinn just smiles as she comes to a stop in front of her girlfriend. "It probably started when you showed up at my bedroom door with that horrible yellow flyer," she says. "And it's been growing ever since."

Rachel looks at her in disbelief. "I had no idea."

Quinn's lips press into a thin line. "I'm very good at hiding things."

Rachel reaches out and runs a soothing hand over Quinn's hair. "But you're not doing that anymore, are you?" she murmurs. "Not with me, at least."

"Not with you," she agrees softly. "Never again."
"I love you," Rachel says, serious and truthful.

The words sound heavy to Quinn, but she's not running from them. She's no longer hiding, even if Rachel is the only one who gets to see the true person she's trying to be. "I love you, too," she says, and finally hands over the box.

Rachel's fingers take it from her and, after sending a beaming smile Quinn's way, she opens it to reveal the most perfect necklace she's ever seen. It's white gold, she thinks, with a pendant that takes her breath away.

"Quinn," Rachel breathes. "Is this a - a bee?" she asks, taking in the intricate detail and the embedded diamonds.

With trembling fingers, Quinn removes the necklace from its box. "Can I put it on for you?" she asks softly.

Nodding her head, Rachel spins around and shifts her hair out of the way. She can barely breathe as Quinn manages to clasp the necklace in position, leaving a lingering kiss against the heated skin of her neck.

When Rachel turns back around, the fingers of her right hand are already on the pendant.

"It is a bee," Quinn says. "They're kind of important to me."

"I know," Rachel says. She's noticed that the little buzzing animal is drawn onto many of Quinn's notes and even on the back of her hand sometimes. She's never really asked about it, and she doesn't think Quinn is about to tell her right now.

"Daniel also calls you B," Quinn adds after a moment, blushing.

Rachel's arms snake around Quinn's neck and she draws her into a hug. "I'm yours," she whispers into Quinn's ear. "I'm yours."

Quinn wraps her arms tightly around Rachel's waist. "Happy birthday," she says, as if the words can take away from the severity of this moment.

Rachel just hugs her tighter. "I'm yours, Quinn. I promise I'm yours."

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"Hey, Dad."

Hiram looks up from the newspaper he's reading, automatically smiling at his daughter as she moves into his office. "Good morning, Sweetheart," he says from behind his desk. "Did you sleep okay?"

Rachel just about manages to keep the blush off her face as she crosses the room and drops her tired body into one of the armchairs opposite him. She can almost still feel Quinn's hands on her body, her fingers gentle and her skin warm and soft.

It's always a surprise to her whenever they're in that position: Quinn assertive and Rachel submissive, and she's always relieved when she can just lose herself in the feel of her girlfriend without getting caught in a violent flashback.

"Yes," Rachel finally answers. "What about you?"

"Oh, I slept very well," Hiram says. "My bed is far more comfortable than that thing they had me
on in the hospital."

"That'll teach you." It's meant to be a lighthearted jab, but it comes out more serious than she initially intends.

Hiram stiffens at her tone. "You're mad at me, aren't you?"

Rachel doesn't immediately respond. She suspects they need to have this conversation, and she's all for it, but she isn't sure she's wants to have it right now.

Really, she would much rather be with Quinn, who she knows is currently in the shower after her extended run. It's a bit of a routine now, with Quinn and Hiram going for a morning walk, and then Quinn continuing with her run... until she's borderline exhausted.

It's still something they need to discuss.

Rachel sighs. "I just wish you wouldn't have such a blasé attitude about your health," she says, almost reluctantly. "You had me so worried, Dad, and I really don't want to walk out of an exam to that kind of news ever again."

Hiram merely nods, unsure what to say. He could make promises six ways to Sunday, but he's sure that's not what Rachel needs from him. He needs to show her that he's going to try.

"You're my Dad," she says. "I need you around, okay? You have to be at my graduation, and at my first Broadway show. You have to walk me down the aisle, and you have to meet your grandchildren. So, I really need you to stick around, okay?"

Hiram raises his eyebrows. "What makes you think you'll be the one walking down the aisle?"

"Dad."

He sighs. "I hear you, Sweetheart," he says. "I hear you, and I promise to try harder."

"Really?" she asks with an arched eyebrow, channelling her girlfriend. "Because I'm pretty sure you've said that to me before."

Hiram ducks his head in slight shame. He has said he would do better, and then he ended up in the hospital. It's not fair to his family, and he really does intend to do something about it. He's already started. "This time is going to be different," he tells her.

"Why?"

He blinks. "I don't know how to answer that," he confesses. "It just is."

There's a severity in his tone that almost makes her believe him. Still, she's reserving judgment for when she actually sees the results. LeRoy's been keeping him on a short leash and, while he complains good-naturedly about his new menu and the morning exercises, he's still doing them.

Rachel supposes they'll just see what happens.

Opting to change the subject, Hiram asks, "How are you and Quinn?"

Rachel's smile automatically blooms across her face, and she doesn't even try to suppress it. She is stupidly in love with a girl who can actually stand her, and she feels great. Their relationship has experienced ups and downs - as most relationships do - but she can't help feeling that they're in a good place.
For however long that's going to last.

"We're good," Rachel says, meeting her father's gaze. "We're great, actually. Better than great."

Hiram regards her carefully. "Really?"


Hiram looks away from her for a moment. "I don't know," he says quietly. "I was… surprised by your relationship."

"I was, too," Rachel admits, trying to give her father the benefit of the doubt. "I was so certain she was going to shoot me down the moment I even mentioned my feelings."

"Because you thought she wasn't gay?"

Rachel presses her lips together. She doesn't really feel all that comfortable discussing Quinn's sexuality with anyone. "I think so," she eventually says. "It's either that, or she just wouldn't like me."

"But you're very likeable," Hiram immediately says, ever the biased father.

Rachel lets out an amused breath. "Apparently," she agrees with a slight shrug. "Quinn says she had her troubles staying away from me."

Hiram merely nods, his view of Quinn changing slightly. He thought he knew, but he actually knew nothing. The entire time he was trying to warn her to be gentle with his daughter, she already knew how she felt about Rachel. He's almost mad at her for not shutting him up before he made a fool of himself, but he understands why she wouldn't have said anything. He probably would have done the same.

Of course, Hiram has spoken to Quinn about some of this on their walks, but the girl is notoriously tight-lipped. She gives very little away, which makes it difficult to get a read on her.

Her eyes, however, tend to give away what the rest of her body tries so desperately to hide, and he's coming to realise that there is so much about Quinn Fabray she will never let him or anyone know.

She is an island nation, overgrown with darkness and surrounded by an ocean of hurt.

"I'm in love with her," Rachel says. "I'm so deeply in love with her; I barely know what to do with myself." She relaxes into the armchair, her body almost boneless. "She just makes me so happy, Dad. Like, the kind of happy that's barely containable. It almost wants to bubble out of me, and I'm having such a hard time trying to hide it."

"I can only imagine," Hiram says thoughtfully. His daughter always was rather open with her affection, never really one to shy away from showing the people she cares about just what they mean to her. It was part of her personality, so friendly and giving of her time and her smiles.

And then Justin Prescott took that from her in the ugliest way.

Rachel lost her… sparkle.

Or, it dampened under the scrutiny and prejudice and downright hurtful and moronic justifications of violence.
The assault robbed Rachel Berry of something, which really robbed the world of something.

Hiram can't say he was surprised when Rachel asked to move schools. He and LeRoy were already discussing it beforehand. Really, he thought she would want to go back to New York to get away from it all, but then she pulled up the website for Dalton Academy, and that was that.

Her start at the school was quiet. Hiram could tell she was determined to stay under the radar, choosing not to draw any unnecessary or unwanted attention to herself as she acclimated to her new surroundings. Hiram spent weeks being overly paranoid about having her out of his sight, and he constantly kept his phone on hand in case she needed him.

Then, something changed.

One day, she decided to run for Head Student, and his baby girl slowly but surely began to return to them. It was when she started talking about her opponent, one Quinn Fabray, that Hiram really started to think that the Rachel he was worried he lost was probably coming back to them.

It was in her voice, even when she was complaining about Quinn's attempts to usurp her voters, and Hiram thinks he knew before she did that she liked the blonde girl.

It's obvious to Hiram that Quinn Fabray has been making his daughter happy for a very long time. It's a scary thing for him, and he tries not to think too much about the fact that he wasn't the one able to do that for her.

She's his daughter, and it's his responsibility to keep her happy.

It was a bitter pill to swallow when he realised Quinn took up that mantle but, looking at his daughter now, he's so relieved. The girl sitting across from him is Rachel Berry, a girl who's lost some of the fear and trepidation.

She's a girl in love.

"Have you spoken to Shelby?"

Rachel almost smiles at the way her father refers to her mother. He never calls her Rachel's mother, and Rachel finds it almost amusing that he's even attempted to try to create some kind of divide - even unconsciously.

Almost.

"I did," Rachel says. "She wants me to fly out on Thursday; latest Friday."

Hiram regards her carefully, picking up on something very particular in her tone of voice. "What do you want, Sweetheart?"

If Rachel were to be truthful, she probably wouldn't go to New York at all. She has half a mind to ask her mother to fly out here instead, just so she can be near her father for the rest of the Break.

And Quinn.

Who, technically, isn't expected in Hartford until New Year's Eve. She really just wants a few more days with her family… and her girlfriend.

More her girlfriend, if she's being honest.
"I want to spend Christmas here," she says. "I was thinking that maybe Quinn and I could leave together on Monday or Tuesday." Possibly even Wednesday, if she pushes it.

Hiram looks thoughtful. "Quinn's not spending the holidays with her family?"

"No, she's not."

Hiram wants to ask something more, but he holds his tongue. He realises there are things neither girl will tell him, and he's going to have to pick his battles wisely.

This is not one of them.

"Would you like me to speak with Shelby?" Hiram asks.

Rachel internally grimaces, just knowing that conversation won't go well. "No, I think it's better if it comes from me," she says; "but thank you for offering."

"I would just make it worse, wouldn't I?"

"You may be a lawyer, Dad, but you've never really been good with your words when it comes to Mom."

He nods in agreement, memories of times when Shelby managed to cut him down with an icy glare and a perfect, well-delivered one-liner flashing through his ageing mind.

Rachel bites her bottom lip, visibly contemplating her next question. Eventually, she decides to go for it because she wants to know, even though Quinn doesn't like to talk about it.

"Dad?"

"Hmm?"

"You are technically still a lawyer, right?"

His brow furrows. "Technically, yes," he says. "You know I don't practice anymore."

"But, you would if I needed you, right?"

"Of course." Then: "What's this all about, Rachel? Are you in some kind of trouble?"

Rachel lets out a laugh. "Dad, be serious," she says. "I'm not in trouble."

"But…?"

She clears her throat. "What kind of rights does a child have?"

Of all the things he was convinced she would ask, that definitely isn't it. "What?"

She huffs in mild annoyance. "Dad," she says. "Tell me, how much control do parents realistically have over their minor children?"

To his credit, it takes Hiram only a moment more to figure out they're talking about Quinn without actually talking about her. "Well, that depends, Sweetheart," he finally says.

"On what?"

"On any number of factors."
Rachel recognises that her father is being deliberately vague. "I just want to know what they could possibly do to her if they find out she's gay?" she asks, abandoning all pretence. "She's - she's terrified of them and what they would do, so I want us to be ready, in case they learn the truth before she gets the chance to turn eighteen."

Hiram can hear the worry in his daughter's voice, and it forces him to stop and pay attention. If Rachel is concerned, then he knows she must have a strong reason to be. He's seen what looks like darkness and shadows in Quinn's eyes, and he wonders if they've even scratched the surface.

"I'll look into it," he finally says.

She nods her thanks. Then: "Please don't tell Quinn," Rachel says.

He isn't planning to.

Rachel does discuss the change in plans with Quinn, which the blonde immediately agrees to, and then makes her own travel arrangements. As far as her parents are concerned, she's at a friend's home until the New Year's party. They don't really care beyond that, and Quinn doesn't mind all that much.

Quinn just plans on soaking up as much time with Rachel and her family as possible. Anything beats the empty house in Hartford, at this point. While Martha is nice enough, Quinn can never quite stop herself from thinking about Tori in the house.

It isn't as if Quinn misses her per se; it's more that she misses her friend, and there are far too many reminders in all the rooms to be anything but depressing.

Quinn briefly entertains the idea of taking Rachel to Hartford with her and making new memories, but that's just silly.

And stupid.

And, Quinn Fabray is anything but stupid.

When she finally arrives, Kelsey barely gets a chance to set her bags down - it's just one bag, really, because Daniel is lugging in the other, much larger, one - before Levi is dragging her into the living room where Quinn, Rachel, Declan, Julian, Eric and LeRoy are sitting watching a Christmas movie.

"She's here," Levi declares. "Quinn, come on."

The blonde startles at the sound of her name, and looks at Levi with confused, curious eyes. "Uh, where are we going?"

Levi rolls his eyes. "Kelsey is here," he says.

"I can see that," Quinn says. "Hi, Kelsey."

"Hi, Quinn," Kelsey says, waving a hand at the lot of them. "Hi, everyone else." She looks at Levi. "Do you want to tell me what's got you so excited, because it's obviously not the arrival of your girlfriend?"
Levi just laughs, gently kissing her cheek. "I missed you," he whispers, and then pulls back. "But you have to see Quinn's drawings."

Kelsey turns to Quinn, whose eyes have widened. "Drawings?"

"She draws," LeRoy offers. "Really well." He looks at Rachel. "I think you're going to have to get your friend moving there," he says, gesturing with his hand at the stock-still girl who's now sitting beside Rachel.

Rachel just nods, an amused smile on her face. "Right," she says, getting to her feet, and then immediately pulling Quinn to hers. She looks at Levi. "Meet you in the dining room?"

"Sure."

If Rachel weren't so worried about Quinn, she might find it slightly comical the way the blonde seems to be frozen in place. Rachel actually has to guide her up the stairs, and then physically search Quinn's things herself for Quinn's sketchbooks.

It's when they're leaving the room that Quinn even speaks. It's just one word, and it stops Rachel in her tracks.

"Don't."

Rachel pauses, and turns to face her. "Don't what?"

Quinn's jaw tenses, and then she reaches for one of the sketchbooks in Rachel's hands. "Not this one," she says. "Not this one."

Rachel is so tempted to ask, but she bites the inside of her cheek to stop herself. "Okay," she says. "Not that one. And the rest?"

"They're okay," Quinn says, nodding once. She points at a red one. "That one is mostly of you, so..." she trails off.

"Maybe we should leave it up here then?"

Quinn just nods again.

Rachel steps towards her and slips her free arm around Quinn's waist to pull her into a hug. "I love you," she whispers. "You know that, right?"

Quinn smiles at her. "You're just saying that to soften the blow when Kelsey says I'm talentless."

Rachel shakes her head, and then reaches up to kiss her cheek. "You're not talentless," she says. "Believe me, I know what you can do with that mouth of yours."

Quinn laughs out loud. "So, if all else fails, I can be a, what? What job could I get with a talented mouth?"

Rachel starts to respond, but Quinn interjects.

"That is relatively PG."

Rachel huffs. "You're no fun."

Quinn steals a kiss from her pouting lips. "Come on," she says. "Levi and Kelsey are waiting."
Neither of them makes a move to leave.

Quinn sighs, a small smile on her face. "I'm starting to wonder what I've ever done without you," she murmurs. "How did I ever get anything done?"

Rachel giggles softly, kissing her cheek again. "You love me."

"I do," she says on an exhale. "I really, really do."

"Can I buy this one?"

Quinn frowns down at the sketch Jared is pointing at. She's still a bit uneasy around him, but he hasn't done anything untoward this trip, and he hasn't even looked at her with distaste (that she's seen, at least.)

The sketch, itself, isn't that great, but he seems to like it. It's one she drew while she was waiting to board the train to come to Wallingford, and her nerves manifested in a pretty neat picture of what was her view of the many trains on the tracks.

She clears her throat. "They're not actually for sale," she says about the various sketches she and Kelsey have spread out on the dining room table. Kelsey's helping her put together a portfolio - though, Quinn still doesn't know if she'll do anything with it. "But, if you want it, you're welcome to have it."

Jared steps a little closer, inspecting the sketch. "I like the detail on the tracks," he says, reaching for the piece of paper and lifting it up. "Usually, one would relegate the tracks as something unimportant, but people forget that it's the tracks that even allow the trains to move. Guiding them. Keeping them on track, for lack of a better term."

Quinn feels the hairs on her arms stand on end. "I try to pay attention to everything," she says. "It seems you do."

Quinn isn't quite sure what exactly is happening, but she's aware enough to know this conversation is something else entirely, and her heart is beating double-time because of it.

Jared meets her gaze. "I can really have it?"

"Of course," she says.

He smiles and, for a second, he looks startlingly like LeRoy. "You really are very talented, Quinn," he says.

She swallows nervously. "Thank you."

"I see you going very far, Miss Fabray," he says, and then turns around and walks out of the room.

For the longest time, Quinn can't bring herself to move. Her heart is thumping in her chest, and she feels the first prickling of fear creep up her spine. He can't know. There's no way he knows. She and Rachel have been careful, and it isn't as if Jared has been around the house all that much. He's just -

Quinn is startled out of her thoughts by the arrival of Rachel and Kelsey, both of them giggling about something or the other.
Rachel sobers slightly at the look on Quinn's face, and she immediately moves towards her. "Everything okay?" she asks, her voice dropping to a whisper.

Quinn blinks a few times, and then she nods. "Fine," she forces out. "Just had a weird moment there."

"Where did you go?"

Quinn links their pinkies between their bodies, hidden from view. "Wherever you are."

"So swoon-worthy, Fabray."

Quinn grins at her, fully recovering from her… moment with Jared. "I try."

Now that they're being completely honest with each other, Quinn knows she's going to have to discuss her little run-in with Jackson Prescott.

She hates that she even remembers his name. And his face. It's unlikely she'll ever forget, but she's trying not to think about the man, because that just fills her with rage and disgust. She has enough of her own anger to deal with, without adding on Rachel's.

"Are you ever going to eat that?" Rachel suddenly asks, breaking into Quinn's haze.

"What?"

Rachel regards her carefully. "You haven't even touched your breakfast, Quinn," she points out. "Are you okay?"

"I just have a bit on my mind."

"Oh?"

Quinn straightens her spine and clears her throat. "Do you think we could take a walk after this?"

Rachel eyes her warily. "Sure."

"It's nothing bad," she tries to reassure her. "I'm in this. You know that, right?"

"I know."

Quinn meets her gaze. "I'm in love with you, Rachel."

The brunette blushes under Quinn's intensity, and she smiles. "I don't think there will be a day when I'll tire of hearing you say that."

"It's doubtful I'll tire of saying it, either."

They're still staring at each other when Julian and Declan enter the kitchen, naughty grins on their faces.

Rachel rolls her eyes at the sight of them. "Okay," she says; "what have you two done?"

"Nothing," Declan quickly says.

A little too quickly, if you ask Rachel.
She levels them with a glare, and the boys visibly squirm under her scrutiny. "Save us all the trouble, and just spill it," she says. "We both know you're going to."

Declan looks between the two girls for a moment, before he steps towards Rachel and whispers, loud enough for them all to hear. "Is Quinn your girlfriend?"

Rachel's surprised gasp is drowned out by Quinn's spoon clattering into her cereal bowl. Both boys look at Quinn, and it takes everything Rachel has not to look, but she knows she can't. She wouldn't be doing them any favours because, honestly, she's unsure of her reaction if she were to see Quinn's face in this moment.

Rachel clears her throat, and the boys turn back to her. "What makes you ask that?" she asks, surprised by how steady her voice sounds, when she's internally freaking out.

Declan looks confused for a moment. "Because you're always together," he says. "And you're always holding hands or looking at each other." He smiles widely. "Julian says you make googly eyes," he adds with a giggle.

Rachel takes a moment to digest his words, and then she plasters on a smile. "Quinn is my best friend, Declan," she says. "She's very special to me."

He frowns. "So, she's not your girlfriend?"

Rachel swallows audibly as she determinedly refuses to look at Quinn. "She's my best friend," she says again, not wanting to deny explicitly what is true in life and in her heart.

"Oh," Declan says. "Well, that's still cool, I guess."

"Yip," she says. "I'd really appreciate it if you didn't go telling people other things."

He nods his head vigorously. "Uh huh."

She pulls him in for a hug that lasts a beat too long, and he squirms to get out of her grasp. "Rachel," he complains.

"Sorry," she murmurs.

He just laughs, and then takes off.

Julian lingers for a moment, and then he follows after his brother. Rachel just watches the space they vacated for several beats of her still-racing heart, and then finally turns to look at Quinn.

The blonde looks lost in thought, completely elsewhere.

"Quinn?"

She snaps to attention, frowning, and then smiling slightly. "So, that walk?" she asks, quickly rising to her feet and moving to deposit her bowl in the dishwasher after rinsing it out.

Rachel isn't sure what to make of this moment. Shouldn't they talk about Declan's assumption?

"Ready to go?"

Rachel looks at Quinn, who looks entirely too calm, and Rachel just knows no good can come of this.
"I have to tell you something," Quinn says, her heart beating a little faster. She isn't sure how to get what she needs to say out, and the look on Rachel's face really isn't helping.

It's taken them all day to get around to their walk because Kelsey and Levi caught them on their way out this morning, and it's been a busy day of selecting drawings, trying not to give their relationship away and cooking prep for the upcoming Holt-Berry Christmas dinner.

"It's about what happened at the cafe," Quinn explains

Rachel frowns, trying to follow, even as she tries not to trip over the small stones on the ground. "The cafe? What cafe?"

"The day I arrived," she explains, somewhat reluctantly. "At the train station."

Rachel's frown gives way to understanding, and she feels something heavy settle in her stomach. "Are we talking about Jackson Prescott?"

Quinn nods.

"What about him?" she asks, slightly more wary. Why isn't she bringing up the whole Declan thinking their dating thing? What is this?

"He kind of spoke to me," she explains. "While you were getting the car."

"Oh." She's unsure what exactly she's supposed to feel in this moment. "Uh, what did he say?"

Quinn stops walking and begins to recall the entirety of the one-sided conversation to her, word-for-word, as she remembers it. It's almost clinical in a way, as if she's dissociated, and the lack of emotion is something on which Rachel picks up, and her already-roiling emotions force her to ask a very, very dangerous question.

"You believed him, didn't you?"

Quinn makes the grave mistake of hesitating.

She's just so taken aback by how preposterous the idea is that it catches her off guard, but the brunette reads the gap in response as something else.

"Oh, my God," Rachel practically gasps, covering her mouth with her hand. "You actually believe him."

Quinn shakes herself, coming back to her senses. "What?" she almost shouts in indignation. "No, no I don't! Jesus, Rachel."

Rachel shakes her head, refusing to believe it. "But you hesitated, Quinn," she accuses. "Why would you do that if you don't believe him?"

Quinn doesn't even know what to say to that. How can Rachel even think that? What has Quinn done to make her think anything like that at all?

"You think I invited him onto me, don't you?" Rachel practically screeches. "God, you think I'm such a tart, don't you?"

Quinn grits her teeth, forcing herself to stay calm. "I did not say that," she says. "I do not think that at all."
She's too late, or Rachel is too blinded by her own rage to hear Quinn's words, because the brunette all but blows up in Quinn's face.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" she shouts, and Quinn flinches. "What sort of person thinks I would ask for that?"

"Rachel?" Quinn pleads, suddenly deflating. How is she supposed to explain herself when it doesn't seem that Rachel is even listening to her? "Please."

"No!" she snaps. "You have no right! You know nothing about what I went through! You can pretend to understand all you want, but you've never known fear like that."

It's entirely the wrong thing to say because Quinn's entire demeanour changes. It shifts from hesitant and apologetic to something hard and... spiteful.

It's so sudden, Rachel barely catches it before Quinn is speaking again.

"Well, obviously not," Quinn says, her tone dripping with sarcasm. "Forgive us all for not having suffered the same trauma as you, Miss Berry." Her eyes narrow. "Do not presume to think I do not understand fear."

And Rachel, well, she doesn't back down. They have always enjoyed the challenge, even though nothing about this is remotely 'enjoyable.'

It escalates quickly.

In fact, it turns decidedly ugly far too quickly, and it's almost as if Quinn plans it. Guides it. Wants it.

"What?" Quinn spits out. "Is this the moment you actually confess that you actually consented to the really bad sex and then didn't want your parents to find out, so you faked the whole thing?"

Of all the things Rachel is expecting to hear, that definitely isn't it. She just stares blankly at Quinn, her mouth hanging slightly open. The girl in front of her is someone she doesn't recognise.

Who is she?

Where has her Quinn gone?

"How can you even ask that?" Rachel asks in a small voice.

Quinn's own anger and insecurities are spinning out of control and, while she can see the look of utter devastation on Rachel's face, she can't seem to register it.

"We both know you can take care of yourself," Quinn says, and there's such darkness in her voice. Her own defences are raised so high; she barely acknowledges the words leaving her mouth. "Tell me, what would have happened to those boys if I hadn't showed up at the Halloween Dance?"

Rachel glares at her. "Oh, I don't know, Quinn," she says, equally as harsh and... sardonic. "I might have tripped and fallen down the stairs like a scared little girl."

The sarcasm fills the empty space between them, and Rachel sees a flicker of something in Quinn's eyes. It's just there for a moment, something that looks like pure, unadulterated fear, but it's gone
just as quickly.

"Of course," Quinn says, recovering. "Even then, you were so eager to get them all expelled for nothing," she says with a roll of her eyes. "So hell bent on ruining their lives too, huh?"

In a move that surprises them both, Rachel, unthinkingly, raises her hand and slaps Quinn.

She actually slaps her.

The shock of it is almost too much to bear, and Rachel can barely look at the surprise on Quinn's face.

"You don't get to say things like that," Rachel says, keeping her eyes on Quinn's neck. "I told you what happened with that miserable excuse of a human being. I told you. I know you don't mean any of this, but it still hurts. It fucking hurts, Quinn. So, you don't get to stand there and make it worse.

"I relive that day all the time. I can barely go into town most days, and I have all these flashbacks and nightmares, and I hate that you could even entertain the idea that I'm the one who ruined his life. That - that man raped me! He held a knife between my legs and told me he would kill me if I didn't do what he said.

"I have no idea what could possess you to think I would make up something like that. That hurts more than anything, and I honestly don't know what more to say to you right now!" She's crying uncontrollably now. Her tears are falling down her cheeks, but Quinn does nothing.

And then, the blonde steps back, retreating.

Rachel sees it happening, and she suddenly knows exactly what Quinn has done.

"Why did we ever think this would work?" Quinn asks, her voice flat, almost a monotone. "We're both too fucking messed up for this."

Rachel wipes at her eyes. "Don't you dare," she says strongly. "You don't get to say that either. You don't get to say anything, right now. We're fine."

"Like hell we're fine," she snaps. "You slapped me."

"You deserved it."

Again, it's entirely the wrong thing to say, because Quinn's face falls completely. The emotion drains away entirely, and the blank look she portrays is enough to make Rachel's hairs stand on end. "I deserved it," Quinn echoes, almost mechanically. "Of course, I did. Because I did something bad."

Rachel just stares at her. "Quinn?"

Quinn shakes her head. "You're right," she says. "I deserved it. I'm sorry."

"Quinn?"

The blonde steps back again, almost stumbling over a rock. Her eyes glance at the hand Rachel used to slap her, and there's another flicker in her eyes.

"Quinn?"
"I have to go," she says. "I - I have to go."

"No," Rachel says, closing the space between them. "What's happening right now? What is this?"

Quinn doesn't respond. She just steps away again, needing to keep substantial space between them.

"Don't do this," Rachel says, almost pleadingly. "I know you're doing this on purpose, even if you don't even realise it. Quinn, just stop. Stop pulling away." She huffs out a breath, quietly berating herself for not seeing the signs sooner. "Stop trying to push me away."

Quinn frowns. "That's not what I'm doing."

"It is," Rachel argues. "You've just come to realise how serious this relationship is, and Declan scared you - he scared you - so you're coming up with all these awful, hurtful ways to force us apart because you neither desire to want or need anyone."

"That's not it," Quinn says, adamant.

"Then, what is it?"

Quinn is silent for a moment and, when she does finally speak, Rachel wishes with all her might that neither of them even bothered to open their mouths at all today.

"I'm the one who doesn't want to ruin your life," she says slowly, and then steps back again. "It's all I seem to be capable of doing." Eventually, she turns around and walks away. Back towards the house or out into the fields, Rachel doesn't even know.

All she can do is stand there and wonder how it is they lost that blissful feeling so quickly.
It's exactly eight-twenty-seven the next morning when Rachel heads downstairs, already dressed for the day's festivities.

It's Christmas Day, and she's supposed to be happy and joyful, but all she feels is sick to her stomach, and she has a splitting headache.

It doesn't help that she looks like a disaster. Her eyes are puffy from crying herself to sleep, and she feels completely drained, both physically and emotionally. Is this what heartbreak is supposed to feel like, because she's honestly never felt anything like it?

It's as if it's in her very bones.

Rachel finds LeRoy and Grandma Holt in the kitchen when she finally wills herself to show her face. LeRoy actually startles at the sight of her, his eyes narrowing at the state of her face.

"Uh, Sweetheart," he starts. "Are you - is everything - what's wrong?"

Rachel's shoulders slump, and she almost runs straight into his embrace, but she contains herself, even though she really needs a hug right about now. "Quinn - Quinn and I had a fight," she just about manages to say, which is probably the biggest understatement imaginable.

LeRoy's facial expression softens. "Oh, Honey," he says. "Cou - uh, best friends fight all the time."

Rachel almost rolls her eyes at his near-slip, but she's too exhausted for derision. Her heart is aching and, as far as she knows, they're barely even a 'couple' right now.

"You don't understand," she says. "It - it was bad, Lee. It was awful, horrible, absolutely terrible. She said things, I said things, and I don't even know where it all came from. It - it was nasty." She feels tears prick at her eyes, and she really doesn't want to do any more crying.

LeRoy isn't sure what to say.

"I slapped her," Rachel suddenly cries, burying her face in her hands. "I actually slapped her. I - I don't even know what I was thinking."

LeRoy waits only a beat before he's crossing the kitchen and wrapping her in his arms. He just holds her as she cries, and he's aware of his own mother's hand on his back as she walks past them and out of the kitchen to give them some semblance of privacy in this large, open kitchen.

"I hate her for doing this," Rachel sobs into his chest. "I hate her, but I'm just so in love with her. I love her so much, and she's just so… frustrating and annoying and so, so stupid."

LeRoy rubs soothing circles on her back as he tries to calm her.

Eventually, Rachel does grow quiet, and she wipes at her eyes as she pulls out of his embrace.

"Only Quinn Fabray has the power to do this to me."

LeRoy feels helpless. "I don't know what you two fought about, but I do know that talking about it will help. The two of you have had the night to think on it, and you're probably much calmer now."
Rachel isn't sure about that. "Where is she, anyway?"

LeRoy frowns. "I haven't seen her."

Rachel feels an uneasy shiver run down her spine. "What?" she asks. "Isn't she walking with Dad?"

"It's Christmas Day," LeRoy explains. "He's taking the day off. He's still in bed."

Rachel blinks. "And you haven't seen Quinn at all?" she asks.

"Not a peep," he says. "Maybe she decided to sleep in."

Rachel is already backing out of the kitchen because, no, Quinn does not sleep in. Ever. Not until this late in the morning, at the very least, and Rachel feels her panic rip through her as she races up the stairs to Daniel's room. She has no idea what she's expecting to find, and her heart stutters at the sight before her.

Nothing.

The bed is perfectly made, and there's no sign of Quinn or any of her things. Frankly, it looks as if nobody has been in the room for years, and Rachel's heart literally breaks.

She's gone.

She's gone.

"Quinn," Rachel says into the empty room, just because she can't think of anything else to do. Quinn is gone, and her brain is refusing to compute just what that means.

Just, how?

When?

What?

Recovering some semblance of control of her extremities, Rachel turns around and rushes back downstairs. She practically bowls over LeRoy when she gets to the kitchen. "Daddy, she's gone," she chokes out, her breathing choppy.

LeRoy stops what he's doing immediately because Rachel calls him 'Daddy' only when she's stressed, panicked, hurt or wants something very specific from him. "What?"

"Quinn is gone," she forces out. "The room is empty and her things are - " she halts suddenly, at the sound of rough, painful coughing.

Or is it wheezing?

Her heart jumps into her throat, and she sprints from the kitchen and out the front door. She rounds the house and comes face-to-face with a red-faced, doubled-over Quinn Fabray, whose one hand is on the wall and the other over her chest.

It takes Rachel far too long to realise Quinn can't breathe.

She's having an asthma attack.

"Daddy!" Rachel screams, as she sprints towards Quinn, immediately sliding an arm around her
waist to support her. "Daddy!"

A moment later, LeRoy comes barrelling out of the house, along with Levi, Kelsey and Eric.

"Her inhaler," Rachel says. "She needs her inhaler." She looks at Quinn, who she's forced to straighten. "Where is it? Quinn, baby, I need you to focus. Where's your inhaler?"

"B-bag."

Rachel looks at her family. "Her bag, her backpack," she says, though she doesn't know how much good that'll do. Still, Levi and Kelsey rush back into the house, and LeRoy and Eric move towards the girls.

Quinn grabs onto Rachel's sweater, fistig it tightly. "I - I ca - "

"It's okay," Rachel soothes, running a hand over her hair. "The inhaler's coming. Just hold on, okay?"

"I'm so - sor - "

"Ssh," Rachel says, kissing her forehead. "It's okay. Just take long, deep breaths. Don't try to talk."

When Levi comes flying out of the house, he immediately hands the bag to Rachel, who searches for the inhaler in Quinn's - thankfully - organised mess, and then hands it to LeRoy. Between him and Quinn, they manage to get the attack under control, and Rachel can't bear to look away from Quinn.

She's never actually witnessed an attack, but Santana once told her about one Quinn suffered in their freshman year. She said it was fucking scary.

Rachel has to agree.

LeRoy turns to Eric. "Go inside and make her a coffee. No milk, no sugar."

Eric frowns, looking as if he wants to question the instruction, but LeRoy is already looking at Quinn again. He reaches for her left wrist and checks her pulse as Eric goes into the house, glancing over his shoulder at the way Rachel still has her arm around Quinn's waist.

Rachel doesn't notice because all her attention is on Quinn. Stupid, stupid, irresponsible Quinn, who goes running without her phone or her inhaler.

LeRoy rests a gentle hand on Quinn's shoulder. "Are you all right to walk inside?" he asks cautiously.

It takes Quinn a moment, but then she nods, and the five of them start to head inside. Quinn's footsteps are a little shaky, but her feet carry her into the house and into the kitchen where Eric is just setting out a single cup of steaming hot coffee on the island.

Quinn and Rachel walk towards it, and both girls give LeRoy a curious look.

"The caffeine helps," he explains slowly. "Just have a few sips. Humour me."

Quinn manages a smile as she slowly extricates herself from Rachel's grasp and reaches for the cup. Her hand is shaking as she lifts it up and, for a second, the entire room grows very, very quiet.

It's just so, still, and she turns her head to tell Rachel about -
And, then, nothing.

When Quinn next wakes, she's in a bed, her face pressed against something warm. It takes her a moment to realise the 'something warm' is Rachel - Rachel, who's currently threading her fingers through soft, blonde hair and humming to herself - and Quinn immediately bursts into tears.

She buries her face in Rachel's abdomen, lifts her arms to clutch at her waist and just sob. "I'm sorry," she cries. "I'm so sorry. I - I didn't mean any of it. God, how could you think I ever could. I was - was just surprised at the question. I don't - "


Quinn hiccup. "Do - do you hate me?"

"Of course not," Rachel says, and she sounds so sure. "I'm just really mad at you, right now. You - you scared me."

Quinn grows still. "What?"

"Quinn, do you even know what happened?"

For a moment, the blonde says nothing. And then she lifts her head, surprised by how heavy it feels. "Umm…"

"What's the last thing you remember?"

Quinn scrunches up her face in thought, and it's honestly the cutest thing Rachel has ever seen. "Umm, coffee…?"

Rachel just sighs, her right hand lifting to guide Quinn's head back down. Her grip around her shoulders tightens, and she fists the blonde's shirt in her free hand. "Please don't ever do that to me again."

Quinn's eyes close. "I - I don't know what I did."

"You went running," she says. "For how long?"

Quinn audibly swallows. She can't actually remember. "A while."

"And you went without your inhaler and without your phone," she says. "You - you couldn't breathe, Quinn. What were you thinking?"

Quinn can't actually recall thinking anything.

"You scared me," Rachel says again, her own eyes closing.

"I'm sorry."

"You passed out."

"I did?"

"You spilt your coffee on Eric."

"Oh."
Rachel breathes out slowly. "Quinn?"

"Hmm?"

"I'm going to ask you something now, and it's probably going to be rather difficult for us both, but I really need you to tell me the truth."

Quinn tenses, but she resists the urge to pull away. In fact, she buries her face in Rachel's abdomen and just breathes, content to lose herself in the brunette's intoxicating scent. "Okay."

"Did - did you dissociate?"

Quinn remains silent, not reacting in any way.

Rachel rushes to continue. "It's just that, last night, after I - when I - " her voice catches. "I don't know. Something happened to you. It was like - like you were caught in a flashback, but also not, and I - God, is it because I slapped you? I'm sorry, I just, you were saying - I couldn't - "

Rachel doesn't have the words, so she just squeezes the blonde as tightly as she can, and asks, "Baby, who hurt you?"

Quinn doesn't speak for long minutes, her eyes clenched shut as she focuses on the steady rise and fall of Rachel's chest. She can hear the other girl breathing, and she uses it to keep her here.

"Quinn," Rachel whispers, and she sounds so worried and broken, and Quinn nuzzles against her sweater. "I love you, you know?" she says, her fingers gentle as they draw circles on Quinn's back. "Nothing you say will ever change that."

"You can't promise me that," Quinn mumbles into the fabric.

"I can," Rachel says. "Watch me. I promise nothing you tell me will change how I feel about you." She waits. "Actually, no, I take that back," she says. "It might make me love you more, so you should be careful."

Tears spring to Quinn's eyes, and she hides her face again, her arms tightening around Rachel. "I'm sorry," she says, but it's muffled. "I don't think any of the things I said. I've never thought them. I was just so caught off guard that you thought I would, and then I - " she falters.

"And then you decided to use it, in a misguided attempt to push me as far away as possible because you think we're getting too serious and you're convinced you're going to ruin my life?" Rachel finishes.

Quinn says nothing.

"You know, for a genius, you're kind of stupid."

Quinn sighs, her breath seeping through the fabric and tickling Rachel's skin.

"Why do you think you're going to ruin my life, and where on earth is this even coming from?" she asks. "I thought we were fine. Did something happen? I don't see how what Declan assumed could have brought this on? Is it the sketches? Are you feeling pressured? It's just that you're so talented, and I want you to have the best chance ever, you know? You could go far, Quinn, and, I mean, if you actually want to be a lawyer then that's fine too, but I don't think you'll be as happy doing that than if you were..." she trails off when Quinn's body starts to shake in what she initially assumes is laughter. "Yeah, yeah," she murmurs; "Laugh it up." She shakes her head. "I know I'm rambling,
but you - " she stops abruptly when she realises Quinn is actually crying. "Quinn? No. Baby, what's wrong?"

And, still, Quinn cries, and Rachel lets her.

She just cries and cries, until the sounds eventually stop, and Rachel realises that she's actually fallen asleep. It's sad and heartbreaking and entirely too adorable, and Rachel just holds her. She wraps her in strong arms that offer comfort and warmth.

Rachel can't help wondering when was the last time Quinn actually let herself cry this way. Rachel's always held the belief that, sometimes, a person just needs a good cry. These tears seem overdue, and hold so much more than what just today might have warranted. It's as if she's cried for everything and nothing at the same time, and Rachel's heart is breaking all over again. She doesn't know if there will ever be a day when a part of her doesn't hurt even a little bit for Quinn.

She closes her own eyes to ward off her own tears, and slips into a sleep that offers her no respite from any of the demons that haunt her - or Quinn.

When Rachel opens her eyes again, Quinn is awake, but she hasn't moved all that much. Now, her head is resting on Rachel's chest, her right ear pressed to Rachel's heart as the fingers of her left hand draw lazy shapes on her sweater-covered abdomen.

There's something so simple, so childish, about the action, and Rachel just allows herself to enjoy it for a moment. The two of them have a series of very difficult conversations coming up, and this moment is something of the calm before the emotional storm.

Breathing a sigh, Rachel finally speaks, the sleep leaving her in an instant. "You didn't leave."

Quinn startles at her voice, looking adorably confused, with her hair in disarray and her eyes squinting as she lifts her head to look at her. "Wha - "

"You didn't leave," Rachel repeats.

"Uh, no, I didn't," she mumbles. "I'm right here."

Rachel shakes her head. "No," she says. "Last night. This morning. You didn't leave."

"No, I didn't," she repeats, frowning as her brain tries to catch up with what Rachel is trying to tell her. "Did you think I did?"

Rachel blinks back tears. "You - you weren't here," she says; "and all your stuff was gone."

Quinn glances around the room. "I tidied up," she says. "The room was only a mess because of you."

"Shut up."

Quinn presses her lips together, just waiting.

Rachel sighs. "You're my girlfriend," she says. "You're my girlfriend, and I love you, so we're going to get through this… whatever it is. This - this is just a… thing. We are going to fight and, because we're the people we are, that's probably going to be a lot." She looks at Quinn's face. "You are mine," she says. "You can fight me all you want, say the worst things imaginable, but you are
You don't get to leave, because I'm not going anywhere. Push me away at your peril because, honestly, you know I like a challenge."

Quinn closes her eyes. "I'm not good for you," she whispers.

"Bullshit," Rachel says. "You are the best for me. Don't you see? Can't you tell? God, Quinn, you're saving me every single day, and I love you, I love you so much. You're the most important person in my life right now, and I need you to get rid of those masochistic, dark thoughts and just let me love you."

Quinn stares at her for the longest time. "Do you know you're the first person I've ever told 'I love you' and actually meant it?" she says.

Rachel frowns. "Not even Tori?"

Quinn purses her lips. "I do love her, in some way, but it's never been real. How could it be when what we had never was." She looks away for a moment. "I'm in love with you, Rachel Berry. It feels like nothing else in this world, and it terrifies me. I'm - I'm scared all the time, and I don't want that for you. I want you to - "

"Quinn," she gently interrupts. "Can I tell you something?"

She hums her acknowledgment.

"I want you," Rachel says, shifting so that she's facing Quinn. "I want you. I'm under no illusions that any of this is going to be easy, but I want you, so I'm willing to face all of it, okay? We're going to figure it out. You just - you have to want me too, and the two of us are going to take over the world."

Quinn shakes her head. "You have far too much faith in - "

"You?"

The blonde sighs and drops her head, soaking up Rachel's warmth. "I'm counting down the days until my birthday," she says. "When I'm eighteen, I don't think I'll be as scared as I am now."

"I don't want you to be scared at all," Rachel counters.

"Let me ask you something," Quinn says. "If I were willing to come out tomorrow, would you?"

Rachel can't bring herself to answer the question, and it's enough for both of them. "But, we're not talking about that, are we?" she questions instead. "What are we talking about, Quinn?"

Quinn swallows. "My parents weren't alway so… distant," she says. "They were pretty decent in the beginning. Sometimes, I think they liked to delude themselves into thinking I could replace my sister. Like, if they just did everything right, I would be just like her, just without the entire getting sick and dying part." She closes her eyes. "Sometimes, I wonder why they couldn't just be happy they had another child, you know? Isn't that what normal people want?"

Rachel decides not to mention that Quinn's parents obviously aren't remotely 'normal.'

"I - I think Judy does love me, in her own way, but Russell definitely doesn't. He could never love the person who murdered his child."

Rachel gasps, her hand moving to cover her mouth. "Quinn, don't say that."
"Why not?" the blonde questions. "He did."

Rachel can't contain the whimper she lets out. "Oh, Quinn."

"He's an alcoholic, you know," she says. "I didn't really know what that was when I was little, but I just understood that Daddy got really angry and loud when he drank the brown liquid. He used to shout a lot. He used to say things that didn't make sense to me until I turned seven... until I outlived Frannie. I didn't get why there was so much hate whenever he looked at me when he got like that, as if he wasn't even seeing me. Or, he was, and he wished he were seeing someone else.

"After I found out about my sister, he didn't have to pretend anymore. He didn't have to pretend to love me or care or even acknowledge me. And, as heartbreaking and confusing as it was, it was definitely bound to happen and, after the truth came out, he didn't just get angry and loud; he also got... violent."

Rachel sucks in a sharp breath.

"It was really only for that summer," she says, which sounds like a lie. "But... I deserved it."

And, when it clicks - you deserved it - Rachel's chest clenches so tightly, she can barely breathe. Oh, God. "Because you were bad," Rachel whispers, and she's absolutely horrified.

Quinn nods, looking relieved that Rachel seems to understand. "I could never do anything right," she says, and the words take Rachel back to the first time she saw Quinn's parents the night of the induction service, and she watched Quinn threaten to fall apart for the first time. "I still can't."

Oh, God.

She thinks she deserves it, because she can never do anything right.

"Quinn."

"It got worse with the campaign. It wasn't going well, and he was so stressed, I guess, and I tried to be so good. I didn't do anything wrong, but I was - " she pauses. "Sometimes, I get heartsore when I remember I was sent to boarding school so young, but I actually think it was my mother's way of protecting me without actually having to do anything."

Rachel can't seem to wrap her head around what Quinn is saying. She's just saying words - mortifying, heart wrenching words - and it's as if she doesn't even understand the magnitude of them. It's almost the same thing with her situation with Tori - like, she doesn't even realise how literally messed up everything actually is.

It's her reality, and she doesn't know anything different.

Rachel suddenly feels sick, and it takes all her willpower not to rush to the bathroom to expel the nothing she's eaten today. She's been too stressed and worried about Quinn - for good measure, apparently - and now her girlfriend is practically unravelling before her eyes.

Rachel really doesn't want to hear any more about any of it, so she just clutches Quinn tightly to her and holds on. Even when the blonde squirms, she just hugs her tightly, not letting her go.

Eventually, Quinn just gives in, her body sagging as she relaxes against Rachel. It's quiet for a few moments, and then Quinn whispers, "Nothing has changed, right?"

Rachel can't hold back her silent tears. "Nothing has changed, Quinn," she says. "I love you. I love
This time, when Quinn falls asleep again, Rachel can't stand to lie there anymore. Her heart is hurting, and she doesn't even know everything. Quinn has told her things without even telling her, and her stomach is churning unpleasantly.

If her father could hurt a kid for - for nothing - then there will be hell to pay if ever he learns that Quinn is gay. It's as simple as that.

Or, as complicated.

Slowly, Rachel reluctantly removes herself from Quinn's grip and gets to her feet. Her muscles complain, and she stretches her arms up in the air. It doesn't help.

Nothing helps.

And, when she leaves the room, she goes straight to the bathroom and dry heaves into the toilet bowl. It's not just that Quinn's story is... alarming and the absolute worst. It is, yes, but there are stories about child abuse all over the world, and it's disgusting and horrifying, but the part that really gets to Rachel is Quinn's opinion on it.

God, she still thinks she deserves it.

Rachel just heaves again, and then spends another fourteen minutes just sitting there, willing her mind not to picture a tiny Quinn Fabray with fear in her eyes.

It doesn't work.

Because the fear is still there.

Eventually, Rachel pulls herself to her feet and goes downstairs after a quick check-in with Quinn - who she may or may not have kissed on the forehead - and heads to the kitchen, which is surprisingly and mercifully empty.

There, alone, she downs two glasses of water and fills one for Quinn. She grabs Advil and two protein bars, and then goes back upstairs.

After setting the items on the night stand beside Quinn's bed, Rachel doesn't know what to do. This is definitely not how she was expecting to spend her Christmas. She hasn't even had the opportunity to wish her family yet.

Breathing a sigh, Rachel bends to kiss Quinn's temple, and then she leaves the room. She goes to her own bedroom for a moment, just to breathe, and then she goes downstairs to find her family. They're spread out between the dining room, den and living room. There's some football game on TV, but nobody seems to be paying attention as her brothers debate something or the other.

It's almost comical the way everyone falls silent when she moves into view and, no, she will not cry. LeRoy reacts first, rising from his armchair and moving towards her to wrap his arms around her.

"Are you okay?" he whispers into her hair.

She shakes her head, even though her face is pressed against his chest.

"What do you need?"
She just hugs him tighter. She has two amazing fathers, and Quinn doesn't even have one half-decent one. It's just not fair, and she doesn't know how to wrap her head around that.

She also can't seem to accept that maybe she isn't helping Quinn at all; that what Quinn needs is beyond her.

So, just lets LeRoy hug her and tries to soak up some… strength or something from him. She's exhausted and starving and she has no idea what time it is.

Rachel pulls back from him. "Is there any food?" she asks.

LeRoy laughs. "Christmas dinner isn't for another few hours, but I'm sure I could fix you something," he offers kindly, his grip loosening. "Quinn?"

Rachel's eyes sting at the sound of the blonde's name. "She's asleep."

"Still?" he asks, eyes widening in alarm.

"No," she rushes to say. "She woke up, we had a talk, and she went back to sleep."

He still looks worried. "Is - is she okay?"

All Rachel can do is shake her head, but she can't offer any more explanation. She doesn't think Quinn has ever been 'okay,' and that's enough to send her already-swirling emotions into a whirlwind.

"Well," LeRoy says. "Does she like chocolate?"

Rachel frowns because, honestly, she's not really sure. Quinn is so disciplined with what she eats that, even if she does like something, she would deny herself - even getting her to eat her beloved Skittles is a feat.

But it's Christmas, and who doesn't like chocolate?

"She likes hot chocolate," Rachel ends up saying.

"Now I see why you two get along," he teases, which draws a tired smile from Rachel. He kisses the top of her head, and then sends her into the living room while he heads to the kitchen.

Rachel stands perfectly still for a moment, just taking in the many eyes that are watching her. She breathes out slowly, and then crosses the room towards the recliner that's occupied by Hiram. Without asking permission, she crawls into his lap and rests her head against his chest, feeling so much smaller than she really is.

Hiram just rubs her back as he casts a worried look around the room. Everyone knows vaguely what's happened, but the full story evades everyone. There's more to it than Quinn having an asthma attack and eventually passing out. Rachel is far too devastated for that to be it, but nobody is brave enough to ask.

After what feels like a millennium, Rachel sighs, and then asks Daniel, "Were you guys going to play Monopoly?"

Daniel just laughs. "Nobody's brave enough," he says, relaxing somewhat now that he's laying eyes on his sister. When he, Emily-Anne and Lena arrived earlier, there was an… odd atmosphere in the air, but it's easing with Rachel's presence.
"After what happened last year, can you blame them?" Kelsey says. "Honestly, I'm convinced Eric drew blood."

"I did not," the boy argues. "And you totally cheated."

"Did not."

Hiram laughs. "We aren't even playing, and the fighting's already started."

Rachel giggles, shifting slightly to get more comfortable. "I think this is the first Christmas I've actually spent here since I came to live with you," she says, her voice quiet and thoughtful. "I don't even know what you do."

"We're doing it," Daniel says, his arm casually wrapped around Emily-Anne's shoulders. "All the cooking gets done the night before and in the morning, turkey goes in, and then we kind of all just laze about and scrounge until the rest of the family arrives and we have dinner all together, before we open presents."

"What do you usually do with you mom?" Emily-Anne asks her, and Rachel stiffens. God.

She hasn't even called her mother.

"Uh," she murmurs. "It's New York, so we generally do all those cliched New York things," she says. "Rockefeller, ice-skating, the tree." She rolls her eyes. "She can't cook to save her life, so it's always quite the experience when we attempt to make dinner together."

Hiram guffaws at that. "Shelby in the kitchen? Wow!"

Rachel giggles.

"And with B," Daniel adds, and Rachel shoots him a glare. "What?" he asks innocently. "You're pretty awful in the kitchen as well."

"At least Quinn has some cooking skills," Eric says, and Rachel's eyes snap towards him. "That way, you won't starve."

If Hiram can feel the rapid beating of her heart, he doesn't say anything.

There's something knowing in Eric's voice, and Rachel casts a look around the room. The family in here is relatively immediate, because she can hear Patrick, Declan, Julian and her grandparents in the dining room - probably playing some board game - and the rest are in the den.

If Eric knows, then everyone else must as well.

At least, in this room.

Before anyone can say anything, LeRoy returns with a bowl of soup, a cup of hot chocolate and some toast. Rachel immediately sits up, ignoring her father's protests at her movement - serves him right for having a heart attack - and holds her hands out for the tray LeRoy places in her lap.

"Thank you," she says with a beaming smile.

LeRoy just chuckles softly, kisses the top of her head and then returns to his armchair.
Rachel is quiet as she eats, just listening to the sounds of her family all around her, taking in their voices and their faces. She can't believe she misses out on this every year, and she can't help thinking her father's heart attack could be considered a tiny blessing in disguise.

Minuscule, really.

When she's done, she takes the tray to the kitchen, downs another full glass of water, and then returns to the living room. This time, she bypasses Hiram's lap, and rather settles on the floor by the fire, where Levi is lying on his stomach on the carpet. She lies on her back beside him and looks at his face, unable to stop herself from smiling.

"Hi, you," he murmurs.

Rachel blinks slowly. "You know?" she whispers so only he can hear over the volume of the other voices.

"Yip," he says, an easy smile on his face. There's no judgment, no accusation, not even curiosity. Definitely not like Eric.

Rachel still feels guilty.

"You did call her 'baby,'" he points out.

Her eyes widen. "I did?"

"You totally did."

She can't even remember doing it.

"She was mid-attack, so you can't be blamed for your slip," he assures her. "But I do believe you kissed her forehead as well, and the way you look at her..." his voice trails off. "It's kind of like the way Grandpa looks at Grandma."

She frowns, wondering why he's picked that relationship to which to compare.

"He looks at her as if it hurts," he says.

"You know what he went through to get back to her," he says, bringing up their grandfather's various tours in the army. "Sometimes, he looks at her as if he can hardly believe she's real; as if he still hasn't quite accepted that this is the life he gets to live with her."

Rachel feels the breath leave her body. "And you think I look at Quinn like that?"

"I've seen it," he says, shifting closer. "She looks at you that way too, you know?"

Rachel feels herself blush. "You're not mad?"

His features soften, and her heart swells. This is her brother. She may be the closest to Daniel, but she's always been able to talk to Levi. He was the most incensed by her assault, and she had to acknowledge the almost ruthless quality to him that, honestly, scares her a little.

He's going to be a brilliant lawyer.

"Why would I be mad?" he asks, genuinely curious.
"Because I didn't tell you."

He sticks out his bottom lip for a moment, and then smiles. "I'm not mad, Rach," he assures her. "A little surprised, but not mad."

"Surprised?" she questions. "You know I like girls."

"Not you, Kid."

"Oh."

Levi just smiles. "Does she make you happy?"

"So happy," she automatically says. Even after this truly horrific day, she can't deny just what Quinn means to her. They have so much to work on, sure, but Rachel would rather deal with all of that than spend a single day without her blonde girlfriend.

"Then, of course, I'm not mad."

"But… Eric is?"

Levi's eyes narrow. "Eric's a prick," he says. "Don't pay any attention to him, okay?"

Rachel just nods. "Does - does everyone know?" she asks, her voice cautious.

He shakes his head. "Just Kels, me and Eric," he says. "We're not going to tell anyone, you know? I realise you didn't tell us for some reason."

"Sorry."

"Don't apologise," he says. "Never apologise." He lifts a hand and presses a finger to her nose. "I can't even begin to imagine what it's like for either of you, so you don't get to apologise for any of it, okay?"

Rachel smiles gratefully. "You're my favourite, you know?"

He laughs out loud. "Liar."

She just giggles happily, and then sighs, her head turning so her eyes are on the ceiling. She allows her body to relax, her breathing growing steady. It's going to be okay.

Everything is going to be okay.

It's nearly ninety minutes later when Quinn Fabray makes her appearance.

For whatever reason, Rachel imagines Quinn almost stumbling down the steps, looking flushed with a wild case of bedhead.

But, no.

The Quinn Fabray who emerges from the upstairs is freshly showered, perfectly put together and just looking altogether stunning. She's dressed in her Christmas best, and Rachel's isn't the only jaw that drops.

The blonde is dressed in a pale yellow baby-doll dress with tiny white polka dots, a knitted white
cardigan and white Oxford wedges. Her hair is hanging loose, perfectly coiffed, and her white headband has tiny yellow stars on it.

Rachel has to sit on her hands to stop herself from jumping up and rushing towards her to bury her in a hug - or, worse, to dip her into a searing kiss.

Quinn looks a little surprised by all the eyes on her, but she manages to smile, all shy and exquisite and, God, what is this girl trying to do to Rachel?

"Hello," Quinn says to the room, blinking a few times. "I, umm - " she pauses, a little unsure. "I would just like to apologise for… what happened today," she says, her eyes briefly meeting Rachel's. "I didn't mean to worry anyone, and I definitely should have picked a better day to spend half of it asleep."

Daniel lets out a small chuckle, which seems to ease some of the tension in the air.

"How are you feeling?" LeRoy asks, sounding concerned.

"Rested," is all the answer Quinn gives, wringing her fingers together in front of her.

Hiram watches the action, realising she's uncomfortable. "Apologies are unnecessary, Quinn," he says, waving her into the room. "Come, sit, we're just talking about… what are we talking about, again?"

"Your old age," Daniel teases.

Quinn steps further into the room, her eyes scanning for a place to sit. Eventually, she settles on her destination - the floor beside Rachel - but Eric rises to his feet before she can even move.

"Here," he says. "You can take my seat."

Quinn studies him with slightly narrowed eyes, but he looks genuine. She sometimes gets an uneasy feeling around him, but she chooses to ignore it as she accepts the piece of couch beside Emily-Anne and Daniel with a quiet, "thank you."

He just grins at her, and then settles on the floor just to the left of her feet.

Quinn shifts slightly, her knee bumping Emily-Anne's, who smiles warmly at her. "Where's Lena?" she asks softly.

"It turns out that babies like to spend half the day asleep, as well," she answers.

Quinn glares playfully. "Are you calling me a baby?"

"Never."

Quinn just rolls her eyes, and then shifts her gaze to Rachel, who's already watching her. She offers a tentative smile, which widens when Rachel beams right back at her.

'Hot chocolate?' Rachel mouths.

Quinn's eyes grow wide. 'God, yes,' she mouths right back, and then both girls are getting to their feet, practically in sync.

"Is there more soup?" Rachel asks LeRoy.
"In the pot on the stove," he says, trying and failing to suppress his grin.

Rachel just rolls her eyes, and then leads the way into the kitchen, fully aware that Quinn is following entirely too closely behind her. Eyes trail after them, but neither girl seems to care and, once they're sufficiently out of sight, Rachel spins around and immediately draws Quinn into an unexpected kiss.

Quinn stumbles back a step, and then grins against Rachel's lips as her hands find purchase on a perfect waist. Her fingers curl around the fabric of Rachel's sweater, and she tugs her closer.

"I'm so glad you're awake," Rachel murmurs when she pulls back to breathe.

"So you can kiss me?"

Rachel just hugs her tightly. "I missed you."

Quinn sighs, allowing her body to relax into the embrace. "I'm right here."

"I love you."

Quinn pulls back slightly to look at her face. "Still?"

"Of course," she replies easily.

"Good," Quinn murmurs before leaning in to kiss her again; "because I love you, too."
Chapter Nineteen

Quinn can't reliably remember the last time she had a proper family Christmas. She spent the last one with Santana and her family, but the Lopez clan has its own issues that they let get in the way of the holiday. It's never really something she remembers Santana actually talking about, but Quinn knows how it feels to live in the shadows of an older sibling. Santana has two: a sister and brother. Who are both successful in their own rights, and it's an invisible pressure her family unknowingly places on the Latina's shoulders.

Quinn had Mary, and then Tori, and she hasn't allowed herself to get to know Martha well enough to consider her anything special. Right now, though, Quinn isn't even thinking about any of that. Right now, she has baby Lena nestled in her arms and Rachel pressed against her side, and nothing else in the world even matters.

Rachel is chattering away to Robert about something or the other, but Quinn isn't listening. She's too content to pay attention. Her stomach is full, and so is her heart.

She looks down when Lena shifts, and her smile is automatic. Babies make everything better, right? Aren't they supposed to?

Well, her arrival in her family was supposed to solve all their problems, but she just seemed to make it worse. Even back then, she couldn't get anything right.

"Hey."

Quinn looks up, catching Rachel's chestnut gaze. "Hmm?"

"Where'd you go?"

She smiles softly. "I'm right here."

Rachel gives her a look that says she doesn't believe her, but she drops it. "I'm so stuffed," she says instead.

"I told you not to eat that third garlic roll."

Rachel huffs. "But it was so good," she argues. "I don't regret it."

"You will."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

Quinn raises her eyebrows at the tone of the question. "Uh, I'm pretty sure you're going to feel bloated at some point," she says. "What's up with that reaction?"

Rachel presses her lips together. "Oh. Nothing."
"Rach?"

Rachel looks away from Quinn's intense gaze, her eyes dropping to Lena's tiny face. "Do you think I'm fat?"

Quinn actually sputters, she's so surprised by the question. "What?" she almost shrieks.

Lena squirms in her arms.

Quinn grows still. "Sorry, baby Lena," she murmurs, instantly apologetic. "Your aunt just asked me a preposterous question, and I reacted poorly. Forgive me?"

Lena just looks up at her with wide, brown eyes, and Quinn is powerless. Oh so powerless.

Quinn looks at Rachel. "You are beautiful, Rachel," she whispers.

"Are you saying being fat and being beautiful are mutually exclusive, because that's a horrible thing to imply, Quinn?"

Quinn's eyebrows shoot up. Okay. This isn't going to be one of those simple body complexes to tackle.

Granted, she's probably the absolute worst person to be talking about body image. She would much rather starve herself than gain a single pound, and have her mother notice.

God.

She's going to see her mother in a few days.

Quinn's anxiety piques, and she has to force her breathing to steady. "Rachel," she says, slightly amused. "We are seriously so fucking messed up."

And, Rachel laughs.

Quinn's comment is so unexpected that Rachel has no choice but to tilt her head back and let out a full-body laugh that makes her entire form shake. "Don't swear in front of my niece," she eventually says.

Quinn smiles softly. "My apologies, Princess Lena, for my crass remark." She snuggles the baby, nuzzling her tiny stomach until she gets a delighted little giggle.

Rachel can't actually get over how it feels to witness Quinn interact with Lena. The way her eyes shine and her entire face lights up. The way her voice softens and her smile widens. God, she's so beautiful like this.

"Quinn?"

She looks at Rachel, eyes bright. "Hmm?"

"Did I tell you that Lena is my goddaughter?"

Quinn shakes her head. "No, you didn't mention it," she says. "That's pretty cool. Is she going to be Christened, or is it something unofficial? Or did it already happen when you weren't here?"

Rachel blinks. "So many questions, Sherlock," she mumbles with a slow smile. "Umm, she was Christened while I was at school. I'm one of two godmothers. Emily-Anne's best friend from her
hometown in North Carolina is her other one."

"Oh, so you're the spare," she teases lightly, her eyes dancing with mirth.

Rachel is entirely too charmed to act indignant, and she can barely look away from Quinn's smiling face. It's right there, and she wants nothing more than to kiss every inch of it. "Quinn?"

"Hmm?"

"I love you." She barely says the words, but Quinn reads her lips, and the heart-stopping smile she receives in response is well worth the risk of 'saying' those words in a room full of people.

Quinn leans in slightly. "You just want to open your present first, don't you?"

"Well, I'm not going to deny that obvious truth," she says with a slight shrug.

Quinn grins mischievously. "You should know that the present currently waiting for you under the tree isn't you real present."

"It's not?"

"Your relationship present isn't for public eyes."

Rachel's eyes widen but, before she can respond, Hiram claps his hands excitedly. "Presents!" he declares, and there's a collective cheer, even as Quinn goes to cover Lena's tiny ears from the noise.

Rachel pretty much swoons at the action, and then completely pales at the thought that she can't wait to have children with Quinn.

Thankfully, her brief moment of panic goes largely unnoticed as the entire Holt-Berry clan gathers in the living room where the Christmas tree is. Quinn places Lena in Rachel's arms, and then rises to her feet with all the grace of a gazelle.

"I'll be right back," she whispers, and then practically hops over Levi's legs to get out of the room. Rachel shifts to the end of the couch to make space for her grandparents to squeeze onto the couch.

This family really, truly, is large.

Everyone has just about settled when Quinn gets back, carrying a medium-sized pouch with her. Rachel raises her eyebrows in question as Quinn sits on the armrest closest to her, a gentle hand on her back.

"You'll see," she says.

There are far too many presents to hand out, really, and it takes Declan and Julian burning through all their residual excitement from their post-dessert sugar rush to get it done in seven minutes.

Rachel ends up with a rather large pile of presents in front of her, and Quinn's eyes grow misty at the little pile in her lap.

Rachel rubs a slowly circle on Quinn's knee with her palm, and Quinn looks at her. "You're family now, you know?"

Quinn can't bring herself to speak, so she gives up trying pretty quickly.

"Everyone ready?" LeRoy asks the room.

"Uh," Quinn says, awkwardly raising her hand like she's in a classroom at school. She visibly
blushes when all eyes turn towards her, and it takes her a moment to gather herself. "Before we get started, I was wondering if I could hand my presents out," she says. "I didn't get to put them under the tree because, umm, I finished them only yesterday." She looks around the room. "I also didn't realise how many people there would be," she confesses with a soft chuckle as she gets to her feet and starts removing rolled up pieces of paper from her bag.

Rachel just watches in silence as Quinn carefully hands out the rolls, each one carefully addressed to every recipient in the room. The last person to receive one is Rachel, right after Quinn hands Lena's to Emily-Anne. Then she resumes her seat and smiles adorably.

"I suppose you could open them first," she says. "They're probably, definitely, not as exciting as whatever else you have waiting for you."

Before anyone can say anything, Declan is unrolling his gift. "Cool!" he squeals. "Look, Mommy, it's Spider-Man!" He practically shoves the drawing of his favourite superhero in his mother's face, and Stacey has just enough time to dodge the potential assault.

"Wow," Stacey says; "It looks just like him."

"I got Iron Man," Julian shouts, and it becomes increasingly evident to all of them that Quinn has penned each of them ink drawings of things that are either their favourite or very important to them.

It turns into a collective gush-fest that goes on for close to five minutes as the entire room passes around their respective drawings. Rachel's favourite has to be the drawing of Emily-Anne's pinkie finger clasped in Lena's tiny fist that Quinn gives to Daniel.

Stacey almost starts crying at the image of Julian and Declan chasing each other around the backyard. Levi's one depicts the most intricate library Rachel has ever seen, the very details in the books on the bookshelves startling. Hiram's is a scaled representation of the inside of the barn, with him standing with his fists on his hips as he oversees.

They're all really perfect.

And, well, Rachel's heart stutters when she sees her own. It's a picture of herself, performing on stage. It's practically a blue ink still of her solo from Sectionals, and she wonders if that is actually what she looked like.

Quinn gets to her feet at some point, leaves the room and returns with a large rectangular-shaped item draped in a towel. All eyes turn to her again. "This one is kind of for the whole family," she explains, blushing fiercely. "Daniel helped by getting it framed." She carries it over to where Grandpa and Grandma Holt are sitting, setting it in front of them, and then returning to her seat.

Rachel doesn't even realise she's holding her breath until she sees her grandmother drop the towel to reveal the absolute masterpiece within the wooden frame.

It's pencil this time, and it's a drawing of the entire family. Rachel recognises the picture as the one they struggled to take at Thanksgiving, and she feels tears prick at her eyes.

"It's beautiful," someone says.

Rachel feels Quinn's hand on her back, and she looks up at shining hazel eyes. "It's beautiful," she reiterates the earlier words.

Quinn just smiles at her. "Merry Christmas, Rachel Berry."
It's almost midnight when Rachel and Quinn find themselves sitting cross-legged opposite each other on Rachel's bed. The brunette can see Quinn's obvious exhaustion - she's unfairly adorable when she gets sleepy - but Rachel knows they need to discuss this now, and Quinn doesn't seem to be putting up a fight.

They've already exchanged presents. Quinn gave Rachel a Dalton soccer jersey with her name and number on it, essentially claiming the brunette as hers. It's her version of a Letterman. Rachel gave Quinn a set of fabric-covered Moleskine notebooks that she practically gushed over.

Now, though, they have a very important conversation to have.

"Firstly," Rachel starts; "you don't get to say things like that to me." Her voice is steady, but her heart is thundering in her chest, just from the memory of the… fight that started this all. "I know you, so I can recognise when you go on the attack," she says. "I get that it's part of who you are, Quinn, and I would rather you direct your attack at me than at anyone else, or even yourself, but there are things you do not get to use as ammunition, okay?"

"Everything else is fair game. Talk about my overly large nose or my annoying personality, but you do not get to talk about my assault that way. Do we understand each other?"

Quinn can barely look at her, but she nods, feeling like the worst person in the world. She remembers only bits and pieces from the previous night, but she recalls enough to know she said some truly awful things. If the regret she felt when she woke up after passing out is anything to go on, she royally fucked up.

"I'm sorry," she mumbles.

Rachel just reaches for her hands and gives them a gentle squeeze. "Now that we've covered that, I think we should unpack the entire day from the very beginning."

Quinn just nods again.

"Let's start with Declan," Rachel says, and she sees Quinn stiffen. "Did what he asked scare you?"

Quinn breathes out slowly. "Yes," she admits.

"And that's what prompted you to -" she stops when Quinn meets her gaze.

"I did get scared," Quinn says. "But he's just a boy, and he's going to ask questions and make assumptions. I know that. I planned to talk to you about Jackson Prescott before Declan even asked about our relationship."

Rachel can concede that much. "But you still lashed out," she points out.

Quinn releases her hands and runs her fingers through her hair. "After you assumed I believed him," she says through a clenched jaw.

"Because you hesitated," Rachel counters.

"I did," Quinn allows. "Because the mere idea that you thought I believed him caught me so off guard," she says. "And then, when I tried to explain, you wouldn't listen."

Rachel is about to argue when Quinn's pointed look forces her to replay the conversation. She breathes out slowly. "Okay," she relents, her shoulders slumping.
Quinn sits forward slightly. "That first part is... debatable," she says. "But the next part is my fault." She looks away. "You just - you mentioned fear, and you implied that I didn't know anything about it, and I guess I just saw red."

Rachel swallows. "I don't want us to be the sort of couple that compares things like this," she whispers. "I don't want us to be those people at all. I know we both have many, many things to work through, and I never meant to imply anything of the sort. I hope you know that."

"I do," Quinn says, sighing. "I mean, it isn't as if you even knew anything." Her breathing grows slightly unsteady. "I don't talk about... it."

Rachel just waits in silence.

"Santana kind of knows," she confesses. "There are times when I can't quite hide the fear, and I sometimes just react to things." She sighs. "It's funny, you know? I hate being around my father because things are so... volatile all the time, but I get so heartbroken when they don't even want to be in the same state as me. Is that normal?"

Rachel isn't sure how to answer that. "Maybe you should talk to my dad about it," she says instead. "The coming out never did go so well, and I think he has more experience with missing a family that - " she stops.

"Hates him? Wants nothing to do with him? Sees him as scum of the Earth? Would like nothing more than to pretend he doesn't exist?"

Rachel closes her eyes, feeling a wave of... something awful. If Quinn feels that now, then Rachel can only imagine how much worse it'll be if her family learns about her sexuality.

The mere thought of it is painful and entirely too heartbreaking for Rachel to wrap her head around, so she just wraps her arms around Quinn, unsurprised to find her girlfriend trembling.

"I always wonder if my father would have liked nothing more than to kill me that summer," Quinn mumbles into Rachel's pyjama top. "As far as the world knows, my sister never existed. It's like they wanted to erase her from existence, and he probably wished they could do the same with me."

"Maybe he would earn the sympathy vote or something. I don't know. It just - whenever I think about it, I remember wishing, at some point, that he really would." She sucks in a sharp breath. "Sometimes, I still do."

And, yes, okay, Rachel definitely isn't prepared for all of this. She has her own appointment with Dr Howell scheduled for when she gets to New York, and she reasons she's probably going to need to get advice on how to help her girlfriend, who's proving to be more and more broken every day.

God, Quinn pretends so well.

Rachel doesn't think her love will be enough to overcome... all of this. But, it's all she has right now, and she's going to give it willingly. So, she just hugs Quinn tighter, and whispers how much she loves her into soft blonde hair.

It should be enough, but they both know better.

Eventually, Quinn pulls back slightly and looks away. She sucks in a shuddering breath, as if she's trying to steel herself for something.

And then she starts speaking.
"I hate that I'm so afraid of him," she says, nibbling at her bottom lip and frowning as if she's actually angry with herself. "I think, maybe, my seven-year-old mind exaggerated everything or something, but it felt like every day of that summer was his way of proving to himself that - " she hesitates. "That I wasn't Frannie, and I never would be. Like, if he could hurt me, then there was no way I could be her, or something.

"There was one night. I can't really remember when it was, because it kind of all just blurred into one long..." she trails off. "Anyway, I think it was the night that changed the course of time or whatever you want to call it. He was especially mad that night. I think the polls weren't going so well, and it was just easier to blame me, because why would it be anyone else's fault?" She shakes her head in mild disbelief. "It's the night Mary first threatened to call a doctor. I - I remember her crying, and there was shouting, and it just hurt. It hurt so much, Rachel, and I thought - I thought, just maybe, maybe Mary could make it go away, you know?"

Rachel can barely stand this, and she closes her eyes so she doesn't have to see it. There are tears in Quinn's eyes but she isn't crying. Rachel thinks it'll be a while before that happens again.

"I guess, in the end, she kind of did," Quinn says. "It was a few days later when my mother told me I would be going to boarding school. I had a vague idea of what that was at the time, but Mary explained it all to me. While she cleaned my back and changed the dressings, she explained that boarding school was away from here, and away from my father. And, really, at the time, I wanted nothing else."

Rachel makes a mental note to find this Mary person and, possibly, hug her or something. She managed to help Quinn in some way, and that means something. It doesn't mean everything, but she tried, and Rachel can accept that.

Quinn seems to have good memories of Mary, and it seems that she's encountered so few 'good' adults in her life.

Before Rachel even knows what she's doing, her mouth is opening to ask a question she's sure she never would have asked, on any other day. "Can I see?"

Quinn's eyes snap up to look at her, wide and fearful. "What?"

Rachel swallows nervously. "Can I see?"

"My back?"

Rachel nods, choosing not to speak.

For the longest time, the two of them just stare at each other. It takes Quinn a full four and a half minutes to make the decision, and then she's shifting backwards and removing her t-shirt.

Rachel looks away, giving her some privacy until she's sure the girl has stopped moving.

When Rachel turns back, Quinn is lying on her stomach, her bare back on display. The smooth, pale skin is marred by scars of different sizes, and tears automatically spring to Rachel's eyes. Quinn's skin is so pink that the scars tend to blend in, but they're definitely there if you look close enough.

Rachel does that, practically crawling across the bed. "Quinn," she breathes once she settles at the blonde's side. With shaking, gentle fingers, she reaches out to touch Quinn's skin.

"Seriously," Quinn suddenly complains. "I think there must be something medically wrong with
you, Rach. It's not *normal* to have such cold hands all the damn time."

Rachel just giggles softly, the tips of her fingers tracing the gentle curve of Quinn's back, following the dip down to her bottom. She smiles at the slight dimples she finds, and then leans forward to place tender kisses against the warm skin.

"Maybe you're just unnaturally warm," Rachel offers, her breath washing over porcelain skin.

"Like a werewolf?"

"The palour of your skin would beg to differ, baby. You're more suited for a vampire."

"Maybe I'm a hybrid."

"You're definitely very special," Rachel whispers, her lips brushing Quinn's soft flesh. The blonde shivers at the touch, and Rachel can't help her smile. "Very, very special. Practically one of a kind."

"Rachel," Quinn breathes shakily.

Rachel doesn't exactly take it as permission, but she still moves to drape her body over Quinn's, her kisses gentle against the back of Quinn's neck and shoulders. She kisses each of the scars with such reverence that it brings fresh tears to both their eyes.

"It was a belt buckle," Quinn tells her. "I know they're ugly."

Rachel doesn't even waste a second before she's speaking. "You are so beautiful," she whispers. "So beautiful."

"Rachel," Quinn mumbles, burying her face in a pillow.

"I love you," Rachel tells her, and she's never meant three words so much in her entire life. "I love you, and you are so beautiful. I love you, I love you, I love you."

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When Rachel wakes, half her body is still draped over Quinn's, her warmth both welcome and slightly uncomfortable. Quinn is mostly still lying on her stomach, but she's turned a little towards Rachel.

She's also still naked from the waist up.

The second Rachel acknowledges that, she tenses.

And then relaxes.

The shift in pressure draws a small groan from Quinn, and she shifts slightly. Her brow furrows for a few seconds, her lips purse, and then she settles back into slumber.

Rachel just watches her, trying not to think about how creepy it is to watch her girlfriend sleep. It's just that Quinn is here, and she's breathing, and Rachel hasn't acknowledged how much of a miracle that is until this very moment.

And Rachel gets to have her.

God, if that isn't just Heaven and Earth, she doesn't know what is.

She spends endless minutes watching her girlfriend sleep, and then she deems herself *way* past
creepy, and rolls out of bed, careful not to wake Quinn. She's quiet as she floats around her bedroom, gathering her clothes before she disappears into her bathroom. She takes her time, standing under the shower for long minutes and trying to ease the tension in her muscles and the ache in her chest.

She's not surprised when it doesn't work.

Quinn is still asleep when she gets out, and she's relieved for that. Rachel would sooner sit on Quinn's foot and hold onto her leg than have her going for a run today.

Or, any day, really.

Before Rachel leaves the room, she kisses Quinn's temple and lifts the covers higher. Whether it's for warmth, to protect her modesty or even hide the scars; Rachel doesn't know. "I love you," she whispers, because she can, and then she heads downstairs.

It's not exactly early, but it is the day after Christmas, and she suspects majority of her family is nursing a food coma. She would probably be in one as well, if she didn't feel so sick to her stomach.

She doesn't think it's a feeling that'll go away, but she still drinks a diluted glass of orange juice in an attempt to settle the unrest in her abdomen.

She greets her grandmother with a warm kiss to the cheek, and then goes in search of her father. It's not a surprise to find Hiram in his study, and she practically throws herself onto the couch.

"Good morning, Sweetheart," he says, sounding entirely too cheerful.

Rachel glares at him for a moment, and then sighs. "Hi, Dad," she says. Then: "You're up and about early."

"Quinn and I are usually on our walk right about now," he says, shrugging slightly.

"Yeah, you're going to have to go alone today," she says, her eyes narrowing slightly at the mere thought of Quinn doing any physical exercise. If her girlfriend wants to fight her about it, then she's going to get a really big one.

"Is she asleep?" Hiram asks.

Rachel nods. "I think she's actually really exhausted," she says. And then, because, God, she can't handle all of this herself, she says, "I also think she's been slowly starving herself."

Hiram takes that in with wide eyes. "Lee mentioned something about that," he says quietly. "Would you like one of us to talk to her?"

Rachel just looks at him helplessly. "I don't even know, Dad," she says, sounding helpless. "I just - I don't know what to do and I don't know how I'm supposed to help and she's just so perfect and broken and I don't know."

Hiram isn't sure what to say to her, and her body looks so tense that he suspects she won't be receptive to physical comfort. She hasn't been, really, since the assault. They offer as much as possible, but they've come to accept that she has to reach out for it.

Sometimes, it's a bitter pill to swallow.
Hiram knows it's nothing personal, but he can't help the sting he feels when Rachel flinches or steps away when he gets too close. It's been more than a year now, and it still affects him… because it still affects her.

His failure as a father - to protect her in the first place and comfort her afterward - is never more obvious in those moments.

He's never been more thankful for Emily-Anne. In a family primarily made up of boys, Rachel gravitated towards her in all the best and worst ways. He wouldn't go so far as to call it a dependence, but there was obvious attachment.

It's faded somewhat since the end of the trial and her subsequent switch to Dalton. Now, she has friends in Brittany and Santana and a boy named Kurt she sometimes tells them about.

And Quinn.

She has Quinn, who Hiram is coming to realise is almost as broken as his daughter once was.

Sometimes still is.

"Is there anything you would like us to do?" Hiram ventures to ask when the silence has dragged on for too long.

Growing up, Rachel was never one for long silences. She liked to fill them with the sound of her own voice, which is something that disappeared that fateful day.

Lots of things changed that day.

Too many things.

Rachel takes a deep breath and releases it slowly. "Can - can you just be a dad?" she asks in little more than a whisper. "Just, you know, ask her questions and pay attention to her and all those things that good dads do."

Hiram can't keep the stricken look off his face, and he opens his mouth to -

"Don't," Rachel says. "Don't ask me. Please."

Hiram blinks a few times, and then nods. "Okay."

"Just be a dad."

"I can do that."

Her smile is affectionate when it spreads across her tired features. "Yes, you can," she says. "You're actually rather good at it."

"So I've been told," he says with a playful shrug.

Rachel just sighs. "Did you manage to find out about children's rights?" she asks.

He nods. "Some, yes," he says. "Is that something you'd like me to talk to Quinn about? It would probably do her well to prepare herself, if certain things do happen."

"What do you mean?"
"She's going home, isn't she?"

"She's going to Hartford, yes."

There's the ghost of a smile on Hiram's face. Wherever Quinn lives is not a home. Got it. "If you say that it's her intention to… leave ho - Hartford once she turns eighteen, then this will probably be the last time she'll be there, correct?"

Rachel frowns. "You know when her birthday is?"

Hiram looks momentarily caught off guard. "Umm, yes," he says.

"Did Quinn tell you when it is?"

Hiram frowns. "Um, yes," he says. "Why?"

"She won't tell me," she grumbles. "She's convinced everything is going to change, and get infinitely better on her birthday, and she doesn't want me to…" she trails off.

"Start a countdown?" he finishes with a slight grin.

"I know it's in February," she says with a pout. Then: "you're not going to tell me, are you?"

His grin widens. "And ruin all the fun; I could never."

"Why did she tell you?"

Hiram drops his gaze, the smile slipping off his face. His brow is creased as he contemplates how to go about saying what he needs to. "Sweetheart, I believe Quinn is… very troubled."

Rachel blinks. Well, that's one way to put it. "By?"

"Her mortality."

Rachel just stares at him.

"On one of our walks, we went past the family cemetery," he explains. "She asked me if it were possible for me to have her buried there when she passes."

Rachel's eyes widen to saucers. "What!" She sucks in a breath. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Well, at the time, though I found it slightly odd that she assumed I would be the one burying her, it didn't seem important. There are a lot of things we've talked about on our walks that I haven't discussed with you."

Rachel acknowledges her odd sense of betrayal, but there's so much more her father is actually telling her. "Quinn expects to die before you?"

Hiram audibly swallows. "I thought it was merely something fanciful when she told me what her tombstone might say," he says, frowning. "But, it seems, we have more to worry about."

Rachel isn't sure what to say at first, her heart aching and her stomach churning. She's had her own dark thoughts before, but it just seems as if Quinn is living in them; as if she can't see a world where she doesn't deserve them.

"She has it in her mind that she's going to end up ruining my life the way she believes she ruined
her parents'," Rachel says, wary of bringing up something so personal to Quinn. She's starting to think they're a little beyond that, now. Her father has learned about Quinn in his own way. "Sometimes, it seems as if she doesn't think she's worthy of the life she's been allowed to live, as if her life is owed to someone else."

Hiram gives her a thoughtful look, realising there's a large chunk of the story he's missing. "Is that why she, uh, works so hard?" he asks.

"I think she really just wants her parents to see her," she says. "She's Captain of so many things, a soccer superstar, a shoe-in for Valedictorian, the freaking Head Student, and it's as if she's amounted to nothing in their eyes. I see how much it breaks her, even though she'll never explicitly say it."

Hiram blinks slowly. "She helps you, but you help her too, don't you?"

"We're trying," she says with a single nod, shrugging slightly. Then, smiling crookedly, she asks, "Is it terribly presumptuous of me to declare that she may be the one?"

Hiram grins at her. "Does that mean we can start planning the wedding?"

Rachel laughs. "Hold off for another fifty years or something," she says, which is so far off her original plans for her life, but she's just trying to live.

He pretends to look devastated. "If you're planning on getting married that late, I'm not going to get to meet my grandchildren."

Rachel winks at him. "But I heard you're going to live forever."

He rolls his eyes. "If Quinn has anything to do with it, yes," he says. "She won't let me rest. I'm probably going to have to eat boiled carrots for the rest of my life."

"They're not that bad," she says.

Hiram shoots her a look of utter disbelief. "They really are."

And, all she can do is laugh.

What feels like an hour later, LeRoy walks right into the middle of a teenage girl standoff in the middle of the entrance hall. Rachel is standing with her hands on her hips, and Quinn is glaring right back at her.

They're both not budging.

"Daddy," Rachel suddenly says in relief when she spots him. "Tell Quinn she's not going for a run."

Quinn shoots him a pleading look before he can even formulate a response.

LeRoy knows nothing good can come of this.

"Quinn," Rachel says. "Can you just - please, just please?"

LeRoy isn't even sure what she's asking, but there's a certain desperation in her tone that both he and Quinn cannot ignore.
Of course, then, the blonde gives in.

She sighs dramatically. "Fine," she says, looking like it pains her to agree. "But, I'm going running tomorrow."

"Of course," Rachel says, breathing out in relief. She can barely bring herself to smile. "Now march your cute butt back upstairs and put your pyjamas back on. We're having a movie marathon in the den."

Quinn's eyes widen as they shift from Rachel to LeRoy and then back to Rachel. "Rachel, Lee is right there."

"And, I'm sure he'll agree with my assessment of your derriere."

Quinn groans, palming her forehead in exasperation. She glances at LeRoy, who's doing his best not to laugh. "She's your daughter," she says with a roll of her eyes, and he still can't get over the warmth that truth erupts in his chest all these years later.

Quinn feels awkward and uncomfortable the moment Eric asks her to sit next to him when they're just about to settle down for their first of many movies in the den. Her fingers twitch for a moment, and then she rolls her eyes and collapses halfway on top of Declan instead, which gets a squeal out of the boy.

Eric says nothing, and neither does Rachel.

Quinn remains sandwiched between Declan and Julian for the first movie, before she crawls onto the floor and lies on her stomach next to Rachel. The two of them don't speak to each other, but they do link their fingers under the blanket Rachel insists on having.

At some point, they'll have to talk about it, but that time isn't right now.

"I love you," Rachel whispers over the sound of laughter.

Quinn shifts closer, bumping their shoulders together. "I love you, too."

"I don't think you have a clue just how much."

"Tell me."

Rachel meets her gaze. In a moment, she knows that words will never amount to much with Quinn. She's going to have to show her.

"Does Eric make you uncomfortable?" Rachel asks Quinn later that night when they're wrapped up in Quinn's bed, their bodies fitting together as if they were built for each other.

Quinn tenses for a beat. "I wouldn't call it that," she says, her hand pressed against the small of Rachel's back.

"What would you call it?"

Quinn licks her lips. "I thought you said he knew about us?"

"As far as I'm aware, he does."
"Then, I guess he just confuses me."

"Because he's acting as if you're available?"

"As if I'm even interested." She scoffs. "I'm not even a little bit bisexual. I like girls. I like you."

Rachel sighs. "Levi offered to speak to him."

"No," Quinn says gently. "We're only here for two more days, and I think it's best to keep them as drama-free as possible. It's fine."

Rachel presses a kiss to her throat, inhaling deeply. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

Rachel's never felt so boneless and relaxed. Quinn's arms are safe. For whatever reason, she feels protected in them.

Just, in her presence, really.

"Don't go," is the first thing Rachel says when she hears Quinn moving around in the morning. She knows Quinn is on her way out with her father, but she wants nothing more than to drag her blonde back into bed and just hold her close.

Quinn just lets out a soft chuckle, presses a kiss to Rachel's forehead and then leaves.

Rachel can't bring herself to fall back asleep. Instead, she glares daggers at the phone Quinn deigned to leave behind on her nightstand.

She isn't even going to get started on the inhaler sitting right beside it.

When Rachel sees Quinn get back from her run, she jumps up and rushes to meet her at the front door. After a quick look around, she offers herself up for a sweaty kiss that Quinn willingly accepts.

When they pull apart, Rachel grabs hold of the blonde's hand and leads the way up the stairs to Daniel's room.

Quinn's room.

Their room.

Even though Rachel wants nothing more to devour Quinn - and the blonde knows it - Quinn gently shoves her towards the bed and then proceeds to gather her things for a shower.

Rachel throws herself onto the bed with a pout, and Quinn just laughs.

"I'll be right back," Quinn assures her, and then leaves the room.

Rachel just lies there for a full minute before she grows bored. She casts a look around the room for something with which to occupy herself, and she practically grins like a maniac when her eyes land on Quinn's phone on her nightstand.

"Hah," she declares, reaching for it, and immediately opens her girlfriend's camera. Serves her right
for just leaving it behind. She snaps a few pictures of herself pulling funny faces, before she scrolls through Quinn's camera roll.

She feels a slight twinge of… guilt at going through Quinn's phone, but Quinn willingly gave her the password, so what could she really expect to find? It's not as if she's reading her messages or anything like that.

Most of Quinn's pictures are of, well, Rachel. Then a lot of other students at school, who all seem all too eager to be in one of the Head Student's prized photographs.

When she comes across a picture of the two of them, Rachel pauses to study it closely. It's a selfie that she took, her arms extended in front of her, with Quinn standing behind her, arms wrapped around her waist. Quinn isn't even looking at the camera, but rather at her, and the expression on her face tells Rachel everything she needs to know.

Quinn Fabray is it.

They may both have a myriad of problems to work through, but she wouldn't want to do any of it with anybody else.

Just Quinn.

Only Quinn.

Rachel debates with herself for a few moments, before she decides to set the picture as Quinn's Home Screen only, leaving her Lock Screen as a picture of an extremely detailed bee that she drew.

Quinn's never really talked about the importance of the buzzing animal, but Rachel's waiting patiently.

Rachel is still busy scrolling through pictures when Quinn returns, the blonde merely raising her eyebrows at the sight of her phone in Rachel's hand.

"You have far too many Harry Potter memes," Rachel says in response, and Quinn just laughs as she continues to towel-dry her hair. "Do I have a Potterhead as a girlfriend?"

"That depends," Quinn says, eyeing her carefully. "What would it mean for our relationship if I said yes?"

Rachel sets the phone on the bed and straightens her spine. "Well, it would probably mean we would be able to have in-depth conversations about said literary masterpieces."

Quinn grins at her. "Then, yes, you have a complete Potterhead as a girlfriend."

"As if you could get any sexier."

Quinn instantly flushes, and then chucks her towel at Rachel. "I just showered," she says. "Don't get me all hot and bothered."

Rachel pushes herself up onto her knees and crawls to the end of the bed. "But hot and bothered is exactly how I like you," she murmurs, crooking her finger to get Quinn to move towards her.

As if summoned, Quinn starts walking.

Rachel rises up and slips her arms around Quinn's neck when she's close enough. "You are actually incredibly satisfying to look at," she says. "Like, I could probably stare at you for all of eternity."
Quinn's blush only deepens. "Why just stare when you can touch?" she asks, arching an eyebrow.

"Now, that is a very good question," Rachel muses, before going in for a much-overdue kiss.

Quinn isn't the only one who ends up hot and bothered.

"Hey, Lee," Quinn says. "Got a second?"

LeRoy looks up from the recipe book he's perusing, an automatic smile coming to his face at the sight of the blonde. "I've got more than one for you," he says. "What's up?"

Quinn slips into the chair opposite him at the kitchen table and clasps her fingers together in front of her. "I have a… favour to ask," she says. "For Rachel."

"Well, we both know I would do anything for that girl," he says, giving her his full attention.

"What do you need?"

Quinn nibbles on her bottom lip for a moment. "Well, the long and short of it all is I would like to take her on a date before we leave," she says. "I know going into town is completely out of the question, so my plan is to do it here."

"Here?"

"Well, in the vineyard, actually," she says. "I found some pretty decent spots while I was out running and, if it's not too cold, I think we could have a pretty decent picnic."

"Rachel likes picnics," LeRoy says.

"I know."

He smiles. "Of course," he says. "So, what do you need from me?"

Quinn waits only a beat before she pulls out her phone, opens the Note she's been working on since she had the picnic idea, and then proceeds to fill in LeRoy on her plan.

And, well, the man actually swoons.
Chapter Twenty

Now, Quinn knows she has a stunning girlfriend. It's nothing she hasn't allowed herself to acknowledge before, but the sight of Rachel Berry when she emerges from the house still manages to floor her.

Quinn is standing at the bottom of the steps to the porch, nervously fidgeting with the hem of her shirt and her heart beating a mile a minute when Rachel walks out, suitably bundled up against the cold, but looking more stunning than Quinn has ever seen her.

Quinn's eyes immediately drop to Rachel's legs, clad in warm leggings beneath her deep blue dress that stops just above her knee, and her thick, black coat. Her head is covered by a woollen hat, and she's already flushed. Whether it's from the cold, Quinn doesn't know, but she's ridiculously stunning.

"Hey, Missy," Rachel says, sounding amused; "eyes up top."

Quinn lets out an embarrassed laugh and climbs the few steps to meet her. "Hi," she says, extending a hand. "Are you ready?"

She merely nods, easily slipping her hand into Quinn's and entwining their fingers.

Quinn tugs gently, and then they start walking, Quinn leading the way. She remains silent as they go, mentally counting in her head to see how long it'll take her gorgeous girlfriend to break the silence.

Rachel makes it until forty-seven before she speaks. "Where are we going?"

Quinn just smiles at her, saying nothing.

"Quinn," Rachel whines, pulling on her hand, as if the action will loosen Quinn's tongue. "Quinn, you have to tell me. You have to. I won't survive if you don't."

"Ease up on the dramatics there, Berry," Quinn says with a small laugh. "We're almost there, by the way."

"Almost where?"

When they near the barn, Quinn has them veer to the right, into the vineyard. They walk through the rows, the sound of their crunching footsteps and quiet breathing filling the air between them. Out of all the spots Quinn could choose, she had to pick one relatively close to the barn because she needs the power supply.

"So, I've been thinking," Quinn says, her fingers tightening around Rachel's; "we still don't know all that much about each other." She presses her lips together. "I mean, I know you, but I still don't. Does that make sense?"

Rachel hums. "As in, you know what fuels my nightmares, but you don't know that I played Gretel in my fourth grade production of Hansel and Gretel?"

Quinn chuckles. "Not exactly what I was going for, but, yes, something like that," she says.
"Well, I *was,*" Rachel says. "Gretel, I mean. I was actually rather good at it, if I do say so myself."

"I'm sure you were."

"I actually think my mother recorded it," she says, thinking back. "It was such a stupid little play, and the boy who played Hansel was so - " she stops abruptly at the first sighting of the fairy lights. "Quinn?" she whispers, their pace slowing as they approach the small clearing.

Quinn just watches her face as the lights reflect off her perfect skin and shining eyes. Rachel actually *gasp*es at the complete scene, her eyes eagerly taking in the endless fairy lights draped over the vines and leading up to what looks like something out of a fairytale.

There's a large canvas blanket spread out on the ground, with cushions spread out and several fluffy blankets for warmth folded in the corner. There's a cooler off to the right, there's music playing from somewhere, and there are several space heaters set up.

Rachel turns to look at Quinn, a bright smile on her face, despite her latent disbelief. "Quinn," she says again, and it's both a question and a statement.

Quinn just smiles at her. "Come on, you have to get the full experience."

Rachel allows herself to be led, and then directed to remove her shoes and settle against the cushions. She lies on her back as Quinn floats around, getting them something to drink and removing her own shoes before coming to lie beside her and draping a thick blanket over them.

For the longest time, neither of them says anything, content to look up at the stars in the sky as they exist in each other's presence.

Eventually, Rachel sighs happily, her fingers reaching for Quinn's. "This is quite possibly the closest thing to perfect," she says softly. She smiles when Quinn rolls onto her side and wraps warm arms around her. She likes this side of Quinn; the side that's open and affectionate, not averse to touching and being touched.

Rachel hums in content, her eyes slipping closed. "If I wasn't already hopelessly in love with you, I would be now," she tells her. "Do you think it's possible to fall even more in love with someone?"

Quinn seems to give it some thought. "It has to be," she eventually answers. "It's the only explanation for what I feel every time I look at you."

Rachel literally swoons.

"Your legs help," Quinn comments amusedly, her left hand reaching down and running along the back of Rachel's thigh.

The brunette shivers. "Are my legs your favourite part of my body?"

"I love every part of your body," Quinn says, stilling her hand. She doesn't want to push for anything that may or may not make Rachel uncomfortable, and she really didn't bring them out here so they could fool around. There are much warmer places to do that.

"I love you."

Quinn presses her lips to Rachel's cooling forehead. "Do you know that we've been dating for one month today?"
Rachel's eyes snap open. "What?"

Quinn chuckles. "I kind of forgot too," she admits. "But then I was planning out this entire thing because we're leaving tomorrow, and I was like oh, would you look at that?"

Rachel rests her forehead against Quinn's chin. "It completely slipped my mind," she admits. "It - it feels like so much longer, for some reason."

"I think it's because it's unofficially been more than one month," Quinn suggests. "I'm pretty sure I loved you before we even started dating."

"Me too," Rachel admits. "I reckon we just both gave up fighting our feelings exactly one month ago."

"I prefer that, yeah."

Rachel turns her head to gaze back at the stars. "I want you to know something, Quinn," she says, wanting to say this without looking at the blonde. "When the time comes, and you finally get to be free from all the guilt and pressure and fear, I want to be there with you. I want to be standing right beside you, holding your hand and making sure you know that you did it."

Quinn lets out a long breath. "I want that too, Rachel," she murmurs. "I want everything with you."

"Everything?"

Quinn lifts herself up slightly, propping herself up on one elbow. "Everything," she assures. "The love, the life, the family."

Rachel swallows nervously.

"I know I have a lot to work through, but I'm going to do it," she says. "I - I want this," she says, absently waving her free hand in the air. "I want all of it, Rachel. With you." She waits a beat. "And I'm sorry if that's too intense, or maybe it's too soon, but I can't help - "

Rachel interrupts her spiel by pressing their lips together for a kiss that deepens far too quickly. "Quinn," she says when she pulls away. "I want all of it, too."

"You do?"

Rachel nods, kisses her again, and then sits up. "Now, I also want food, and I assume that cooler holds many, many treasures."

Quinn just chuckles as she lifts herself up and crawls towards her stash. She and LeRoy spent a few hours making some of Rachel's favourite things, and the sight of the brunette's wide, surprised smile is so worth it when Quinn pulls out the container of fajitas.

"I love you," Rachel squeals. "Gimme, gimme."

Quinn dutifully passes it to her, and pulls out everything else. There are soft corn tortillas and extra salsa. There's also some kind of yoghurt-based dressing. There are garlic rolls - Rachel's favourite - which made LeRoy laugh because there's bound to be limited kissing occurring now.

Quinn packed extra mints.

There are chocolate covered strawberries (mainly for Rachel) and freshly-baked cookies with Skittles in them. It's the only indulgence Quinn will allow herself.
Well, besides Rachel, of course.

Rachel abandons their food first.

As much as it pains her, she bypasses the garlic rolls, crawls across the blanket and straddles Quinn's thighs. Her arms slip around a pale neck and bemused, hazel eyes look at her curiously.

"Hello," Quinn says, still nibbling on an overly-sweet cookie.

Rachel takes the cookie out of her hand and chucks it over her shoulder.

"Hey," Quinn complains. "I spent a lot of time on those."

Rachel has a lot of flirty things she could say, but all she wants to do is kiss the slight frown off her girlfriend's face.

So, she does.

The kiss starts slowly as they both settle into it. Quinn's hands come up to slide along Rachel's back, drawing her closer until their bodies are flush against each other. Rachel lets out a soft moan at the contact, and her grip tightens, fingers sliding into Quinn's hair.

As the kiss deepens, tongues tangling and bodies rocking together, Quinn tries and fails to remain sitting upright. Rachel pushes her back against the pillows, and the two of them resettle, Rachel draped over the blonde's body.

"You're missing the stars," Quinn murmurs against Rachel's lips.

"I'm seeing them," Rachel whispers back, dragging her mouth down to a perfect, pale neck. She sucks gently on the skin above Quinn's pulse point. "All I have to do is close my eyes and kiss you, and I'm seeing the brightest stars imaginable."

Quinn tilts her head, absently tugging on Rachel's hair to bring them into another heated kiss. She gasps when Rachel cups her left breast, gently squeezing the flesh.

"Take off your coat," Rachel suddenly says.

"No ways," Quinn immediately says. "It's freezing."

Rachel huffs. "But I want to touch you."

Quinn growls, whether in frustration or arousal, neither girl knows. "I'm not taking off a single layer of clothing, Rach," she says. "We're going to have to wait until we get back to the house."

Rachel sighs, burying her face in the crook of Quinn's neck. "We're sleeping in my room," she says. "It's soundproofed."

Quinn blinks. "It is?"

Rachel nibbles at her skin, enjoying the whimper the blonde lets out. "Yes."

"Why didn't I know that?"

"Didn't come up."
"Why is it soundproofed?"

"My brothers used to complain about my singing," she explains. "I had a very strict practice schedule."

Quinn pulls back slightly. "But you don't anymore?"

Rachel lifts her head to look at Quinn's face. Lying on Quinn is probably her favourite place in the entire world, and she can't imagine what her life would be like without this. "Before, I used to think singing and dancing and getting to Broadway was everything," she says softly. "I dedicated so many hours of my life to practicing, and made endless sacrifices of my time and energy and friends and family. After the assault, it just didn't seem as important to me anymore."

Quinn thinks that over. "Is that why you stopped singing?"

Rachel shifts slightly, resting her head so her ear is pressed over Quinn's beating heart. "Not exactly," she says. "I told you I wasn't in a good place afterwards. With the investigation, the vilifying and the trial; I just didn't feel joy. Singing has always been my companion, you know? My friend when I had none. A constant. And, I didn't want him to take that from me, so I didn't want the one thing I loved doing the most to fall victim to my... lacking."

Quinn isn't sure she fully understands, but she doesn't think it's all that important. Whatever prevented Rachel from singing has been overcome, and now her girlfriend is back on stage and performing and doing what she so obviously loves.

"I don't give it as much time as I used to," Rachel continues. "I think, without it, I learned a lot more about myself. I accomplished other things, and I think it was important for me to discover exactly who I am without my talent. Because, that's all it is. It's a talent. I'm a singer, but it's not all I am, and I think that's an important distinction going forward."

"I think I know more than anyone that anything can happen. One of these days, my talent could be gone, and then what's going to happen to me? Before last year, I probably wouldn't have been able to tell you, but I have a better handle on my goals and desires now."

Quinn quirks an eyebrow. "Desires, huh?"

Rachel giggles softly. "You know I want you all the time, Quinn," she says. "It's actually a problem. I don't know how I'm supposed to survive the next almost two weeks without your pretty face and oh-so-sexy body."

Quinn chuckles. "If you're going to miss my body so much, why are you spending all your time talking?"

Rachel meets her gaze. "You know, Quinn, you really do ask the smartest questions."

Quinn has just enough time to smile smugly before it's being wiped right off her face by a pair of insistent lips.

"Dance with me."

Rachel just stares at her for a moment. "You want to dance?"

"With you, yes," Quinn replies easily as she slowly gets to her feet and stretches. She holds out her hands to help Rachel up, and then she's sliding her arms around the brunette's waist as they both
stand in their socks.

Rachel hesitates for only a beat before her fingers link together behind Quinn's neck. There's a song playing in the background, but Rachel isn't paying attention to anything besides the strength of Quinn's body and the warmth of her breath.

"Just when I thought this night couldn't get any more perfect," Rachel murmurs.

"Hmm?"

She just pulls Quinn closer, her eyes slipping closed as she embraces this moment.

It's unlikely they're going to be able to experience many more in the foreseeable future.

"Take it off," Rachel commands, as soon as she turns the lock on her bedroom door and shoves Quinn towards the bed.

Quinn just smirks at her. "What exactly am I taking off?" she asks, her voice dripping with something sultry.

Rachel has to take a moment to gather herself, shaking her head to clear it. All of it, her mind screams out, but her mouth says, "Start with the coat."

Quinn willingly obliges, and Rachel does the same with her own, dropping it onto the ground and stalking towards Quinn with the intention of devouring her. Rachel practically jumps into Quinn's arms and wraps her legs around the blonde's waist.

"Is it too late for you to come with me to New York?" Rachel asks, already breathless.

Quinn just chuckles, as she turns them and shuffles towards the bed. "Think I can fit in your suitcase?" she asks as she gently sets Rachel down on the duvet, and then climbs over her.

"Are you flexible enough for that?" Rachel questions, shifting until she's lying against her pillows.

Quinn crawls over her, her knees between Rachel's legs and her palms on either side of her head. "Is this the moment we talk about it?" she asks softly.

"Talk about what?"

Quinn meets her eyes. "You wanted me to take off my coat," she says. "Is that all you want me to take off?"

Rachel reaches up to trace the tips of her fingers along Quinn's cheek. "I want to see you," she whispers. "And I want to touch you."

Quinn merely nods, her gaze unwavering. "Am I allowed to see you?"

Rachel nibbles at her bottom lip, before she nods her head.

"Touch?" Quinn questions.

"Gently."

"Always, baby," Quinn assures her, and then slowly nestles herself between Rachel's legs, supports herself on one elbow, and softly kisses her. "Just tell me if it's too much, okay," she instructs as
lightly as she can.

"Like, a safe word?"

Quinn nods. "Sure," she says with a ghost of a smile on her lips. "We can do that. Any ideas?"

Rachel absently plays with Quinn's hair, twirling it between her fingers as she visibly thinks. "What about… cinnamon?"

Quinn raises her eyebrows. "Cinnamon?"

"It's unlikely I'm going to say it while we're making out," she points out. "And, it's what you smell like."

Quinn smiles at her. "You're a little obsessed with how I smell, aren't you?"

Rachel just tugs on a lock of her hair. "You smell really good."

"And you were calling me the vampire the other day," she says with a roll of her eyes.

"I'm not against biting," Rachel says easily, and Quinn lets out a long breath.

"You're dangerous, you know that?"

"I do know that," she says, smiling innocently.

Quinn just shakes her head, thoroughly amused and sufficiently turned on. "Okay," she says; "Cinnamon it is."

Rachel's fingers slide into Quinn's hair, which she's come to find is one of her favourite things to do. "Are you okay with all of this?"

"With what?"

"Just seeing, and just touching?"

Quinn blinks. "As in, am I ready to go that far?"

Rachel nods, biting her bottom lip.

"Baby, you do know I've… gone all the way before, right?"

"I know," Rachel says, still slightly uncomfortable with the idea of Quinn and Tori. "So have I, which doesn't automatically make anything we do something you would be ready for. With me."

Quinn kisses her cheek tenderly, and then rolls off her. She sits cross-legged at her side, and regards her carefully. "I didn't really think about it," she confesses softly, wringing her fingers together. She recognises the movement makes her look uncomfortable, and she stops immediately.

Rachel slowly sits up as well, her eyes on Quinn's face. "We should really talk about it, shouldn't we?"

Quinn chuckles softly, and then sighs. "With Tori, is was experimentation at first," she explains. "I was curious, you know? I wanted to know for sure that I actually liked girls, and she helped with that. There was no… tenderness." She frowns slightly. "We kind of just figured out what the other liked, and that was that. I don't think we ever truly made love, if that makes any sense."
"It does," Rachel assures her. "It actually makes a lot of sense."

Quinn meets her gaze. "Finn?"

"I realised only afterwards that I wasn't actually ready," she says, reminding Quinn of why she really doesn't like that boy. "He didn't push me or anything. Or, he did, and I just didn't realise it." She shakes her head, forcing away the memories. "I know you don't particularly like him, but he is a good guy. The problem is that's what he is: a guy. And a teenager, no less. Sometimes, they're just very… single-minded, as it were. A little self-absorbed."

Quinn bites the inside of her cheek to stop herself from speaking. She really doesn't want to be having a conversation about Finn, right now, but she acknowledges that this is all necessary.

"Not that it excuses his behaviour," Rachel says thoughtfully. "I just think… there are levels, or something, and I've experienced an extreme I wouldn't wish on anybody else."

Quinn nods. "Would - would things be different if I were a boy?" she asks, careful to keep her tone of voice neutral.

Rachel gives herself time to think about it. "I think so," she finally admits. "I can't be sure, because I'm inherently attracted to you, and I think I would still be as into you if you were a boy."

"Why?"

"Is this one of those things where you're wondering why I like you again?" she questions.

"Maybe."

Rachel reaches for one of Quinn's hands. "I told you there's no one reason, Quinn," she says. "Maybe there are many, but those reasons have no bearing on how I feel about you."

"That doesn't make any sense to me," Quinn confesses. "How can you like me without having a reason?"

"Okay," Rachel allows. "Why do you like me?"

Quinn doesn't even hesitate. "Because, when you look at me, all you see is Quinn." She sucks on her teeth for a moment. "You don't see Lucy, and you don't see a Fabray. You don't see Frannie's little sister who couldn't save her. You don't see the girl whose life isn't worth the loss. You don't see an investment to be paraded around when it's convenient and required. No. When you look at me, all you see is Quinn, and that's all I've ever wanted."

Not trusting herself to speak, Rachel just moves into Quinn's lap and holds her. The two of them just sit there, perfectly still, their breathing the only sounds in the room. "Can I tell you what I think?" Rachel murmurs.

"You can tell me anything," Quinn responds, just a quietly.

"Me thinks that no clothes are getting taken off tonight."

Quinn chuckles lightly. "Me thinks you are correct."

After a little manoeuvring, the two of them get settled under the covers, not bothering to change into pyjamas. Quinn holds Rachel close, tucking the brunette's head under her chin.

"Quinn?"
"Hmm?"

"I love you."

Quinn adjusts her hold, tightening slightly. "I love you, too."

"Do we have to leave today?"

Rachel just laughs as Quinn throws herself onto Rachel's bed dramatically, dislodging the brunette's carefully folded clothing.

"Isn't there some way to stop time or something?" Quinn questions.

"If you manage to figure it out, I'm all ears," Rachel says thoughtfully, and then sighs. "You know, if you wanted, I'm sure you could stay a few more days."

Quinn sits up, their gazes meeting. "Rach?"

"You said you have to be in Hartford only for the party on New Year's Eve, right?"

Quinn nods.

"So, you could stay here until then," she says. "You don't have to leave just because I have to. It doesn't work like that, and you know how much they love you."

Quinn just stares at her, trying to determine if she's being serious or not. "Would you really be okay with that?" she asks seriously.

Rachel shifts to stand in front of her. "If you want to stay, and it's not too much of a hassle to change your travel plans; then you should stay, Quinn. I want you to, as jealous as I'll be." At the conflicted look in Quinn's eyes, she places her hands on the blonde's shoulders. "Of my family, I mean," she says. "They'll get to spend time with you while I'm in New York, and I might just turn green with envy."

Quinn shifts to the edge of the bed and slips her arms around Rachel's waist. "Well, green looks good on you."

"I'll be sure to remember that when I'm starring in Wicked," she quips, bending to kiss the tip of Quinn's nose.

Quinn draws her closer, pressing her face into the valley of Rachel's breasts. "I don't want you to go."

Rachel just chuckles. "We'll be back at Dalton before you know it."

"If that's supposed to make me feel better, I'm afraid you've missed the mark, Berry."

Rachel bends once more, this time kissing the top of Quinn's head. "Just say you're going to miss me, and help me finish packing."

"No," Quinn grumbles, tightening her hold.

"Quinn."

"You're not leaving."
"I have to."

"No."

Rachel's fingers thread through Quinn's hair. "The faster I get packed; the more time we get to make out before I have to leave."

At the sound of that, Quinn immediately releases her, drawing a sharp laugh from Rachel.

"You truly are very special, you know that, right?"

Quinn grins at her. "I know."

"Wait, so, you're not leaving?"

Quinn blinks. "Uh, yes," she says. "Is that okay?"

Hiram, Daniel and Emily-Anne just stare at her for a long moment, and then she's being buried in a Holt-Berry hug that has her tensing for a few seconds, before she forces herself to relax.

"Okay, okay," Rachel says as she descends the stairs. "Let's not forget that I'm still leaving. You lot can hug Quinn to death when I'm gone."

Hiram just laughs as he releases Quinn and moves towards his daughter. "Don't be sour now."

Rachel rolls her eyes, and then looks at Daniel. "Dan, you think we could head into town a little earlier? Quinn and I are supposed to meet Noah and his new girlfriend at Proof before my train."

"Am I invited?" Daniel asks, pouting.

Rachel shrugs. "I'm sure Lee will want you to pick up something," she says. "We're just going to meet her, maybe grab a hot chocolate, and then I'm on my way."

"Aw, Sweetheart," Hiram says, pulling her into a hug. "We're going to miss you, you know?"

"No, you won't" she grumbles. "You'll have Quinn, and you won't even think of me."

Quinn chuckles. "Such a drama queen."

Rachel shoots her a look. "At least you've acknowledged I'm royalty."

"Oh, but you're a lot more than that, aren't you, Your Majesty?"

"So."

Rachel turns away from looking over her shoulder at a visibly-tense Quinn and looks at Daniel as he drives them into town. "Yes, Daniel?" she queries, stretching her arm back to offer her hand to Quinn, which the blonde immediately takes, clutching it tightly.

"Aren't you going to lay down the law or something?"

Rachel frowns at her oldest brother. "What do you mean?"

Daniel glances at a rigid Quinn in the backseat, who, he now knows, has to take anxiety medication to help her travel. He wants to make the trip as painless and quick as possible, but he's
not about to start speeding. He suspects that'll make things worse. "You're leaving your girlfriend with us, and you don't have instructions for any of us?" he questions, his tone light. "I don't believe it."

Rachel just stares at him. "Did Em tell you?" she eventually asks.

"No, but you just confirmed it," he says. Then, as if nothing monumental has been revealed, he asks again, "So, no warnings then?"

Rachel takes another moment to gather herself. "No warnings," she confirms. "I trust you guys to treat her well," she says, glancing back at Quinn, who has her eyes tightly closed and her empty fist clenched. Rachel rubs her thumb over the back of the hand she's holding. "If I haven't managed to scare her away yet, I doubt you'll be capable of doing it."

Daniel grins at her. "Is that I challenge I hear?" he questions.

"No, it's def - "

"Because, challenge definitely accepted," he interrupts enthusiastically. "We're going to feed her berries until she pukes, and we're going to tell her all about that time when you were seven and you we - "

Rachel clamps her free hand over his mouth. "You wouldn't dare," she hisses, her eyes wide.

"Oh," he says, shaking his head until she drops her hand. "Is that a warning I hear?"

Rachel grumbles. "I hate you."

"I'm going to miss you too, B," he says, his smile gentling. "I promise we'll take good care of your precious cargo."

"Thank you," Rachel says softly, and she means it for so much more.

"Who are we meeting again?" Daniel asks, draping an arm over Rachel's shoulders as they make the short walk from the car to Proof, one of Wallingford's best bakeries.

"Noah's girlfriend," Rachel tells him, glancing over at Quinn, who still looks a little traumatised. As heartbreaking as it is, Rachel can't stop herself from thinking her girlfriend looks positively adorable. She wants to reach out and comfort her, somehow, but she's not willing to risk it.

"Who is she?" Daniel asks.

"I don't actually know," Rachel admits. "Besides the fact that her name is Jennifer and she works at Proof, he hasn't said much else. He seems to like her a lot, though."

Daniel raises his eyebrows. "Are we sure we're talking about Puckerman?"

Rachel giggles. "It must be serious," she says. "She must be quite something to have him thinking about dating for more than just a weekend."

Daniel rolls his eyes. "I can barely look Natasha in the eye anymore."

Rachel just shakes her head as they reach the door, which he immediately pulls open. Rachel lets Quinn go in first, just because she wants to place her hand at the small of her back.
The blonde smiles at her over her shoulder. "God, it smells so good in here," she murmurs.

"Tell me about it," Rachel echoes, her eyes scanning the room for Noah. She spots him at a table in the corner, sitting opposite a girl who's slightly obscured by his muscular frame. "Over there," she says, gesturing to their collective right.

Quinn looks in that general direction, easily spots the table, and then starts moving towards Noah, a steady smile on her face. She's nothing if not polite, even if she's feeling slightly uncomfortable in public.

Noah must sense their approach, because he turns his head, and slowly rises to his feet. Quinn doesn't quite understand his facial expression - it's a mixture of guilt and concern and a deep apology - until she hears Daniel swear behind her.

"Jeez, B," he grumbles. "You can't just stop walking in the middle of the shop."

Quinn turns around to look at Rachel, who has stopped walking. In fact, she looks frozen in place, suddenly pale, and Quinn knows something is wrong.

Noah moves towards Rachel, his hands held out in front of him in some kind of placating manner. The girl behind him stands silently, observing everything with conflicted eyes.

Quinn can barely pay her any attention beyond the fact that she looks vaguely familiar, because Rachel hasn't moved an inch.

"Rae," Noah says softly. "Rae, you have to - "

Rachel shakes her head, her eyes closing for a few moments. "I don't have to do anything," she hisses, her voice low and dangerous. "How - how could you?"

Quinn's frown deepens, and she automatically moves back to stand at Rachel's left side, just wanting to be closer to her.

Noah looks pained. "I - I didn't mean to," he says, his voice sounding strangled. "It just kind of happened, and then it was too late to - "

"What the hell, man?" Daniel suddenly says, catching on to what the problem is. "Like, what the actual fuck?"

"Dan, please," Noah says.

"No!" Daniel snaps, stepping forward to shield Rachel, who seems to have shut down. "It's one thing to - " he stops, still in disbelief. "But to actually ask Rachel to meet her? In public, no less? Are you fucking psychotic?"

Quinn is very confused, but she can read enough about the situation to know that Noah's girlfriend's identity is not going down well with either Daniel or Rachel, and Rachel needs her.

Quinn steps as close as she can without actually touching her, leaving the option of making contact to Rachel.

Which the brunette takes with minimal hesitation. She wraps her arms around Quinn's shoulders and buries her face in the crook of Quinn's neck. She's gasping for breath, fighting to stay in control, and Quinn feels her rage at Noah increase tenfold.

"Rachel," Noah tries again. "I don't know what I'm supposed to say. She's not like the rest of - "
"Don't you dare finish that sentence," Daniel interrupts hotly. Quinn has never seen him look so livid. He's even turning red, which is an amazing sight on his brown skin. "You were there," he forces out. "You heard them. She sat right there behind him, defending him, calling Rachel all sorts of..." he trails off because, honest to God, he actually can't believe this. "How dare you even think to stand there and defend her? In front of Rachel?"

Noah looks helpless.

Quinn decides to speak. "Daniel," she calls gently. "What's happening right now?"

Daniel looks at her, his eyes refusing to take in the trembling form of his sister. He's bound to lose it completely, if he does. "That's Jenny Prescott," he says. "Justin's little sister."

Quinn takes a moment to process just what that means and, the second she does, the entire shift in her demeanour is evident for everyone to see.

Noah actually takes a step back, suddenly wary, and Daniel's eyes widen as Quinn's eyes harden and the rage and protectiveness practically roll off her in waves.

"Daniel," Quinn says, her tone brokering no argument. "Take Rachel to the car."

"What?"

Quinn's eyes narrow. "Take her to the car. She needs to get out of here, and I would really prefer it if she didn't hear the words I'm about to say."

Daniel waits another beat, before he gets moving. He has to pry Rachel off Quinn, and then they stumble out of the shop, Daniel glancing back once before disappearing.

"Rachel," Noah starts, trying to follow, only to have Quinn step in front of him, her glare so pronounced that it would probably incinerate him if it were a physical entity.

"Get out of the way," he says, suddenly irritated. "This has nothing to do with you, Quinn." He tries to sidestep her.

She doesn't let him past. "Actually, it does," she says, which gives him pause.

It takes him another moment to click, and then his features turn curious. "Really?"

Quinn steps into his space. "Tell me something, Noah," she says, her tone icy cold. "At what point in the last, I don't know, few weeks did you first think it was a good idea not to tell your best friend you're fucking her rapist's kid sister?"

Noah flinches at her tone, and blinks at the words. "I didn't know how to - "

"No," she says, shaking her head. "That's not an answer to the question I asked. I want to know exactly when you realised, hey, I definitely can't tell Rachel about this because, God, she's probably going to freak out and I'm probably the worst best friend in the world right now."

Noah clenches his jaw. "Out of everyone, you should be the one to understand," he says.

She raises a curious eyebrow. "Oh? How so?"

"I imagine your friends and family aren't too happy with your choices either?"

Quinn's eyes narrow, but she's just able to suppress her flinch. Her latent fear has roared to life, and
there are quite a few people in this shop.

Still, this is about Rachel.

"You're right," Quinn allows, and Noah sighs in relief. "I understand completely, Noah. I understand that, when they do find out, I'm going to lose them all."

Noah's face falls.

"I understand that this is too much for them to accept, and that I'll no longer be welcome," she says. "I understand that fully, and it's a relief to know you do, too, because I would hate to have to point out that you're essentially choosing this… relationship over Rachel and, frankly, I think it'd be the worst choice imaginable."

"Quinn," he whispers.

"I don't know what's going through your fucking mind, but I sincerely hope you're suffering some kind of brain injury right now, because even you can't be so stupid as to have Rachel meet your girlfriend like this." She forces herself to take a deep breath. "God, what the fuck is wrong with you?"

"I wasn't - I don't - " he tries to defend.

Quinn just raises a hand to keep him silent. "Sort your shit out," she says. "Determine who's worth it, and try to figure out if you're willing to put Rachel through any more loss." She shakes her head, and then looks past him at the girl whose presence is causing all this mess.

She looks contrite, but there's a certain challenge burning in her eyes that Quinn positively hates. Now, Quinn sees why she was so familiar. It's the look she saw in Jackson's eyes.

To anyone else, the girl looks so harmless, but the blonde knows better. "Tell your brother to stay the fuck away from me," she says clearly. "He comes near me or Rachel or any of her family again, he'll find out exactly who my father is. Do I make myself clear?" She doesn't even wait for a response, as her attention shifts back to Noah. "Seriously," she says, suddenly exasperated. "Just, seriously, like, what the fuck?"

And then she turns and walks out.

Seriously.

"Should we take her home?"

Quinn ignores Daniel in favour of smoothing her hand over Rachel's hair. "Rach," she whispers, trying to coax her out of the… catatonic state she seems to have gone into. "Rachel, please look at me."

It takes a while, but Rachel eventually lifts her gaze to meet Quinn's hazel eyes.

"Hi," Quinn breathes, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear.

"Hi," Rachel whispers back.

"What do you need?"

"Just a moment."
"Okay." Quinn reaches for her hand and squeezes her fingers, and then looks at Daniel. "You can take us to the train station so long," she says.

He hesitates. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," Quinn assures him. "It's okay. Just drive."

Daniel merely nods, and then backs out of the space. He keeps an eye on them through the rearview mirror, and his heart both swells and breaks when he sees Quinn pull Rachel into her arms and begin to whisper quiet words into her ear.

It hurts because he knows he wouldn't have been able to help in this situation. Quinn seems to know exactly what to say and do, and he's trying not to think about how or why that could be. He doesn't think he could handle knowing Quinn has also gone through some kind of trauma.

Whatever Quinn says to her must work because, by the time Daniel is pulling into the parking lot at the station, Rachel is good to go. Her eyes are clearer, and she isn't shaking anymore. If Daniel hadn't seen her twenty minutes ago, he wouldn't believe anything was amiss.

Quinn is some kind of miracle worker, surely.

She's something.

If he's being honest with himself, the blonde girl scares him a little. She has this intensity to her to which he's not used, and he's unsure how to handle it or her.

With her attention so focused on Rachel, Quinn barely acknowledged they were in a car, and all three are immensely relieved by that.

When they unload the car, Daniel drags Rachel's suitcase along, and Quinn shoulders her backpack, allowing the brunette a few moments to compose herself.

They find her platform easily, and Quinn gives brother and sister a moment to say their farewells.

"Rach?"

"Hmm?"

"Can I just tell you that I'm very frightened of your girlfriend?"

Rachel laughs lightly, pulling him into a hug. "I'm glad to hear that."

"She's terrifying."

"Good," she says. "Don't mess with her."

"Oh, I won't, believe me."

She squeezes him tightly for a moment, and then releases him. "Thank you," she says.

"For what?"

"Being you."

"I don't know how to be anyone else."
She reaches up and kisses his cheek. "Go put my luggage on the train," she instructs gently. "I need to say goodbye to a certain blonde."

He smiles knowingly. "You know, you should probably think about putting a ring on it as soon as possible."

Rachel rolls her eyes. "You really are Hiram's son, aren't you?"

Daniel laughs out loud. "Indeed, I am."

"Come with me."

Quinn just manages to hide her amused expression as Rachel tugs on her hand and leads her into the women's bathroom. Mercifully, it's empty, and the two of them spend an obscenely long time not talking.

Rachel pushes Quinn up against the main door and kisses her for all she's worth, trying her best to remember everything about this moment: the smell, the feel, the taste.

Everything Quinn.

When she pulls away, her lips are swollen and her pupils are dilated.

"Why are you so God damn sexy?" Quinn murmurs, stealing a few more kisses.

"Are you going to be okay?" she asks softly, moaning when Quinn nips at the skin of her neck. "Tell me if you need me to stay, because I will."

"Your mother is expecting you," Quinn reminds her, sucking on her pulse point. "She's been waiting for you all Break. You have to go."

"I know," Rachel breathes, tilting her head back to give Quinn more access. "It doesn't mean I have to like it… Oh, Quinn."

Quinn's smile spreads across her skin. "I love you," she whispers.

"I love you, too."

"You have to go."

"I have to go."

"I have to let you go."

"You have to let me go."

Quinn kisses her mouth again, deepening it immediately. It's enough to leave them both breathless and wanting, and Rachel is suitably flushed and a lot aroused when she finally gets onto the train.

Quinn and Daniel stand on the platform and watch her leave, both of them waving until they can't see her chestnut eyes anymore. Even then, the two of them wait until the train is completely out of sight.

"She's going to be okay, right?" Daniel asks as they start back towards the car.
"Of course," Quinn replies easily.

"How can you be so sure?"

Quinn glances at him. "She's Rachel Berry," she says. "How can you not be?"

When Daniel and Quinn get back to the house, Daniel is the one to explain to LeRoy, Hiram and Emily-Anne that Noah's new girlfriend is Jenny Prescott, which draws gasps and shocked expressions from all three of them.

"And he wanted Rachel to meet her?" LeRoy fumes. "Is he crazy?"

"I hope you gave him a piece of your mind," Hiram says, his eyes on Daniel.

Daniel cocks his head to the side. "Actually," he says; "you should probably be talking to Quinn about that. She's fucking scary."

The blonde rolls her eyes. "Only boys are scared of me."

Daniel pouts. "You're mean to me."

"You threatened to feed me berries until I puke," she counters.

"You heard that, huh?"

"I was mid-anxiety attack," she says, entirely too casually for any of their liking, though she doesn't seem to notice. "It doesn't render me deaf."

It's later, after Rachel is safely on her flight from New Haven to New York that Hiram finds Quinn sitting in the kitchen with Declan and Julian, the three of them playing Monopoly.

From the looks of things, she doesn't seem that interested, and it's pretty easy for him to end their game by suggesting the boys go and bug Eric and the PlayStation.

Quinn doesn't move. She just looks expectantly at him, a part of her knowing he's really here for her. She has only two more days in New Haven County, and then it's off to Hartford, where she's going to be the best actress she's ever been.

"We should probably talk, shouldn't we?" Hiram says, sounding thoughtful.

Quinn bites her bottom lip. "Probably," she agrees.

"There are a few things I would like to discuss with you," he tells her. "Would you be comfortable talking in my office?" He asks the question carefully, because she always seems to get uneasy whenever they're alone behind a closed door.

Quinn regards him carefully. "Is it going to be one of those conversations?" she asks.

"I'm afraid so."

She sighs in resignation. "Lead the way."
"Is it just awfully clingy of me to say I miss you?"

Quinn chuckles to herself as she makes her way down the stairs with the intention of grabbing an apple from the kitchen. "I think we're way past that, Rachel," Quinn says into the phone. "Also, I'm pretty sure you just arrived."

"Two hours ago," Rachel points out unnecessarily.

Quinn can't contain her amusement. "Wow, you have a problem."

"Are you saying you don't miss me?"

"I don't recall those words leaving my mouth."

"Well, I don't recall the opposite leaving your mouth either."

"You're a demanding little thing, aren't you?"

Rachel gasps. "Did you just refer to me as a thing?" she asks.

"A little one," Quinn quips.

"Why, I never, Quinn Fabray."

Quinn just laughs again as she reaches for a green apple in the fruit bowl. She shuffles over to the sink and rinses it before taking a dainty bite. "How's your mother?" she asks.

Rachel sighs. "She's... good," she says.

"Please don't tell me you're already fighting."

"I left Wallingford fighting with her already, Quinn," she says primly. "This isn't anything new."

Quinn thinks she should be well-versed in dealing with unwilling parents, but she's never actually fought with either of her own parents. They just say things to her, and she accepts it.

Compliant and obedient, that Quinn Fabray.

The perfect daughter, really.

It's sickening.

Rachel's relationship with her mother is very different, and Quinn won't even pretend to understand it. She's just going to be a good girlfriend and act as a sounding board whenever Rachel feels the need to vent.

Which, Quinn has come to realise, is quite often.

Quinn prefers a fired up Rachel Berry anyway. From what she's learned over the past few months, this is more like the girl she used to be before, and Quinn wants to do everything she can to coax
the truest version of her girlfriend back into existence.

"Tell me something," Quinn says. "Is it colder there than it is here?"

"Definitely!" Rachel says. "It's freezing. I'm practically frozen."

"So, what you're really saying is you're at your normal temperature?"

Rachel laughs out loud. "You do miss me, don't you?"

Quinn doesn't reply the way she wants to, because Eric chooses that moment to enter the kitchen. His smile widens the second he spots her, and Quinn feigns chewing. She points at her phone, to prove a point, but he just hovers, and Quinn sighs internally.

"I do," Quinn eventually says into the phone. "More than you could ever know."

"I think I have an idea."

"Doubtful," Quinn drawls, turning away from Eric and leaning her hip on the counter. "But, seeing as I refuse to engage in this debate that I'll undoubtedly win, why don't you tell me just what you talked to your father about, in regards to my… situation?"

Rachel is quiet for the longest time. "You're right," she eventually says. "You would definitely win the debate, hands down."

"Rachel."

"I love you."

Quinn rolls her eyes, letting out an exasperated sigh. "You're lucky you're so many miles away," she warns playfully. "Though, I could get it out of you, if I really put my mind - and body - to it."

"Oh, I have no doubt about that," Rachel murmurs, and Quinn flushes. Then: "Did he talk to you?"

"We talked, yes," she says, still very aware of Eric waiting on her. She sighs. "Can we talk about it later?" she says. "There's kind of something I need to do."

"Oh?" Rachel sounds, slightly surprised. "Is everything okay?"

"I think so," Quinn says.

"Quinn?"

"It's fine," she says. "I'll call you back in a little while, okay?"

"Okay," she relents, not sounding happy about it at all. "I love you, Fabray."

"Me too, Berry," she whispers, and then hangs up before Rachel can ask her why she wouldn't say the actual words back to her.

*God,* Eric.

Quinn pockets her phone as she turns around, suddenly all too aware of the triumphant smile on Eric's face, as if he realises she shortened her call with Rachel for him. She groans internally, and mentally surveys her options.
In her mind, she's filed him away as 'Relatively Harmless,' because it's impossible to imagine anyone in this family intentionally harming anyone. Based on what she's learned from Rachel, she thinks Eric harbours an unhealthy amount of jealousy towards her, and Quinn realises she's now been lumped in with all of that.

She was aware of his… attraction to her when she was here for Thanksgiving - he's not very subtle - but it's different this time.

This time, she's dating his sister and, this time, he knows she's unavailable.

Quinn clears her throat. "Is there something you need, Eric?" she asks indifferently, biting into her nearly-abandoned apple.

Eric steps forward, and Quinn tenses. "I was wondering if you'd like to take a walk with me," he says, smiling indulgently.

Quinn looks over her shoulder at the darkening sky. "Isn't it a little late?" she questions before her brain can catch up with her mouth. *That wasn't a rejection, Fabray.*

"If I recall correctly, you've been out later than this," he points out. "By yourself, no less."

Quinn definitely can't argue with that, and she's not going to. Instead, she says, "I'd prefer not to."

For a moment, he looks surprised she would refuse. And then he smiles, seemingly ready to try to convince her.

Quinn raises a preemptive hand to stop him. "I'm not interested, Eric," she says, and there's a finality to her tone that he seems to miss.

"It's just a walk, Quinn."

"Maybe it is," she allows, because she doesn't want to be the girl who assumes; "but I'd prefer not to. Thank you for the offer, though." And, with that, she makes her escape with her stupid, unfinished apple.

As she heads back up the stairs, she contemplates telling Rachel about this. She hopes tonight is enough to get Eric to stop, so she rather sends a different text to her girlfriend.

*Quinn: I REALLY MISS YOU.*

**Rachel: Whoa. There's no need to shout.**

*Quinn: Skype before bed?*

**Rachel: It's a date.**

Rachel actually startles at the sound of the knock at her door, which makes her giggle softly. Her cheeks are still flushed from her conversation with Quinn - which was really just the two of them trying to outdo each other with innuendo - and her mother gives her a curious look when she pops her head into Rachel's bedroom.

"Are you decent?" Shelby asks.

Rachel just rolls her eyes as she shifts her laptop off her lap and sets it at her side. "Always am," she says, trying to hold onto her good mood. She doesn't want to be angry with her mother, but she
can't help it sometimes.

They're too… similar for their own good, and it manifests in a very volatile relationship.

Shelby moves further into the room and settles herself on the edge of Rachel's bed. She runs her palms along the tops of her thighs. She's never been nervous or unsure in her daughter's presence, but they just can't seem to talk to each other.

Shelby clears her throat. "How is Quinn?" she asks gently, knowingly.

The smile that blooms across Rachel's face is breathtaking, and all Shelby can do is stare at her in absolute wonder. "She's good," Rachel says, suddenly breathless. "She's actually really good."

Shelby's never seen her daughter like this. Before she moved to Connecticut, there were a few crushes here and there, both girls and boys, but nothing serious until Dominic Rice, but Shelby tries not to think about him.

There was Finn, as well, who put stars in Rachel's eyes for entirely different reasons. She saw a leading man, something of a protector, but he failed her countless times.

Then he failed her in the biggest way, and Shelby burns whenever she thinks that her daughter actually considered getting back together with him following the aftermath of the assault. Shelby's glad Rachel came to her senses, and she imagines the current person in Rachel's life had a little something to do with it.

Or, a lot something.

Because, the way Rachel talks about Quinn is transcendent. The look on her face is everything Shelby has ever wanted for her, and she worries that it's so tied to another human being.

Something she won't be able to control; something with the potential to hurt her in the worst ways.

Hasn't she been hurt enough?

By people who are supposed to care about her; people who are meant to love her. Her supposed friends, and even her family.

Particularly Shelby.

Shelby closes her eyes when the thought crosses her mind, her heart aching in her chest.

"Mom?" Rachel questions, noting the slightly pained expression on her mother's face during a retelling of a story about Quinn and her particularly-hilarious dislike for berries. "Are you okay?"

Shelby shakes her head to clear it. "I just missed you, is all," she says and, before Rachel can stumble through trying to avoid returning the sentiment - she's always been a lousy liar - Shelby keeps speaking. "Does she treat you well?"

Rachel, for her part, frowns at her mother's strangeness. It's nothing new, but there's something oddly melancholy about her tonight. "She does," Rachel says, choosing not to mention the single ugliest fight the two of them have had to date. "Well, she tries," she relents. "We're both trying," she adds a moment later because Rachel isn't blameless. They're both works in progress, each of them having to deal with a myriad of issues, both separately and together.

"But she makes you happy?"
As if on cue, Rachel's smile blossoms once more. "I've never known a happiness like this," she says, and her voice turns wistful. "Mom?"

"Hmm?"

"Next time we Skype, would you like to meet her?" she asks, extending an olive branch.

Shelby smiles timidly. "I'd really like that," she says.

Rachel attempts to smile, but her mother's mood is throwing her off. "Is everything okay, Mom?" she asks, finding that she's willing to do anything to wipe that… lost look off her mother's face.

Shelby breathes in slowly. "I just missed you," she says, and she means it. "I feel as if I barely see you, and I know that's nobody's fault, but I just… miss you."

Rachel reaches for her closest hand and gives it a reassuring squeeze. "You know, in less than, umm, seven months, I'll be in New York permanently, and you'll see me all the time. You'll end up sick of me."

Shelby laughs softly. "Impossible."

Rachel grins at her. "Challenge accepted."

Quinn manages to avoid being alone with Eric at all costs. When she's not with Daniel or Emily-Anne, she's with Declan or Julian. More often than not, she's with both boys. The two youngest Holt cousins have really taken to her, and living in the same house has helped strengthen their growing bond.

When Quinn isn't with any of them, though, she's with Kelsey. They've worked hard to put together a suitable portfolio and, while Quinn is still somewhat apprehensive about the direction she intends to take regarding her tertiary education, she's not willing to rule out anything.

Law is still on the cards.

So is Medicine, if she's being entirely honest. Doctors couldn't save her sister, and she sometimes wonders if she might have been able to… help, just in a different way to the one she obviously failed at.

"Do you do any writing?" Kelsey asks her the afternoon before she's scheduled to leave for Hartford. They're up in Daniel's room, Kelsey sprawled across the bed as Quinn finishes up with the last of her packing.

"Hmm?"

Kelsey shifts into a sitting position. "Writing? Do you write?"

Quinn blinks. "Like… stories?"

"Anything."

Quinn bites her bottom lip for a moment, and then reaches into her bag to pull out an A5 notebook. "I journal," she confesses quietly. "Well, between all my little doodles, I write about my days. It's nothing exciting, but it's helped me deal with… stuff."

Kelsey regards her carefully. "You've had a lot of… stuff to deal with, haven't you?"
Quinn shrugs. "I still do."

"Can I tell you something?"

Quinn stops all her fidgeting and gives Kelsey her full attention.

For a moment, Kelsey falters under the intensity of the other girl's gaze, suddenly realising what everyone else has been talking about. Being Quinn's sole focus is overwhelming, and she absently wonders if every person this girl meets is doomed to fall in love with her in some way.

"My family hates that I'm dating a black guy," Kelsey says. "I mean, they're too polite to say anything to Levi's face, but he knows. It's why I can't take him home with me, and why I come here for all the major holidays. We'd probably switch it up, visiting each other's homes, if we wanted, but I don't. I won't subject him to their backhanded comments and thinly-veiled tolerance, and I won't spend time with them without him." She sighs, suddenly unsure why she's unloading all of this on Quinn.

For some reason, she suspects the other girl just understands.

"My family doesn't know I'm gay," Quinn confesses, surprising them both "I don't think I'll ever be able to tell them."

"We're going to get married, you know?" Kelsey says, trying not to make a spectacle of Quinn's confession. "The idiot has it all planned out. He has no qualms about such things. He doesn't even care that my family might not approve. They're nothing like this one, because I'm certain nobody even bat an eye when Daniel announced his intention to marry Em.

"So, Levi's got this whole plan for us. He's going to graduate, pass the Bar, and then take Chicago Law by storm." She rolls her eyes. "He wants to support my passion, he says. The way the people in this family love... it's overwhelming. It's everything and nothing, and I think we're both pretty lucky."

Quinn smiles knowingly. She hasn't really been able to talk to anyone about any of this, and even she couldn't have predicted it would be Kelsey she would be confiding in. "I tried, you know," she says. "I tried not to give in. I wanted to be older and away from my family when I came out, and it was never my intention to get into an actual relationship while in high school. But Rachel didn't really give me a choice in the matter. She just... happened."

Kelsey chuckles softly. "She'll do that to you."

Quinn tilts her head to the side. "You don't find it weird?"

"What?"

"Discussing homosexuality?"

"Not at all," Kelsey says. "I'm an artist, Quinn. I'm open to everything. I have so many gay friends; I'm pretty sure I'm the odd one out. I had to come out as straight to them, I swear."

Quinn laughs, the corners of her eyes crinkling. "I don't get to talk to anyone other than Rachel about this," she says, sobering at the sound of her own admission. "I'm... terrified all the time, Kelsey." Her voice trembles, and she mentally scolds herself for her weakness. "I don't - I don't know what they'll do if they ever find out. And, not just to me."

Without giving it much thought, Kelsey rises to her feet and draws the younger girl into a hug. It's
awkward at first because Quinn stiffens at the contact, but then she slowly relaxes and accepts the foreign comfort.

Kelsey releases her first, realising she might be pushing the girl to her limit. "Listen to me, Quinn," she says, placing her hands on the slightly shorter girl's shoulders. "Whatever happens, just remember that you have us, okay? The boys can be idiots, and the family can be a bit much, but they love with everything they have, and you're now one of us. Got it?"

Quinn nods.

"Good," Kelsey says, and then releases her fully, retreating to her position on the bed once more. "Now, tell me, what kind of stuff do you write?"

"You know, you're going to have to keep walking when I'm gone," Quinn says, smiling affectionately across the desk at Hiram. "I'll call you every single day if I have to. It's important you keep it up, okay? And, maybe, when I next come back, we'll be able to jog together."

Hiram laughs a little too loudly, unsure whether she's being serious or not, but he soars when he realises she is. He casts a nervous look around his study, looking for anything to help him get out of this.

When he finds nothing, he sighs and says, "Oh, well, I think that's asking for a little too much, don't you think?"

Quinn straightens. "Not at all," she says. "If I never have to hear Rachel's voice telling me something's happened to you ever again, I'll take it. You didn't hear her, Hiram. That sadness and utter devastation. So, no, I don't think I'm asking for much at all. Your daughter expects you to live forever, and I'm going to do everything I can to make sure it happens. I won't stand idly by and watch as she loses you."

Hiram swallows audibly, feeling the intensity of Quinn's declaration. There isn't an inch of amusement in her tone, and it's nothing like when Rachel says it.

No, right now, there isn't even a hint that the Universe could even attempt to thwart her. She's determined.

"I'll try," Hiram finally says.

"That's not good enough." Quinn says flatly.

Hiram shifts in his seat. "I'll make sure, Quinn," he says. "I'll follow all my doctor's orders, and I'll keep up with the exercises. I want to be here for as long as this world will have me, believe me."

Quinn merely nods.

Hiram risks a smile. "You know, I'm actually going to miss you," he confesses. "I know, in the grand scheme of things, we haven't really spent all that much time together, but you already feel like a part of the family."

Quinn smiles indulgently, allowing herself to enjoy this moment. "I don't really know much about family or belonging," she admits; "but I've never felt more… right, anywhere else before."

"You'll always have a home here," he says. "Please, please never forget that."
Quinn tilts her head to the side. "I might have to take you up on that offer in the not too distant future."

"I assume you remember everything we talked about?"

"Yes, Sir."

Hiram sighs. "I sincerely hope it doesn't come to… that, but we're trying to be realistic here," he says sadly. "Be careful while you're up there, okay? Call every day, and make sure you eat all your vegetables."

Quinn laughs softly, and then grows serious. "Thank you, Hiram."

"For what?"

"Everything."

He shakes his head in amusement. "Well, in that case, you're very welcome."

"So, how are you feeling about going back to Hartford?"

Quinn responds by holding up an orange bottle of pills and rolling her eyes at the screen of her laptop. "I really wish I could Apparate."

Rachel hums in agreement. "Gosh, that would make life so much easier," she says. "Though, I imagine the sensation of being pulled through a tiny tube from your navel can't be all that pleasant."

"At least it's over quickly," Quinn says, leaning forward and sighing. "I have like five hundred hours of travel ahead of me."

"I think you're proving, with every single day, that you're even more of a drama queen than I am."

"Shut up."

"I love you."

Quinn sighs softly, a smile on her face. "I love you, too."

Rachel stares at her for the longest time, taking in the lines of her face and tired eyes. "You're not getting much sleep, are you?"

Quinn runs a hand over her hair, smoothing it down unnecessarily. "I miss you," she says. "I don't like sleeping without you, and I'm stressing out about seeing my parents for what could possibly be the last time, ever."

Rachel realises Quinn is saying a lot of things with those words, but she isn't sure how to respond. "It's going to be okay, you know," she eventually says. "I know my Dad has you… doing things, but you know you can call me whenever you want… if you want to talk, or if you want to vent. Just, call me, any time."

Quinn arches an eyebrow. "Wow," she murmurs. "You really miss me, don't you?"

"I do!" Rachel suddenly bursts out, and Quinn laughs in response. "I really miss you, Quinn. Like, I want to crawl through this screen right now and settle myself in your lap and lick the length of your
she stops suddenly when there's a knock at the door, her eyes widening in alarm at the direction her sentence was going.

Quinn laughs out loud at the alarmed look on her face.

Rachel just scowls at her, and then calls out, "Come in."

Quinn holds her breath as she watches Rachel talk to someone who must be Shelby. Rachel looks more… settled, even upbeat, about her mother, and Quinn is surprised by how relieved she actually feels to know that truth. For whatever reason, she wants Rachel to have good relationships with all her parents.

She has three that love her wholeheartedly, and Quinn has… none.

Rachel glances hesitantly at Quinn, asking a silent question.

Quinn merely nods.

She's ready, even if she's not.

Rachel's smile grows, and she reaches out for Shelby. "Mom," she says, "I'd like you to meet my girlfriend, Quinn Fabray."

Despite herself, Quinn finds herself sitting up straighter and blushing slightly. She's never actually met a boyfriend or girlfriend's parents, and her heart rate spikes as soon as Shelby moves into view, dropping down onto the bed with Rachel and smiling entirely too knowingly.

"Hello, Quinn," the woman says, and Quinn is struck by how similar the mother and daughter actually look. The woman is practically Rachel, maybe a little paler, and just aged up. "I'm Shelby. It's nice to meet you, finally."

Quinn recovers enough to return her smile. "Likewise," she says politely, her manners rising to the surface as if muscle memory.

It's awkward for a moment as the three of them just sit there looking at one another, and Quinn feels the hairs on her neck stand on end. It's obvious Shelby is… scrutinising her, trying to decide if she lives up to everything Rachel may or may not have told her mother about her girlfriend.

Eventually, Shelby turns to look at Rachel. "You didn't tell me she was so pretty," she says, not bothering to whisper, and Quinn realises she must have passed the first test.


Quinn's smile spreads into a shit-eating grin, and Rachel groans at the sight of it.

"Look what you've done now," Rachel mutters. "Her ego can't handle it, Mom. She's going to be insufferable."

The light banter eases some of the awkwardness, and they're able to have a decent, if not brief, conversation about school and their respective plans for New Year's Eve.

Eventually, Shelby excuses herself, polite with her farewell, and then it's just the teenagers left to analyse the first meeting of girlfriend and mother.

"Well," Quinn prompts.
"It didn't go… terribly," Rachel eventually concedes, smiling in both relief and disbelief. "I actually think she likes you."

Quinn offers her an amused smile. "How do you figure that?"

Rachel shrugs. "I just know."

Quinn rolls her eyes. "Right."

Rachel regards her carefully. "I think it's to do with the fact that the first thing she did is compliment you," she explains. "She doesn't do that. Ever. I dated this girl the summer before sophomore year, and she definitely didn't like her. At all. She's never been afraid to let them know her true thoughts, regardless of my feelings for them."

Quinn, admittedly, is unsettled by the new revelation of one of Rachel's previous relationships. While they've talked briefly about Sam and Tori, and about Finn; Quinn knows very little about Rachel's relationship history.

Quinn swallows. "Is - is that something we're going to talk about?" she asks, slightly irritated with how small her voice sounds.

Rachel smiles warmly, gentle and understanding. "We're going to talk about everything, Quinn," she says with a nod. "Everything, in time, I promise."

Quinn, so very irrationally, reaches out to touch her laptop's screen, and then shakes her head at herself. "It's really pathetic how much I miss you," she says sadly. "Don't you want to come to Hartford with me?"

They burst out laughing at the same time because, no, just no.

"God, can you even imagine?" Quinn says, wiping at her eyes with her left hand. "That would be a fucking shit-show."

Rachel's laughter eventually tapers off. "I would get to kiss you at midnight."

"You would."

"It'd be magical."

"Definitely."

They stare at each other for the longest time, neither of them feeling the need to fill the silence with unnecessary words. It's something that's changed about Rachel in the months since, since. It's not exactly something she hates about herself. She finds that she appreciates the fact that she's now… tempered.

Silver linings and all that.

"Lee said he's making your favourite meal for your last night," Rachel eventually says, and then frowns. "I'm still not sure how I feel about the fact I didn't know what your favourite food was until I spoke to him."

Quinn licks her lips. "There are still things we have to learn about each other," she says. "That's the fun part."

"But you know my favourite food," Rachel points out with a slight pout.
"I think the entire state knows how much you love poutine," Quinn teases. "If your resulting moans are anything to go by."

Rachel's expression is indignant. "I resent that."

Quinn ignores her. "You're also a fan of the garlic roll."

Rachel smiles dreamily. "The garlic roll does make me happy."

Quinn grins at her.

"But you make me so much happier," Rachel says, sighing. "Just so you know, when I finally see you; I am definitely going to have my dirty, dirty way with you."

Quinn visibly straightens. "Why are you making this so much harder than it has to be?"

Rachel's shoulders sag. "We're both just so pathetic, aren't we?"

Again, they just stare at each other, both of them silently acknowledging the end of this conversation. Quinn is expected at dinner, and Rachel has a movie marathon scheduled with her mother.

"I love you," Rachel says, because those are the most important three words.

"I love you too, Rach, and I - "

This time, **she's** the one who's interrupted by a knock on the door. She sighs heavily, glancing at the time and realising it's probably someone coming to get her for dinner. She quickly bids Rachel farewell when the door suddenly opens, and Eric pops his head inside.

Despite herself, Quinn feels her body tensing.

Eric smiles at her as he slips into the room and closes the door behind him. "Hey," he says. "It's almost dinner time."

"I'll be right there," Quinn says, turning back to her screen. For whatever reason - something she'll ask herself plenty of times after tonight - she merely mutes and minimises the screen instead of ending the call completely.

"I can wait," Eric says, entirely too casually, and this is the first time Quinn has felt unsafe in the Holt-Berry home. It's not a feeling she particularly likes, but she's trying to give Eric the benefit of the doubt.

"I can wait," Eric deadpans as she gets to her feet and crosses the room - further away from him - to get her shoes from the closet. "I'm sure I can manage to find my way."

"Maybe I just want to spend a little more time with you before you leave," he counters easily, pouting at her.

Quinn turns away from him, trying her best to gather herself. She's imagining it, surely. He's just being… nice. It isn't as if he doesn't know she's dating Rachel. Even though neither girl has been explicit about it, she knows he knows.

Quinn sucks in a breath and slips on her shoes, using the extra time to calm herself. It's fine. She's fine. She's misunderstanding everything.
When she's tied the last lace, she straightens and spins around… to find Eric standing much closer to her than he was before.

_Much too close._

"Eric," she says, swallowing nervously. "What are you doing?"

An easy smile is all she gets in response, and Quinn _knows_ this situation is five seconds away from turning _ugly._

"Look, I don't know what your problem is, but I think I've made it pretty clear I'm not interested," Quinn says, feeling her heart rate spike.

Eric doesn't seem to be listening. "I don't get it," he says, almost as if he's speaking to himself. "I don't get it."

"There's nothing to get," Quinn says and, suddenly, she wishes she hadn't muted Rachel. All this would be over if her girlfriend could just _speak_, and Quinn doesn't know how to get to the laptop without-

Eric reaches out to touch her, and her first instinct is to flinch.

Quinn backs up. "Eric," she says and, for the first time, there's a certain coldness in her tone that forces him to look at her. "You are going to step away from me, right now," she instructs, her tone brokering no argument. "You're making me uncomfortable."

Eric just stares at her for a long moment, unmoving.

Quinn uses the opportunity to duck away from him, moving towards the door. She stops with her hand on the handle and turns to look at him. She's still slightly confused by what he doesn't seem to _get_, and she's irritated with herself for not putting a firmer end to whatever this is earlier.

She clears her throat, and Eric's eyes snap towards her. She's never been more relieved that they're nothing like Rachel's. "I suppose, in life, Rachel and I are going to have to deal with plenty of people like you," she says. "I don't know if it's petty jealousy, or if it's something more serious, but you obviously have some kind of problem. Rachel is your _sister_."

Eric's expression turns into an irritated scowl. "No, she's _not_," he says darkly, and there's a very odd lilt to his tone that catches them _both_ off guard. "Don't call her that."

If Quinn wasn't watching him so intently, she would probably miss it. For the briefest moment, there's a flash of utter anguish in his eyes, and everything suddenly clicks into place.

_Oh_.

_Oh_.

Quinn's grip on the handle relaxes, but her body remains tense. "God," she murmurs; "you have a _bigger_ problem than I thought."

Eric frowns, clearly confused by her word choice.

Quinn audibly swallows. "You _don't get it,"_ she says softly, echoing his words as her brow furrows. "You don't get why she likes _me_, and not _you_."

For a moment - such a long, long moment - it looks as if he's about to deny it, but he doesn't. He
ends up saying nothing, just dropping his head and letting his shoulders slump in silent confession.

Quinn can barely breathe.

No.

This isn't happening.

This can’t be happening.

Quinn Fabray is not about to acknowledge that - that -

NO.

Eric lifts his head. "You can't tell anyone," he forces out, practically pleading with her. Begging. "God, nobody can know." He runs rough hands through his hair, and Quinn watches him unravel right in front of her eyes. "It's wrong. I'm - I'm disgusting. What is wrong with me? She's my sister. I literally watched her grow up." He practically claws at his scalp, and Quinn doesn't know what to do. What can she even say? "I tried. I tried so hard. It was so much better when I went to school, but - but she's Rachel. She's like… the sun. That's it. She's blinding, and I don't even think I stood a chance. Do you get that? Do you understand that, Quinn?

"I mean, out of everyone, you have to be the one to understand. She - she doesn't let you go. Once she catches you; that's it, and I'm caught. I'm fucking caught, and I don't know what to do. What do I do? How do I make it go away? Because, I've tried. I thought it would disappear when she started dating that Finn guy, but it didn't. It made it worse, because he treated her like shit, and she deserves better. And then - then the - " his voice catches, and his eyes are wide and frenzied.

"It's a good thing I wasn't here when Prescott put his hands on her, because I honestly have no idea what I would have done. I tore apart my dorm room, you know? I ripped it to pieces. How fucking dare he hurt her? I would have killed him. I definitely would have. I still might.

"He snuffed out her light. He took something from her, and I hate him. I fucking hate him. I should have protected her. I should have been there to make sure nobody could hurt her. But I went away. I took myself away, so I could forget. I was supposed to forget. I was supposed to - " he stops suddenly, and his eyes settle on Quinn. "And then you," he says, and his tone is both accusatory and one of disbelief. "I could handle Finn, and I could handle Noah, and all those other insignificant people who came in and out of her life, but you… You."

Quinn picks up on his own self-loathing and hatred of her for the first time. He's managed to hide it behind lingering looks and quick glances. She really misunderstood everything. He was just trying to figure her out; possibly work out whatever it is that Rachel happens to see in her.

God, this is… there aren't even any words to describe what this is.

Eric's eyes bore into Quinn, wild with something. "You're different," he says. "I knew it the moment she mentioned your name. So, so long ago. I should have been prepared for it. But then she brought you here, and I had to watch you together, and I don't fucking get it!" His tone of voice is back to being manic, and Quinn can practically see the way he comes undone.

It's confusion and longing and self-loathing and fascination and curiosity and concern and adoration and disbelief and just everything.

"I know I can never have her," Eric says. "I know it, but it was easier to imagine when you didn't exist. What - what can you even give her? Secrecy and lies? You're a Fabray. You had her lying to
her fucking family, Quinn. I mean, just who do you think you are? What can you possibly give her that I can't?"

And, really, there are a hundred different things Quinn can say to answer that question. Millions, even, but there's a minuscule part of her that feels sympathy for him. It's the tiniest part of her, because she wants nothing more than to punch him in the face in this moment.

So, what she does end up saying is maybe worse, or maybe better, she doesn't know.

"Happiness."

The word leaves her mouth before she can stop herself, and the two of them are forced to accept the truth of it in the silence that follows. As much as Eric wants to deny the girls' relationship, even he isn't blind enough not to acknowledge, begrudgingly and reluctantly, that Rachel is happier.

He just hates that it's because of her.

"You better," Eric finally says, sounding as broken and defeated as Quinn has ever heard anyone. His shoulders sag. "You better make and keep her happy," he reiterates. "Out of everyone in this world, she deserves it."

Quinn says nothing.

"And, don't hurt her," he adds. "Just, don't fucking hurt her."

Still, Quinn remains silent. She wouldn't even know what to say.

Eric sighs heavily. "She can't know," he says quietly. "She can't."

It's the moment Quinn remembers that Rachel may or may not still be on the Skype call, and her heart lurches in her chest. Her body even jerks, and the fact that Eric's eyes are downcast is the only reason he misses it.

Quinn moves away from the door towards the desk, giving him the silent cue to leave, so she can deal with… this, without him hovering over her.

God.

What is happening?

"She can't know," Eric says again. "I've worked too fucking hard to make sure she never has, and I really don't need you to fuck that up."

Quinn barely moves an inch.

"She can't know," he repeats as he moves towards the door, barely looking at her.

If he can help it, he'll never look at her again.

When Eric leaves, Quinn just stands, frozen. She didn't even realise she was holding her breath.

And then.

Scrambling across the room, she practically throws herself on the bed and grabs for her laptop. A part of her wishes that Rachel ended the call before all of that, but she knows better.
Forcing herself to take in a deep breath, she maximises the window to reveal Rachel's pale face. It's obvious she's been crying.

She still is, in fact, and Quinn has no words for her.

They just stare at each other for the longest time, the reality of what they both now know sinking in and settling between them in the ugliest way.

When the silence becomes too much, Quinn opens her mouth to speak.

"I'm sorry," she says, and she doesn't even know for what she's apologising. She thinks that girls should be able to go their entire lives without finding out their stepbrother… loves them… that way.

"I love you."

Quinn's breathing spikes. "Why are you saying that to me?"

Rachel blinks, her mind still spinning. "Because, I think we both need the reminder," she says. "I love you, Quinn. I love you."

Quinn feels a bit sick, and she imagines she's turned a bit green. "Rachel."

"I love you," she says again. "We - I - Quinn."

Quinn leans forward, needing to be closer. She just needs to touch. "I'm sorry," she says.

"Stop saying that."

"Stop telling me you love me, as if - "

"As if what?"

"As if this changes anything."

Rachel presses her lips into a thin line. "Doesn't it?"

Quinn breathes out slowly. "I don't know, Rachel, does it?"

Rachel closes her eyes for a moment. "No," she eventually says. "It doesn't. It doesn't change how I feel about you, or how I feel about - about Eric."

Quinn's nostrils flare at the sound of his name. She doesn't know if it's irrational or what, but she feels an inexplicable rage towards him.

Just, how dare he? How fucking dare he do this to them? She and Rachel already have enough to deal with, without adding on a borderline incestuous infatuation.

"Quinn," Rachel says softly, soothingly, as if she can sense the storm building in the blonde. "Baby?"

Quinn's eyes meet hers, and what she sees there forces her to curb her own feelings on the… situation. "Are - are you okay?" she asks, realising that she probably already knows the answer.

Rachel sucks in a breath. "Honestly, no, I'm really not," she confesses quietly. "I don't know what I'm supposed to do. Am I supposed to do something? Jesus, Quinn, this is - "
"All kinds of fucked up?" Quinn offers.

Rachel sighs in defeat, wishing she could be amused. "I'm definitely surprised, even shocked, but I'm also not," she says, frowning in thought. "All his behaviour makes sense now. It - it started a long time ago, and I just read it all wrong."

Quinn remains silent. She's at a loss as to what either of them is supposed to do. "Rachel," she says, getting the brunette's attention. "What happens now?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

Rachel buries her face in her hands. "Am I expected to talk to him about it?" she asks, somewhat rhetorically. "For all he's aware, I don't know about any of this."

"But you do," Quinn counters. "You know, and I would have told you."

"Would you?"

"Yes."

It's the fact that Quinn answers so quickly and without any hesitation that makes Rachel's heart swell. "You really would have, wouldn't you?"

"Of course," Quinn says. "I'm going to tell you everything. I thought we already discussed this."

"I love you."

Quinn's mouth quirks into the tiniest grin. "I'm sorry."

Rachel smiles for the first time since the... revelation. "I truly do love you, though. I don't think I can say it enough."

"Please, never stop."

"We're going to get through this," Rachel assures her. "It changes nothing."

And, well, Quinn has no choice to believe her.

---

For the most part, Rachel is right.

Nothing changes.

Quinn leaves the Holt-Berry household as scheduled, the entire family none the wiser of the shift in its dynamic.

Quinn and Eric do not talk to each other.

They don't even look at each other.

It's fine.

Quinn leaves, and nothing changes.
But, then, well, everything just *does*. 
"You look beautiful."

Rachel chuckles in Quinn's ear, and the sound settles every part of the blonde's tense body. She's been on edge all evening, and she almost laughs at the fact that all it takes is a single phone call to her gorgeous, stunning girlfriend… who is not physically here to make her feel better.

"I look like a marshmallow," Rachel mutters, and Quinn just manages to hear her over the noise in the background on Rachel's end.

"A beautiful marshmallow."

Rachel's laugh is louder, and Quinn has the sudden urge to crawl through the phone and straight into the brunette's arms. "You can't see me, but I'm rolling my eyes."

"I can only imagine," Quinn quips, absently glancing over her shoulder to make sure she's still alone. She's just managed to escape the ballroom to make the call she's been wanting to make since Rachel sent her a picture of her all snuggled up and freezing in Times Square.

"I miss you," Rachel eventually says, sighing.

"I miss you, too," Quinn automatically returns.

"I wish you were here."

Quinn smiles to herself. "It's one of my Resolutions, you know," she says. "You and I, we're definitely going to spend more time together."

"Kissing?" she asks teasingly, hopeful.

"Talking."

"Lame," Rachel mumbles, the pout clear in her voice. "But, I suppose I'll be able to make do. Will I get to look at you? You're really very pretty."

"You know, sometimes, I think you're with me just for my looks," she jokes.

"Oh, no," Rachel immediately says; "I'm with you for your sunny disposition."

They both giggle at the sound of that, and then taper off to silence, just the fact the other girl is on the other end of the line more than enough for either of them.

Rachel eventually clears her throat. "So… do I get to see Quinn Fabray in all her decked out glory?" she asks. "What colour is your dress?"

"It's red," Quinn answers, absently looking down at herself. Her mother had the dress waiting for her when she arrived in Hartford, and the tailor came around to make all the necessary alterations.

It's actually a nice dress, and she does feel quite pretty.

It's just that it all makes her feel quite sick.
Like, she's five seconds away from throwing up, and there's no getting around that.

Quinn hasn't truly had to pretend in such a long time, and it's taking so much out of her. It's so exhausting, and she just can't fathom how she ever expected herself to be able to get through a lifetime of this.

Why would anyone choose this?

"Quinn?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you okay?"

Quinn sighs. "Did I even tell you about the boy with whom my parents have been trying to set me up?" she asks.

Rachel waits a beat. "No, you didn't." Then, once again, she asks, "Are you okay?"

"My mother claims it'll be a good political connection for my father," Quinn explains, ignoring the question. "He comes from a respectable family, and he'll probably, definitely, be going to Yale to study Law. He's also halfway decent to look at, so we'll probably have cute children, which is important, apparently."

Rachel remains silent, realising that Quinn needs to say whatever she needs to.

"He's been hovering a lot," Quinn continues. "It's annoying, and I really want to slap him, but that would be improper of a young lady. He's clearly bought into this… arrangement, and I'm convinced he's going to pounce on me at midnight. I resisted his charms over the summer, and I suspect his own family is putting pressure on him to… seal the deal, as it were."

Rachel waits a painstakingly long time to ask the question. "Baby, are you asking for my permission to let him?"

Quinn closes her eyes, hating this more and more. "I - I don't know," she quietly confesses. "I just - I don't know how I'm supposed to get out of it without making a scene, and I don't even want to think about what my father will do if I - " she stops abruptly. "I don't want to," she says. "But, if he tries to kiss me, I don't know how - " she stops again. "God, this is so fucked up."

Rachel is inclined to agree. "I hate this," she says. "I don't think I've hated something as much as I hate this, right now." Her voice is rising in anger, and Quinn wants to say something, anything, to calm her. "Your parents are essentially pimping you out, Quinn," she practically shrieks. "If you kiss him, you're just giving into them and, if you don't, you'll face embarrassment, and pain." She sucks in a breath, and it sounds as if she's starting to hyperventilate.

"Rachel," Quinn says. "Rachel, baby, just breathe."

There's a bit of shuffling, and then there's another voice on the line. "Quinn?"

"Shelby?"

"Hello, Quinn," the woman says. "Sorry about that. Rachel's just - well, I'm not entirely sure what she's doing at the moment."

"Is it a flashback?" Quinn asks, slightly hesitant.
Shelby is silent for a moment. "I don't know," she says. "But, it looks like it's over now. Her breathing has evened out, and her eyes are clearer. Would you like to speak with her?"

"Please."

More shuffling.

Then, a small voice: "Quinn?"

"Hi, baby," Quinn murmurs. "I'm sorry."

"Why are you apologising?"

"I didn't mean to stress you out," she says. "Tonight is supposed to be a good night for you, and I'm ruining it with all my stupid drama. I'm going to figure it out, okay? I'm not going to kiss him." She pauses. "Maybe I can just kiss his cheek, and that'll be fine. Or, you know, I can just hide in the bathroom when midnight rolls around. I can deal with whatever happens after that. The very last thing I want to do is cheat on you, and I'm sorry this is even a thing."

"I love you," Rachel says. "I love you in all those dangerous ways, Quinn."

Quinn waits, silent and apprehensive.

"So, this is my giving you the permission you need to do whatever you have to do to cause you the least pain, okay?"

Quinn's breath catches.

"Promise me," Rachel insists. "I want to hear you say that you will do everything required to make sure nobody hurts a single hair on your beautiful, wonderful head, okay?"

Quinn remains silent.

"Say it."

Quinn takes a moment, not wanting to do this but realising she's going to have to. "I promise."

"There better not be a single mark on you when I see you, Quinn," she says. "Nobody is allowed to hurt my girlfriend. Not even you. Understand?"

"I do."

Rachel lets out a long breath. "I love you," she says. "Nothing that's happened or has to happen changes how I feel about you, or about us." She lets out a small laugh. "God, we've been through so much shit; I can barely wrap my head around it." Then: "Sorry, Mom."

Quinn giggles softly.

"She's such a dinosaur, sometimes," Rachel complains. "I barely swear. She's lucky she has a kid as well-behaved as I am."

"She doesn't know about your wondering hands," Quinn points out.

"And, she never will," Rachel immediately says. "Goodness, Quinn, we don't want to scar the poor woman. She'll never look at either of us the same."
"You say these things as if we've done more than heavily make out," Quinn murmurs.

"I know what your tonsils taste like."

Quinn laughs out loud, absently covering her eyes with her free hand in mild dismay. "Is your mother still listening?"

"To every single word."

Quinn shakes her head. "I really do love you, you know?"

"I know," she says brightly.

"Thank you," Quinn says softly, feeling slightly overwhelmed.

"For what?"

"You know what."

Rachel gives them both a moment. "You're welcome, Quinn."

Quinn is about to reply when she hears footsteps coming her way. She panics for a moment, takes a breath, and then calmly says, "I should head back."

Rachel hums in acknowledgment. "I should too," she says. "My mom keeps shooting me looks. I think she's feeling left out."

Quinn just laughs. "Are you drunk?"

"No."

"She's tipsy, Quinn," Shelby shouts in the background, and Quinn can't stop her smile. "I had nothing to do with it."

"It's not true, Quinn," Rachel weakly defends, the pout clear to hear in her voice. "I'm perfectly sober."

Quinn can't even bring herself to imagine her life without Rachel, and she hopes she never has to. "I really should go," she says. "Happy New Year to you both, and I'll talk to you tomorrow, okay?"

"You'll talk to me next year, you mean," Rachel says, giggling softly.

"Exactly."

"I love you."

"I -"

"There you are!"

Quinn startles at the voice so hard that she almost drops her phone. She spins around, expecting one of her parents or even Biff, but she finds Tori instead.

For a moment, she's relieved... and then not.

Frowning slightly, Quinn presses the phone back to her ear and says, "I have to go. Have a good night, and stay safe." She hangs up without waiting for a reply, and then turns back to give Tori her
almost-full attention.

"I've been looking everywhere for you," Tori says, stepping closer to Quinn in a way that Quinn is no longer used to. It's been a little more than five months since they've even stood this close together.

Since Tori's engagement party.

Quinn arches an eyebrow, resisting the urge to take a step back. "Why?"

"You were gone."

"I didn't think you noticed," Quinn observes; "what with you hanging off of Tom all night."

Tori laughs when nothing is funny, at all. "Is that jealousy I hear?"

This time, Quinn laughs, and she does take an inconspicuous step back. "I can assure you that I'm not jealous," she says. "If you recall correctly, I've never been jealous."

Tori pouts. "We both know that's not true."

It's obvious to Quinn that Tori's... drunk, and Quinn really doesn't want to be having this conversation right now.

Or, ever, really.

Quinn has made peace with Tori's decisions, but it doesn't seem as if Tori has. Which, admittedly, isn't Quinn's problem.

Because, honestly, Quinn has enough problems of her own that require her attention.

"Why were you looking for me anyway?" Quinn asks, against her better judgment.

At the sound of that, Tori regains the space Quinn put between them and reaches out with a hand to touch Quinn's hip. "We have a bit of time before midnight," she says suggestively.

Quinn removes Tori's hand as gently as she can, the image of Rachel blazing in her mind's eye. God, what she would do to be with Rachel right now. She misses her something fierce.

"What's wrong?" Tori asks, frowning. "Nobody will see us."

Quinn shakes her head. "I'm pretty sure we ended this in June, Tori," she says. "You have a fiancé."

"You've never cared about Tom before," Tori points out.

Quinn shrugs. "I'm just not interested, then," she says; "and I really don't want to get caught."

Tori eyes her carefully, trying to figure something out.

Quinn isn't particularly worried, because the woman can barely keep herself upright. Though, the more she stares, the more nervous Quinn feels. The two of them haven't really spoken since Tori's engagement party.

That was a night Quinn wants to forget, for reasons she's never allowed herself to unpack. She's not kidding when she says she's never been jealous of Tom.
Well, not in the sense Tori thinks, at least. Quinn would have done anything to be in a public, happy relationship with the person she wanted to be with. It's exhausting having to hide your feelings - her situation with Rachel is a clear example of that. She caved far too easily, if you ask her.

It's a sobering thought when Quinn comes to the conclusion it was never actually about Tori. She's never felt anything that she feels for Rachel for the woman standing in front of her because, while, yes, her relationship with Rachel is mostly a secret; it doesn't feel... dirty, like the way it did with Tori.

Maybe it shows on her face, Quinn doesn't know, but Tori's own facial expression changes into something Quinn doesn't recognise. It's curiosity first, and then something that resembles anger.

It surprises Quinn.

"Oh, I see," Tori suddenly says, straightening her spine. "You've never cared about my relationship, but we're both going to care about yours."

Quinn remains silent.

"Who is it, then?" she asks. "I hope you're not attempting to hold out because of that McIntosh idiot?"

Still, Quinn says nothing.

"Oh," Tori muses. "You wouldn't care if it were him. This is someone you actually care about enough not to fall back on your newly-found morals." She regards Quinn carefully. "Who is it?"

For the briefest moment, Quinn allows her features to soften at just the thought of Rachel, and Tori catches onto it immediately.

"Well, well, well," Tori says. "Who is she?"

And the fact that she uses that pronoun is enough to set Quinn's teeth on edge. She's not worried that Tori would expose her because, God, she would be exposing herself as well, but the mere idea of Tori knowing about Rachel just doesn't sit well with Quinn.

"She has to be somebody special," Tori continues, essentially having a conversation with herself. "There's no way you would react this way if she wasn't. So, who is she?" A pause. "I bet it's that Rachel girl you talked about over the summer. Is it, Quinn?"

This time, Quinn definitely doesn't react, which is telling, in itself.

Tori laughs, and it's this hollow, empty sound. "You don't honestly think you'll actually get to be with her, do you?" She pauses again, reading Quinn's silence for what it is. "Quinn? Tell me you're not actually thinking what I think you're thinking of doing."

Quinn, resolutely, stays silent.

Tori's eyes widen, and she's suddenly much less drunk than she was five minutes ago. "Quinn, no," she says, turning her body to face Quinn fully. "You can't. They'll never let you." She runs her hand through her hair. "God, Quinn, are you crazy or are you just stupid? I mean, have you finally lost it or something? Your - your father intends to run for president, Quinn. If you think he's just going to let you go; then you're certifiably insane."
Quinn shifts her gaze to glare at Tori. "What do you even care?" she questions, entirely too calm, even though her voice is laced with venom. "I'm not your problem anymore, right? It's not your job to give a shit about me, so you can just stop pretending."

Tori recoils slightly, surprised by Quinn's tone of voice. She's obviously angry, and there's a deep hurt lacing her words. "Quinn?"

"What?" Quinn snaps. "What are you even doing out here? You - you haven't spoken to me once since the summer, and now you have the nerve to come and, what, proposition me for sex?" She scoffs. "And you have the nerve to call me crazy."

"Quinn?"

"It's not your problem," she says resolutely. "What happens to me; let it happen to me, because I'm not going to roll over and just accept the life they have planned for me the way you have."

She looks positively disgusted with Tori, because she is. For whatever reason, Quinn imagined that Tori was braver than this, but she's wrong. She's been wrong before.

"You can't," Tori whispers, because she knows what's going to happen. They both do.

"I have to," Quinn says. "There's no other way for me. I'm not you, I can't just… give in, I'm not built that way, and I would much rather die than force myself to be who they want me to be," she says, and she means every word.

"It may be the only way you ever get out, Quinn," Tori says somberly.

Quinn doesn't have a response.

It's a truth they've both always known.

At a few minutes before midnight, Rachel takes a selfie of herself, Shelby and the Ball as it waits to drop in Times Square, and immediately sends it to Quinn. She feels particularly uneasy after the conversation she had with the blonde, but she's trying not to think about that too hard.

She misses her like crazy, and the alcohol in her system has worn off enough to make her feel both the cold and the melancholy. Shelby's arm is hooked with hers as they keep each other warm in the near-freezing temperatures.

"That's going to be me one day," Rachel says, mostly to herself as she watches the various musical celebrities perform for the masses.

Shelby hears her, and hums in agreement.

Rachel, admittedly, is finding everything about this visit with Shelby to be… weird. Her mother seems almost nervous about something, as if she's building up towards telling her something very particular, and Rachel can't help but feel anxious about it.

Also, as if she's trying to compensate for whatever truth she's holding onto, Shelby has been extremely present. Before Rachel first made the permanent move to Wallingford, the two of them were quite close, and it's almost as if Shelby is determined to get that back before it's too late. As if she's just now figured out that she's losing Rachel, and she's desperate to hold on.

Rachel is determined to *let her*. 
After everything she's been through, and after everything she's seen of Quinn's own relationship with her parents; she doesn't want what she has with her mother to… fall apart. It's a relief to know Shelby doesn't want that either.

Though, Rachel is still wary of whatever Shelby is actively *not* telling her. She gets the feeling it has the power to make or break them.

"It's almost time," Shelby suddenly says, turning them slightly to face the Ball. "I always wonder why we bother coming out here, right until this moment."

Rachel lets out a laugh, because she wonders the same thing. Doing the clichéd New York thing always seems like a good idea until they're surrounded by thousands of people and then find that they're going to have to hold in their pee, or risk losing their spot.

But then there's the Ball, and it all seems worth it.

Even though she *is* freezing.

Rachel startles when Shelby suddenly shifts, reaching into her own coat pocket for her phone. It's nothing different or out of place, but the action itself seems out of character in this moment. While Shelby does have a social life, it tends not to exist when Rachel is around, and the teenager can't help the sudden rush of anxiety she feels.

Oh, she's definitely not going to like whatever Shelby is working up to telling her.

If ever Rachel needed a reason not to push for answers, it's this. When Shelby looks down at her phone, visibly flushes at whatever she reads, and then immediately looks guilty; Rachel starts to wonder if keeping secrets is something she inherited.

She, herself, has so many, and she's keeping various others for other people.

Based on Shelby's reaction, Rachel can only wonder what it is, but she doesn't have much time to dwell, because, all of a sudden, the countdown is starting and thousands of people are screaming in her ear.

Shelby films the entire thing, finally stopping on Rachel, who screams "Happy New Year!" into the camera.

Shelby grins at her, and then moves into frame with Rachel, kissing her cheek. "Are we sending this to Quinn?" she asks.

"Definitely!" she squeals, before immediately relaying her all important message. "Quinn, I love you, and I can't wait to see you. We're in the new year, baby, and we're one step closer."

Shelby waits until she's ended the video to ask the question. "One step closer to what?"

Rachel blinks, and then beams at her. "Freedom," she says. "I can't wait until she gets to be free."

Shelby knows there are things she doesn't know about Rachel and her relationship with Quinn, and she wonders if her daughter will ever actually tell her. She worries, endlessly, that their own relationship is too broken to fix.

How did they even get to a point where Rachel can't even admit that she missed her mother?

Shelby won't even allow herself to think that, maybe, Rachel *didn't*. 
Rachel watches her mother's face closely, noting the conflict behind her eyes. She absently wonders if she's also as much of an open book. She really hopes not, because she doesn't want to be the one who gives away her relationship with Quinn.

Quinn would hate her, and she's pretty sure she would hate herself.

It's what she's thinking about as she and Shelby eventually start on their way home. The crowds are rowdy and loud, but the two of them have made the mutual decision to see out the night in the comfort of their pyjamas and warm living room as they watch Christmas movies.

Rachel adores Christmas movies, and she loves that her mother appreciates them as well. So does Quinn, really, and they've watched a few together, even over Skype.

When they get back to the loft, Shelby heads to the kitchen to get the hot chocolate started, while Rachel goes to change into her pyjamas and get warm. She throws on a Winnie the Pooh onesie, and then goes back out to find them a movie.

Even though they don't spend a lot of time together, they always manage to fall into a simple rhythm. It doesn't take them long to get into sync. They're like the best of friends, who don't have to spend every second of every day in each other's company, and still just manage to fall together when they are in the same place.

Sometimes, it doesn't really feel as if they're mother and daughter. Rachel has parents, and she's come to accept that she doesn't exactly see Shelby as one of them anymore.

She can't tell if she's sad about it or not.

Their relationship has changed, which is expected, but it still feels unnecessarily drastic. The thing is that Rachel was forced to grow up far too soon, and she can't recall really being a kid past her parents' divorce. She definitely acted out like one, but there's a part of her that knows she's had a hand in raising herself from the moment Shelby and Hiram decided to go to war against each other and used her as an excuse.

"Found anything?" Shelby asks, breaking into Rachel's thoughts.

"Not yet," she says, slightly distracted.

"Pick a good one," Shelby says, and then disappears into her own bedroom to get changed.

By the time she gets back, Rachel has found the perfect film, and she's just settling into the couch with a blanket and her hot chocolate. She points to Shelby's cup on the coffee table. "I added marshmallows."

"Just the way I like it."

"I know."

It's comfortable, and also not.

They settle in side-by-side, quietly sipping at their drinks as the movie plays in front of them. Rachel isn't really watching, because she's thinking about Quinn, and she's thinking about what her mother is actively not telling her.

The thing is that Rachel is almost certain she knows.
So, once she's finished her hot chocolate, she sets her empty cup on the coffee table, reduces the
volume on the television and turns to look at Shelby expectantly.

"Mom?" Rachel says.

"Sweetheart?"

She sucks in a breath, and then just goes for it. "Who is he?" she asks and, okay, she may or may
not get some sick sense of satisfaction in seeing her mother's eyes almost bulge out of her head.

"What?"

Rachel smiles knowingly. "I know you, Mom, and there's obviously something you want to tell me.
Also, based on the way you were blushing at your phone earlier, I think I'm smart enough to figure
out that there's somebody new in your life."

Shelby can't meet her gaze, which is confirmation enough.

Rachel laughs softly. "Well?"

All Shelby does is nod, and Rachel notices the way she nervously bites her bottom lip, clearly
contemplating what to say. Her reaction makes Rachel particularly anxious, and she can't help
wondering just what her mother is hiding from her.

Who is he?

Rachel tenses slightly. "Do I know him?" she asks. "Oh, God, are you dating Franco? Because, I'm
pretty sure we already talked about - "

"It's not Franco," Shelby says, shaking her head, and then sighing in defeat. There's no avoiding
this, she reasons, and she's going to have to tell Rachel eventually. He's been bugging her about it
for a few days now, and there's no escaping this conversation.

"Mom," Rachel presses, suddenly wary.

Shelby takes a deep breath, and then says, "His - his name is Brody."

Rachel frowns, the name niggling with familiarity at the back of her mind. She's pretty sure she's
heard the name before, but she doesn't immediately recall where.

But, then it hits her.

Brody.

She knows of only one Brody, and he's the NYADA student she and Shelby met when they visited
the school's campus together over the summer.

No.

There's no way.

She has to be referring to a different Brody.

"Brody," Rachel echoes. "Brody who?"

But, before Shelby can respond, Rachel's phone is ringing, and she freezes at the sight of Quinn's
name on her screen as it innocently sits on the coffee table.

Just from the sight of it, Rachel knows *something is wrong*.

Rachel holds out a hand to stop her mother from speaking, reaches for her phone and continues to stare at it. It takes her a moment to work up the courage to slide her thumb across the glass, and then brings it up to her ear.

"Hello."

"Rachel?"

She doesn't recognise the voice, but it's definitely a woman's, which does nothing to ease her anxiety. "Speaking."

"Hold on, let me give Quinn the phone."

There's a bit of shuffling, and then there's a sound that Rachel wishes she didn't already know. Her heart practically shatters at the first sound of Quinn's sobs, and her features harden.

"Quinn," she whispers.

And then the voice.

The voice that has the power to *break* her.

"I'm sorry."

Rachel sucks in a sharp breath. "Quinn?"

"I couldn't keep my promise."

Quinn first started piano lessons when she was four years old. Mary once told her that Frannie was particularly talented with the instrument, and Quinn took it upon herself to get better and better. She stupidly thought that, if she could get good enough, maybe her parents would love her.

It's actually something she still enjoys. Besides playing soccer and cycling, playing the piano is one of those activities she's managed to hold onto throughout the years.

It's always been a given that she would continue to take lessons wherever she ended up for school, and she's been lucky to be taught by Dr Baron, who has managed to take her playing to greater heights.

Which is why the baby grand piano in the house in Hartford is probably going to be the number one thing she's going to miss when she finally leaves. It's a fine piece of art, really, and she's always admired it. The workmanship, and the detail. She wishes she could take it with her.

When she was little, she used to spend hours tracing the carvings in the wood with her small fingers, already knowing her touch was far superior to her sight.

The piano has always been her comfort.

Which is why she finds herself sitting on said piano's bench, her fingers resting on the keys. She knows many, many songs, but she doesn't actually feel like playing any of them at the moment.
She rather just wants to sit here and pretend that she's not actually wearing a turtle neck to hide the handprints on her throat, because she managed to embarrass her father by not letting Biff McIntosh kiss her at midnight the way she was supposed to, apparently.

Quinn should be good at pretending, but she's really not.

As an only child, she was forced to keep herself occupied, and she did make up entire worlds for herself, but she feels too tired and old for any of that.

This is her reality.

If ever she needed reaffirming that she has to do everything she can to get out, then this is it.

She'll die if she stays.

Tori's convinced she'll die if she goes.

Either way, she's screwed, but there's a little bit more excitement in planning for her escape. Doomed if she does and doomed if she doesn't, and all that.

With a sigh, Quinn starts to play. It's a piece she learned sophomore year, right after she and Sam broke up. It's typically a sad aria, but it's got moments of… hope.

She's always been particularly fascinated by the way composers can showcase emotion in music, and she envies their ability to translate feeling with just a few bars and notes.

The piece is relatively short, and she brings it to a quiet end a few minutes later, her right foot resting on the pedal as the last note lingers.

"I always forget just how good you are."

Despite herself, Quinn tenses at the voice, and then turns her head slightly to see her mother standing in the doorway to the house's library. She doesn't say anything. She hasn't ever been able just to talk to the woman, and it's unlikely to happen now.

Judy Fabray looks pensive as she makes her way into the room. "How's your head?" she asks.

Quinn almost forgot about the ache in her skull. Because, besides choking her, Russell Fabray also shoved her against a wall, and she has a nasty bump on the back of her head from the impact… which also comes with a pretty nasty migraine.

"Fine," Quinn says, which they both know is a lie.

Quinn doesn't hate her mother.

In fact, she's quite certain she loves her, but she doesn't particularly like her. How can Judy stand there and ask her daughter about the injuries that her husband caused? All because Quinn refused to be used in some political game. It's not right, and Quinn really wishes her mother were stronger.

Russell would bend, if ever Judy made demands, because he needs to maintain his image of family if ever he wants to make it to the White House. They'll never elect a single man, and he'll do just about anything to hold onto this.

Quinn knows it.

She knows it, which is the truth she's going to use finally to get out of this Hell she was born into.
"Did Martha give you some painkillers?"

"I have my own," Quinn says curtly. "I've been in pain for long enough to have a personal supply."

Judy, predictably, doesn't know how to respond to that.

Quinn clears her throat, choosing to use the opportunity to broach a topic that might be slightly out of the blue. "Mom," she starts. "I want to get my Driver's License."

Judy's eyes widen. "Oh?"

Quinn shifts slightly, ignoring the pain in her shoulder blades. "If I'm going to be at Yale in the Fall, I think it would be nice to be able to get myself around. I don't want to have to rely on other people."

If Judy can tell what Quinn is really saying, she doesn't mention it. "That's probably a good idea," she says instead. "I'll take all your necessary documents out of the safe for you."

Quinn just stares at her.

"Don't tell your father."

That's a given.

"Is there anything else you need?"

Rachel can acknowledge she's acting childish.

She knows she's being a bit of a brat, but the last thing she wants to do is deal with her mother and her twenty-year-old boyfriend when Quinn is hurting.

If she's being honest, Rachel doesn't even know how to react to the news that her mother - her mother - is involved with a college sophomore, who is two years older than her.

Based on what Rachel remembers of their brief interaction with Brody, it was obvious he was a ladies' man. He openly flirted with the both of them, and he had quite the saucy conversation with one of the dance teachers, Cassandra July.

Rachel, admittedly, didn't think anything of it at the time. Truthfully, she hasn't given the boy another thought since then, but now she's being forced to acknowledge he exists... and he exists in her mother's life.

Rachel just wants to go home.

No.

She wants to go to Quinn. She wants to see her blonde girlfriend, hold her in her arms, and feel the safety of her embrace. She hasn't even been able to bring up all this stuff about Shelby to Quinn yet, because her blonde is caught up in an emotional hurricane of her own, and Rachel doesn't want to pile onto that.

She contemplates discussing it with Santana or Brittany, but she doesn't feel right talking to either of them before she does with Quinn.

So, instead, she does the completely mature thing and locks herself away in her bedroom and tries
to distract herself from the idea that the thing her mother has been hiding from her is that she's dating a guy less than half her age.

What really pisses Rachel off is that Shelby probably wasn't even going to tell her. She had to pry it out of her.

And then Shelby had the nerve to suggest that they all have a meal together, which almost made Rachel throw her phone across the room. Sure, her emotions were already high from her absolutely confusing phone call with a distraught Quinn and an entirely too calm Martha, but how dare Shelby suggest such a thing?

Rachel is counting down the days until she goes back to school.

Boy does she have a lot to talk to Dr Howell about. She's even made a list, which she's been adding to with every hour that passes. The woman is in for the shock of her life. Rachel even scheduled a double session for the next morning.

The sound of her phone distracts her from her thoughts, and she reaches for it on her bed. She knows it's a text from Quinn, and she's not wrong.

Quinn: I think my mother knows.

Rachel immediately sits up on her bed, her heart jumping into her throat.

Rachel: Knows what!?  

Quinn: That I don't intend to come back. Not that I'm gay.

Quinn: Well, I guess that remains to be seen, really. She might know, and she's just choosing to ignore it.

Rachel: Why do you think she knows?

Quinn: Just a feeling. She's being too helpful with getting me the things I need.

Rachel: Things you need?

Quinn: When we next see each other, I will be a licensed driver.

Before Rachel can reply, she hears a hesitant knock on her door, and she lets out a long-suffering sigh.

One thing at a time.

Rachel: No way? When is your test? How are you feeling about it?

She sets her phone on her duvet and slowly clambers off the bed, reluctance practically pouring off of her. She doesn't know if she's going to be able to be civil with her mother, but she's going to try.

Rachel opens the door to reveal Shelby dressed as if she's leaving the apartment, looking unsure and a little lost.

Shelby can accept that she didn't expect her daughter to handle the news well, but she didn't really anticipate an entire shutout. She doesn't know how to go about fixing this, or if she even can. Their relationship was already strained before Shelby decided to date someone more suited to Rachel's
age group.

"I'm headed out," Shelby says. "We need some groceries for your last few days, and I need to check in with Marty." Her manager. "Would you like to come with me?"

*Before*, Rachel might have immediately said yes, but she gives pause now, and then asks the all important question: "Are you going to see him?"

Shelby's lack of response is answer enough.

"I'm good," Rachel says, and then shuts the door. She immediately leans her back against it and sighs, sliding to the ground and feeling like a complete bitch.

She doesn't trust herself not to blow up at her mother if they actually are to interact, so this separation is necessary if they're going to have anything to salvage when all this is over.

She just wishes that none of this was happening.

Not this Brody situation. Not this Eric problem, and definitely not this Quinn predicament.

Maybe a nap is what she needs.

"You have a visitor."

Quinn looks up from her laptop screen to see Martha standing in her open doorway. She's sitting on her bed, checking up on the list she and Hiram drew up, regarding her independent future. She has a few more things to do before she returns to school, effectively leaving her family for good.

"Who is it?" Quinn asks, which proves to be pointless when Tori pokes her head around Martha's tall form and smiles winningly.

Despite Quinn's lingering irritation with the brunette, she can't help the slight smile that spreads across her face at the sight of her old friend.

Because, well, they were friends before they became lovers, and maybe it would be okay to get that back. Though, Quinn is still wary of Tori, and she's especially anxious about what Rachel might think about all of this.

"There she is," Tori says brightly. "Get dressed. I'm taking you to lunch." Which is code for: *we need to talk where nobody will overhear us.*

Quinn almost says no, because the last thing she should be doing is talking to Tori, when she should be talking to her girlfriend.

Still, this is probably going to be the last time she sees this woman, and that makes her sad. There's very little she's going to miss about this life, and Tori is one of them.

So, she says, "Sure," and then hops off her bed.

The bruising is almost gone now, and it's nothing a little makeup won't hide. It takes almost twenty minutes to get her looking decent, Tori lounging on her bed all the while. It's almost reminiscent of the old days, but everything is different now.

Quinn is in love.
She thought she was, before, but looking at Tori now makes her reevaluate all of it. If she recognizes that she's never really felt that way about Tori, then she can only imagine what Tori ever felt for her.

"Ready," Quinn finally declares, grabbing her purse.

"Leave that," Tori says, getting to her feet. "It's my treat."

"I might want to get something," Quinn says, because it's been a while since she's actually been out and about in Hartford. She doesn't hate the city, not really, but it's doubtful she'll ever be back.

Willingly, at least.

Maybe she'll buy a touristy t-shirt, and some fuzzy socks for Rachel.

Tori makes to reach for her hand to get them on their way, but she thinks better of it at the last second, which is a good thing, too, because Quinn would have made it awkward.

"Shall we?"

They take Tori's car, driven by her long-serving driver, Olivier. Quinn wonders if Tori actually knows how to drive, and it saddens her even more when she remembers that Tori is giving into the life that's been set out for her.

The ride is made in silence, and Quinn watches the buildings pass by with thinly-veiled fascination. She's never really taken the time to look at the city, and she wonders about how much she's missed out on by hating the life her parents forced her to live.

Quinn sighs, and Tori glances at her.

"Everything okay?"

Quinn nods. "Just thinking."

"About?"

The way she asks the question makes Quinn know Tori assumes she's thinking about Rachel, which is true. Rachel is constantly on her mind, but she's thinking about a lot of other things, as well.

"Things," Quinn answers.

Tori shifts slightly, looking uncomfortable. "Her?"

Quinn frowns, hearing something very particular in her tone. "Tori," she says. "What's going on here?"

Tori doesn't respond, because Olivier pulls up in front of Tori's favourite bistro. She lives and dies for their carrot cake, and Quinn has always been a sucker for their bacon; a rare indulgence for her.

Tori just gets out of the car, and Quinn has no choice but to follow. She says a quick thank you to Olivier, and then heads into the bistro. They find a table near the front windows, and they sit opposite each other.

Quinn orders a Cafe Latte, and Tori gets a Cappuccino.
In silence, Quinn goes through the menu, silently contemplating what she could probably get away with eating, now that she'll be back playing soccer. Her coach is a little on the crazy side.

She literally can't wait, though. It's her last season, and she's determined to make it to the Championship. She's convinced she can lead her team to glory.

Eventually, she decides on fried chicken, bacon and waffles, with maple syrup. She can't help cringing at the number of calories she's about to consume, but she ran for almost an hour this morning, and she reasons she can work the rest off later in the house's gym.

"Is she better than me?"

Quinn looks up, frowning. "What?"

Tori clenches her jaw. "Is she better than me?" she repeats.

Quinn has an idea she already knows the answer, but she still asks, "At what?"

Tori meets her gaze. "Making you happy."

It's a loaded question, because Quinn doesn't know how to be happy. With Rachel, she knows she's been the closest, but that means very little when the emotion is still foreign to her. "Yes," she answers anyway.

Tori nods sharply. "And, is she better than me?"

This time, the meaning definitely isn't lost on Quinn. Sex isn't something she's currently comfortable discussing with Tori, especially when it concerns Rachel.

At Quinn's extended silence, Tori's face twists into comprehension. "Oh my God, the two of you haven't even done it," she deduces. "Fuck, Q, are you dating a prude?"

Quinn visibly bristles, her features darkening as her eyes narrow to slits. "Don't talk about her like that," she says coolly. "What we have is more than just sex, but you obviously won't understand that."

Hurt flashes in Tori's eyes, but it's gone in an instant. "Is that what we were, huh? Just sex?"

"I don't know," Quinn says; "you tell me, T. You're the one who's always been emotionally unavailable. I didn't think you would be doing us both a favour when you ended it, even if it was for deplorable reasons."

"I got engaged," she argues.

"Exactly," Quinn agrees. "To a man."

"I love him," she says, and her words come out as if she wants to hurt Quinn with them.

Quinn doesn't care. "If you really do, then I'm happy for you," she says. "I don't know what you were expecting, T. You ended things to be with your perfect guy. Did you expect me just to hang around, waiting for you to want me again when it was convenient to you?"

Based on the look on her face, it's obvious that's exactly what Tori expected.

Quinn laughs humourlessly. "Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you," she says snarkily. "While you've been planning your wedding, I've been falling in love with a girl who loves and respects me. A girl
who is unafraid to feel what she feels, and isn't willing to keep it hidden away from me."

Quinn accepts that their inability to hide their feelings might end up being their downfall, but she can't bring herself to care right now.

"Now, are you going to accept that truth and stop acting like some jealous, scorned ex-lover, and have lunch with me, or am I going to walk out of here and never come back?"

Tori takes a moment, and then nods.

It takes them another moment, but they eventually move on to easier topics of conversation.

In the end, Quinn ends up with her t-shirt.

And Rachel's fuzzy socks.
Chapter Twenty-Three

"Are you going to tell your father?"

Rachel can't say she's actually surprised by the question, but she's still irritated by it. This is the first meal she's having with her mother since the whole Brody bomb was dropped, and Shelby's barely managed to get through ten minutes before bringing it up.

Rachel sighs forcefully through her nose, and resists the urge to reach for her phone to distract herself from saying something she's bound to regret.

Two days.

She gets to return to Dalton in two days.

She gets to see Quinn in less than forty-eight hours.

"Rachel?"

She looks at Shelby's face, reading the hesitance and apprehension for exactly what it is. "What are you so worried about?" she asks pointedly. "Do you think he'll have a tantrum the way you did when you found out about LeRoy? I'm eighteen now, so you don't have to - " she halts, a disturbing thought coming to mind. "I'm eighteen now," she repeats. Then: "How long has this been going on?"

Shelby hesitates. "A few months."

"A few months," she echoes. "Since the summer, I imagine. Which means that you've been dating a college student for at least five months. And you're obviously serious about him, so why didn't you tell me before?"

"Well, you've seen the way you've reacted."

"No," she says, her brow furrowed. "That's not it at all, is it?" She doesn't even bother to wait for a response. "I was seventeen until a few weeks ago, and you know that Dad could have used this to get full custody of me if he wanted, so you waited until it wouldn't matter anymore, because you know there's something wrong with it."

"There's nothing wrong with it," Shelby immediately counters.

"Then, why did you hide it?"

"Why are you hiding Quinn?" Shelby shoots right back, and Rachel's hackles rise.

"Don't you dare liken this to my relationship with Quinn," she forces out.

"How is this any different?" Shelby argues. "Why can't you just accept this the same way I've accepted you're gay?"

Rachel freezes at the way she practically spits out the last word, and Shelby realises far too late that she's said entirely the wrong thing.
"I didn't know there were conditions to your acceptance," Rachel says tensely, and then laughs humourlessly. "God, I'm such an idiot, aren't I? You haven't accepted this at all, have you? I'm sure you have conniptions about all of this behind closed doors, based on what I remember about your reaction to learning about Dad."

Rachel leans back, feeling everything she thinks she knows shift completely. "It was never about me, was it? You don't actually accept my sexuality, do you? You just knew that Dad obviously did, and you didn't want him to win." She shakes her head. "Wow, Mom, twelve years later and you're still using me to try to one-up your ex-husband."

Shelby opens her mouth to say something, but thinks better of it.

"I hope it feels good to know you've won, I guess," Rachel says, sounding morose. "I hope you're happy." And then she gets to her feet.

She's angry and sad and all she wants is her father, and Quinn.

Two days is two days too long.

Quinn doesn't expect Rachel's call, so it's a pleasant surprise when Rachel's name pops up on her phone's screen. She's in the library with Martha, sifting through the various volumes her family has managed to accumulate over the years.

She's picking out all the ones she wants to take with her when she leaves, disguising it as wanting to have them at school with her for her final semester's various projects and assignments.

Quinn shoots Martha a slightly apologetic look, and then reaches for her phone. She's smiling when she answers, but it slips from her face the second she hears Rachel's despondent tone.

"What's wrong?" Quinn asks swiftly, and then immediately walks out of the library. The house, itself, is empty of her parents, but she still makes her way up to her bedroom for some privacy. "What happened?"

Rachel sucks in a breath. "I don't know how we get past this," she says.

"Past what?" Quinn questions. "Who? What's going on, Rach?"

There's a beat of silence, and then Rachel starts speaking. She tells Quinn everything that's been happening, about Brody and her fractured relationship with her mother, and how Shelby hasn't been sincere and forthcoming when it comes to her thoughts on Rachel's sexual preference. As if they don't have enough with which to deal.

Rachel is in tears by the time she's done, her voice catching on her sobs, and Quinn wants nothing more than to crawl through the phone and just hold her.

"Oh, Rachel," Quinn murmurs, unsure what to say to make any of this better for her girlfriend. "Baby, what do you need? What can I do?"

"Can you sing?"

The request is so unexpected, and Quinn fumbles for a response.

"I know it's weird," Rachel rushes to say, thinking she's done something wrong. "I just need music, and I think it'll help if it comes from you."
Quinn audibly swallows. "Well, based on Jesse's critics, I'm occasionally sharp, so my singing to you may or may not give you more of a headache."

"You've definitely improved."

Quinn lets out a delicate snort. "You have to say that."

"I don't have to say anything, and you know it."

Quinn hums in thought. "Maybe I can play some piano for you, instead," she suggests.

"You've never played for me before."

"I know."

"Are you sure?"

"Will it make you feel better?"

"Immensely."

Quinn immediately starts moving again, leaving her room with Rachel still on the phone. "Do you have any requests?" she asks.

"Surprise me."

Quinn intends to.

She doesn't really discuss playing the piano with Rachel, because she's never felt as if she stands up to her musically. She knows she's gifted, but it's never been something she would pursue.

It's not a passion, as it were.

The music doesn't live in her the way it does in Rachel, or even Blaine. She knows it doesn't live in Kurt, because his passion is fashion, and she doesn't know Santana anymore to say for sure what fuels her fire, and she's learned enough about Brittany to know she lives for dance.

They all have their things.

Quinn's starting to accept that hers might be Art.

Or soccer.

Maybe, both.

If that isn't something monumental, she doesn't know what is. It just makes her think about Kelsey, and about her now-complete portfolio that she's started sending out to a few universities.

Of course, she already applied to Yale.

Her father might not care about her, but he definitely cares where she goes to school, and anything less than his Alma Mater is unacceptable.

The man is in for the shock of his life when the tenth of February hits.

When Quinn gets back to the library, Martha is still there, and Quinn politely asks if she can have the room. With a nod, Martha leaves, absentely informing her that she'll organise for more
cardboard boxes for packing the books.

Quinn settles on the bench once the door closes behind Martha. She sets her phone on the piano's top, switching it to speaker.

"Rach?"

"I'm here."

"This is for you," she says, and then immediately begins to play River Flows in You by Yiruma. It's one of her favourite pieces, by a long shot. She fell in love with it the second she heard it, and she scoured high and low for the sheet music, learned to play it on her own, and she's never forgotten a single note of the masterpiece since.

Rachel's sniffles when the piece is over aren't a surprise, and Quinn seamlessly goes into Nuvole Bianchi by Ludovico Einaudi, which is another personal favourite. It's sad and beautiful, and Quinn always thinks of the past when she hears it.

She thinks of the future when she plays it.

A future with Rachel, when they might be just a little less messed up than they are right now.

Quinn plays another three pieces before Rachel sounds calm enough when she speaks.

"Why have you never played for me before?"

There are a number of things Quinn could say, but she decides on, "It just didn't come up. It's never been important until now." Which is kind of true.

"You're wonderful, Quinn," Rachel says. "It must be amazing to witness you play." She hums softly. "I recognise only the first song. When do I get to watch you in action?"

"When do I get to watch you sing?"

Rachel lets out a soft, exhausted laugh. "You watch me sing every Monday, Quinn," she says.

Quinn hums. "Will you sing for me, one day?" she asks. "We'll trade." Then, with a gasp, she says, "Hey, I'll play while you sing. We'll actually make music together, that can actually be heard. Oh, my God. Why have we never done this before? Jesus, Berry, we're slacking."

This time, when Rachel laughs, it sounds less tiresome, and Quinn can tell she's feeling better. "I love you," Rachel says, and Quinn resists the urge to scramble to switch her phone off of speaker.

She's fine.

It's fine.

Her parents aren't even home.

They're actually already back in Washington D.C., and Quinn is relieved by that. It allows her the opportunity to claim things from this fake life, merely setting herself up for the future. She's managed to do nearly everything she and Hiram discussed and, the day she turns eighteen, the pressures of the surname Fabray will be a distant memory.

"If you're trying to get out of collaborating with me by buttering me up with all those pretty words, you've got another thing coming, Berry."
Rachel just laughs again, and Quinn is filled with a pleasant sense of accomplishment. "I can't wait to see you," she says. "If I could, I would leave New York, right now."

Quinn bites her bottom lip, wary of how her next words are going to be received. "Do you actually mean that?" she asks.

"I - " she immediately starts to respond, and then stops, sighing. "No."

"Look, I'm not saying you don't have a right to be mad, because you definitely do," she says. "Maybe things are getting lost in translation, and the fact that the two of you aren't actually talking to each other is only going to perpetuate the bad feelings." Quinn sighs. "Just, talk to her, okay? And actually listen. You don't have to meet with this guy if you don't want to, and she has no right to force you to. I just think that things are only going to get worse if you leave them as they are now. If you go back to school in this state, it's just going to get uglier, and I don't want that for you."

Rachel groans softly. "Why do you have to make so much sense?"

Quinn chuckles softly. "We really should learn how to take our own advice, shouldn't we?"

"I still think we're doing quite well, given the circumstances."

"As in, we could be high-functioning alcoholics, and yet we're just somewhat self-destructive?"

"Exactly."

Quinn laughs out loud, her head shaking in amusement. "What am I ever going to do with you?"

"Love me." Her voice sounds small, even to Quinn's ears.


While her talk with Quinn helps put things into perspective, somewhat; Rachel can't help the lingering anger she feels at merely the thought of her mother comparing her situation with Quinn to the Brody thing.

God.

Why is this even a thing?

Why is Shelby making it a thing?

Rachel, out of everybody, should understand that love is love, right? Age is just a number, and all that, and she suspects she's being slightly hypocritical, but this is her mother.

Her mother, who is using Rachel's sexuality as some kind of bargaining chip to make herself feel better about the truth that she's dating a child.

Merely thinking about it is giving her a headache. She doesn't actually know if her mother is home, but she still ventures out of her room to get herself a glass of water.

She's upset.

She also wants just one thing to be easy.
It's a surprise and also not to find Shelby in the kitchen, quietly sitting at the breakfast nook as she nurses a cup of coffee and stares solemnly into space.

Rachel feels guilty for a few seconds, but her anger clouds all of that in seconds. They can all be miserable; separate and together.

She walks into the room in silence, aware that Shelby is tracking her movements. Shelby knows what it means when she drinks a glass of water, and she kind of just wants her mother to do something, anything, to make everything better.

Maybe Shelby can sense it, because she says, "I'm sorry," and Rachel accepts that it's a start.

"I'm sorry, too," she replies, and the atmosphere between them gets less heavy.

"I should never have tried to use your sexuality against you," Shelby continues, her gaze trained on her own hands. "It was unfair and uncalled for, and I don't want you ever to think I don't accept you. Because I do. I love you, Rachel, and all I want is for you to be happy, and if it makes me a terrible mother for wanting you to be happy with me, then so be it."

Rachel sighs. "You're not terrible," she says. "Believe me, I know of terrible mothers, and you're definitely not one of them."

Shelby has a feeling Rachel is referring to Quinn, but she's not going to ask. She's learned what not to ask about the mysterious blonde.

"You were right, though," Rachel says, nibbling at her bottom lip. "I do understand how 'unconventional' relationships can be viewed, and I get how attraction and emotions just happen, as it were." She shakes her head. "What irks me, though, is that you assumed I would be more understanding of this, just because I'm in a relationship that the general society frowns upon."

Shelby nods to show she's listening.

"I don't think I'm okay with this," she says. "I don't know if I'll ever be, to be honest, but I too want you to be happy." She fiddles with the hem of Quinn's soccer jersey, her need to be close to her girlfriend all too telling. "If he makes you happy, then I guess that's it, right? There's nothing more to it."

"But -"

Rachel shakes her head. "No, Mom," she says. "I don't want to discuss it anymore. You're in a relationship. We don't have to bond over it, okay? I leave in two days, and then you can go back to what you've been doing without having to worry about what I think about it."

Shelby blinks repeatedly, unsure what exactly Rachel is telling her. She's not being entirely clear, but it's obvious she's reached her threshold. If this is the best she's going to get for now, then Shelby's going to take it.

At least Rachel is talking to her.

"Okay," Shelby eventually says. Then: "Is there anything specific you want to do with your last day?"

Rachel presses her lips together. "I have a shopping list," she says. "I didn't get Christmas presents for Santana, Brittany, Kurt, Blaine and Jesse."
"Jesse? As in your show choir director?"

Rachel nods with a shrug. "He's really pushed me this semester," she says. "And he made me lead soloist. I think he deserves at least a chocolate bar."

Shelby lets out an unexpected laugh, and she's just so relieved. She doesn't think anything has actually been resolved, but this is better than nothing. At least they're talking to each other.

"And Quinn?"

Rachel automatically smiles, and Shelby thinks Quinn is the best thing to happen to her daughter in a long, long time. "Technically, I already gave her a gift, but I'm not against buying things for her." She shifts her weight slightly. "She's entirely too awkward about gifts. Both giving and receiving them. She turns into a tomato, I swear."

Shelby just smiles, absently wondering if they'll ever reach a point of comfort where she can talk about Brody. She's not holding her breath.

"Am I allowed to get her a gift?" Shelby asks.

Rachel hesitates, studying her closely, as if she's waiting for the catch. "Why?" she eventually just asks.

"I assume Quinn is partly responsible for the conversation we just had," she says. "And she doesn't even know what more she's given me, Rachel. Do you have any idea how amazing it is to see you smiling and singing again? I don't even know what I could say or do for her to let her know how thankful I am for what she's done."

"Mom," she murmurs.

"I'm just saying."

"She would freak out," Rachel says with a giggle. "She would probably combust; I'm not even kidding."

Shelby laughs. "Well, then we better find her a good one, huh?"

"Everything is better with bacon."

Tori laughs as she dips a carrot stick into a jar of peanut butter, her legs kicking out in front of her as she sits on the kitchen island.

"Even cereal."

"That's disgusting, Q."

Quinn dodges the carrot stick that gets thrown at her, and quickly flips the strips of bacon she's frying in a pan. It's late on Quinn's last night in Hartford and, while she recognises she should be sad about it, she's really not.

She's moving on to another chapter of her life, and she's going willingly.

Martha has gone to bed, and it's just Quinn and Tori up and about. Quinn had a craving for bacon,
and Tori followed her into the kitchen. She can't help but wonder if Tori can feel that this is the end.

As soon as Quinn leaves Hartford, it's over. It's either she successfully gets out… or she… doesn't. Either way, it's unlikely she and Tori are ever going to be able to do anything like this again.

Once the bacon is done, Quinn turns off the burner and beams at her snack.

"Are you dipping it in chocolate sauce?" Tori asks.

Quinn considers it, and then shakes her head. "I think tonight has to be classic," she says. "Why? Do you want chocolate sauce?"

"I told you I'm not having bacon," she says.

"I asked you if you wanted chocolate sauce," Quinn quips. "The bacon is mine, T. You can have the sauce."

"Shut up," Tori mutters.

Quinn just laughs, and then grabs a plate. Once she's got all her things sorted, she pinches Tori's arm, and then heads out of the kitchen.

Tori scrambles to gather her carrots and peanut butter, and then follows after her. They end up back in the living room, and Quinn puts on a random movie that neither of them even watches.

Quinn is too busy with her bacon, and Tori is too busy watching Quinn. She's different, now, and she's beautiful. She seems less burdened, somehow, as if she's almost free, and Tori is unquestionably jealous of her.

If ever Tori were to… give in to her Sapphic desires, she can't see herself with anyone other than Quinn. Because, it was more than just sex for her, and she hates that Quinn thinks it wasn't.

"I love you," Tori blurts out, and Quinn freezes mid-chew, her eyes snapping towards Tori's face. "I mean, of course I love you, Quinn." She bites her bottom lip. "I did then, and I do now. It wasn't just about sex, okay? I'm sorry you ever felt that way."

Quinn visibly doesn't know how to respond to that, and the deer in headlights look on her face is so stupidly endearing that Tori can't help but still love her.

She's always going to love this girl.

Quinn clears her throat. "Rachel thinks I have a lot of unresolved feelings about the two of us," she says.

Tori's eyes widen. "She knows about me?"

Quinn frowns. "Of course she does," she says. "She knows everything." She pauses. "Well, she will. Eventually. We haven't been together that long."

It's jealousy, Tori knows. It settles harshly in the pit of her stomach, and she swallows thickly.

Quinn laughs. "She's not really a fan of you," she says.

"Oh? Why?"
Quinn shrugs, but she doesn't respond. The answer is complicated, and she doesn't really want to get into the intricacies of that on her last night,

She'll discuss it with her therapist, some time in the future.

Tori takes the silence in stride. "You're not coming to my wedding, are you?"

Quinn sets her plate on the coffee table and turns her body to face Tori. "No, I'm not," she says.

Tori breathes out slowly. "Please tell me you'll be careful."

"Of course."

"I hope she's worth it."

Quinn shakes her head. "You still don't get it," she says. "This isn't about Rachel. It's about me. I was always going to try to get out, T. Rachel isn't a reason or incentive. I won't survive any other kind of life and, just the fact that I get to spend it with Rachel is a bonus."

Tori sighs. "She's it for you, isn't she?"

Quinn doesn't even hesitate. "She is, yes," she says. "I didn't know love like this could exist, and I can't imagine ever feeling this way about a man."

Tori closes her eyes for a moment. "And, you never felt that way about me, did you?"

Here, Quinn pauses. "I - I thought I did, maybe," she says. "I was young, and I think I confused my feelings for something else." She fiddles with the hem of her sweater. "We could never be real love, because we were never real."

Tori doesn't expect it to hurt, but it does, and she has to look away. She's horrified by the tears pooling in her eyes, and she doesn't want Quinn to see them. It's embarrassing, really, because she's the one who first said goodbye.

"When did you become the mature one between the two of us?"

"I'm pretty sure I've always been," Quinn says, and it's the truth. The mere fact that Tori hasn't been able to move on from any of this proves that. Quinn has been a grownup since she was, well, born.

Tori forces herself to smile. "At least I still look younger than you do," she says. "Seriously, Quinn. What is up with that?"

The joke ties into a lot of Quinn's insecurities, but she's going to take it as it is, because Tori is trying to lighten the mood.

She lets it go, but still chooses to say, "It might not have been like I feel with Rachel, but I did love you too." She smiles sadly. "Sometimes, I still do."

And that's that about that.

Rachel, in general, is a thoroughly impatient person. She's always been. She doesn't like waiting for things, and the fact that Quinn is a full two hours behind Rachel's arrival back at Dalton is making her snappy and grumpy.
Brittany picks up on her mood immediately, and then steers Santana away to her own bedroom. She imagines Rachel will want some alone time when Quinn does eventually get here, and she knows they can catch up on their holidays over dinner.

Rachel busies herself with unpacking while she waits, her bedroom door wide open, so she'll see the exact moment Quinn arrives. She's fidgety and anxious, and she doesn't know how she's ever going to survive any length of time away from Quinn, now that they're together.

Surely, she can find a way to convince Quinn to come to New York with her once they graduate. She's aware that Quinn's parents expect her to attend Yale, which Quinn actually would have jumped at, but now things are changing.

Quinn probably, definitely, won't be going to Yale.

Right now, she has the entire world at her feet, and Rachel can only hope that wherever Quinn chooses to go isn't too far away from New York. Rachel thinks the two of them have been through enough without adding on trying to make long-distance work.

Please can just one thing be easy.

God, what if Quinn ends up in a Chicago with Kelsey for her Art? Rachel knows there's a rather booming theatre scene in that city, and she may or may not be open to pursuing a career there.

But.

New York is New York, and she has a feeling Quinn won't let her end up anywhere else. Quinn believes in her in ways that -

Rachel freezes at the first sight of a mop of blonde hair, and a smile automatically blooms across her face. She physically has to stop herself from skipping across the corridor, but she does move to stand in her own doorway to watch as Quinn shuffles towards her door. She's carrying her own backpack, but two sophomore boys have her large suitcase and her tog bag respectively.

Rachel can just smile as Quinn thanks them with a somewhat sleepy smile and unfocused eyes. Her girlfriend is so high. She even giggles to herself.

She waits until the boys have disappeared to make her way to Quinn's room, picking up the tog bag by the door and carrying it across the threshold and closing the door behind her.

Quinn startles at the sound of the click of the door's lock, spinning around to face the intruder. Her eyes immediately light up when they land on Rachel, and she closes the space between them in a few, quick strides.

Rachel didn't realise how much she missed being in Quinn's arms until she's back in them. She holds onto Quinn's waist tightly, her hands fisting the fabric of her school jersey. Her eyes are closed, and her breathing is unsteady.

"I missed you so much," Rachel says into her shoulder, and she doesn't even care how needy it makes her sound. "I don't want to spend another day apart from you."

Quinn's grip tightens at the sound of her words, but she says nothing. She presses soft kisses to Rachel's hair, soaking in everything she can about the girl in her arms.

The hug lasts for almost eight minutes, and Rachel is the one who initiates the release. Though, she doesn't go too far, pulling back just enough to look at Quinn's face.
"I don't know how you don't get drug-tested every time you get back to school," she says. "You look so hopped up on something really quite lovely."

Quinn's smile is slightly goofy, and she looks adorable. "It was a bad flight," she says quietly.

"Turbulence?"

"The emotional variety."

Rachel lifts up onto her toes and kisses Quinn's cheek, and then smiles when Quinn turns her head so their lips can meet. Rachel feels everything just... settle within her, at the feel of Quinn's kiss.

It's slow, languid, even lazy. There's no rush, and Rachel finds herself smiling every time Quinn's tongue tickles the roof of her mouth. She's missed this. She's missed just being able to be with Quinn.

Who is the one to slow the kiss and bring it to an end, pulling back slowly and breathing heavily. It takes her a moment to force her eyes open, and she rests her forehead against Rachel's.

"I need to nap," Quinn says; "and I really don't want to fall asleep while kissing you and standing up."

"Would you rather be kissing me and lying down?"

Quinn chuckles. "Yeah," she says; "we can do that."

It's cute, Rachel thinks, that Quinn even attempts to stay awake once she's horizontal. She settles on her back, Rachel half on top of her, and she tries very hard to stay alert, merely humming in response to everything Rachel says.

Rachel is so charmed; she's sure she's falling more and more in love with this human being with every second that passes.

"We should start a band," is the last thing Quinn murmurs before she slips into slumber, and Rachel just continues to lie with her, content to listen to her steady breathing and to watch her gorgeous face.

Eventually, Rachel does get up, but she doesn't leave. Instead, she proceeds to unpack Quinn's suitcase, easily noting which clothes are meant for the laundry and which ones are going straight back into her closet.

Rachel doesn't read too much into the fact that she knows exactly where each item of clothing goes. Quinn is very particular about this type of thing and, somehow, Rachel has managed to pick up on all the intricacies of Quinn's slight obsessive compulsiveness.

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Once she's finished with the suitcase, she starts on the tog bag. It's not exactly filled with clothes. There are books and sketch pads and art supplies and all sorts of other trinkets that scream of Quinn's childhood.

Of Lucy.

Rachel isn't sure where they're all supposed to go, so she settles for lining everything up on Quinn's desk for her to put away herself, before she zips away the empty tog bag into the suitcase and puts them both away.
Because she's nosy, Rachel lifts what looks to be an old photo album and moves to sit on the floor by Quinn's bed. She leans against it, stretches her legs out on the carpet in front of her and opens the album.

Rachel thinks she's prepared, but she's definitely not.

She actually gasps at the first sight of a baby Quinn Fabray. She twists her head to look at the picture on Quinn's pin board, and the two babies look so different. She looks days old in the one on the board, but a few months' old in the photo album.

She looks like Quinn.

Well, like Lucy, and Rachel isn't prepared for the sight of big, hazel eyes and soft, dark blonde curls. She looks so, so precious, and Rachel is pretty sure her ovaries are starting to sing.

She wants a baby that looks exactly like Quinn. She wants to be a mother to Quinn's baby and, okay, that's a terrifying thought for a teenager, surely.

Doing her best to ignore those thoughts, she continues to page through the album, swooning as Quinn gets older in the handful of pictures on display. There are no pictures of Quinn and her parents, but a few of Quinn with a woman who must be Mary.

There's one from when Quinn was about six years old, and she's smiling a toothless smile straight at the camera, and Rachel almost starts crying at the innocence in her eyes.

Because, in the later years, it's obvious that the lightness is gone. Her gaze grows darker and heavier as time passed. Her body also physically changes, growing heavier, and the pictures showcase a girl with glasses and braces.

A girl who looks so, so sad.

The pictures are scarce, and then there's Tori.

Rachel thinks she could have gone her entire life without knowing what the woman looks like. It makes her more real. It makes her human.

Quinn mentioned that she spent some time with the woman over their Break, which made Rachel slightly uncomfortable, but she knew it was something Quinn needed. She needed the closure, and now it's over.

She's the one Quinn loves, and that's all that matters.

It's when the pictures change, though. Quinn thins out, turning from Lucy into Quinn in many, many ways. Rachel wonders how much influence Tori actually had on the twelve-year-old when they first started out, but the physical change in Quinn is almost frightening.

She's beautiful.

She's always been beautiful.

Rachel wonders if this is the time in history when Quinn's disagreement with food started. She can't help thinking that Tori might have even encouraged it, and she has yet another complication when it comes to the strange woman.

Still, Rachel can't begrudge her too much, because there are pictures of a smiling Quinn in her
early teenage years, and the smiles almost reach her eyes.

Rachel must spend longer than she expects studying the few pictures that track Quinn's growth into
the girl she now knows because, before she knows it, there are warm lips against her cheek.

She automatically smiles, and Quinn hums.

"You're here," Quinn murmurs.

"I'm not spending any time away from you for at least the next six hours," Rachel informs her.
"You're stuck with me, Fabray."

Quinn chuckles softly, her breath warm against Rachel's skin. "You'll hear no complaints from
here."

Rachel turns her head to look at Quinn's face. "Are you feeling better?"

She nods. "Though, I'll feel a lot better if you were to come up here and kiss me."

Rachel tilts her head back, resting it against the bed. "What time did you schedule the prefects' 
meeting?"

Quinn moves to check the time on her phone that's sitting on her nightstand, and then groans.
"Well, so much for that," she complains. "It starts at five." She shakes her head. "Why didn't you 
say anything when I decided five o'clock on the day we get back was a good idea for a torturous 
meeting?"

Rachel shrugs. "All I know is I couldn't wait to see you," she says. "I didn't really care about 
anything else."

Quinn nuzzles the side of her face. "Well, I mean, we do still have half an hour," she whispers. 
"Get your butt up here, so I can touch it."

"Welcome back," Quinn starts, smiling warmly, despite the murmur of discontent from her fellow 
prefects. "We're officially in our final semester as high school students."

Now, if that isn't something to sing about, Quinn isn't sure what is.

"We have quite a bit to get through, so I hope you're all comfortable." She shifts in her seat, 
casually paging though her notebook to get to the agenda for this first meeting of the new year. 
While she would rather be kissing Rachel, she knows this transfer of information is important.

"We're almost there," she says. "We're hitting the final stretch, and then we get to say goodbye to 
these uniforms forever."

That gets her a good chuckle, which she uses as permission to get into the nitty-gritty of their 
positions.

She's just got to her second point - the disgusting litter situation - when she feels it.

Rachel's foot.

Sliding along her calf.

Her breath hitches, which she hastily turns into a cough. She has a quick sip of her water, deftly
shooting Rachel a warning look… that the girl happily ignores. She's pure innocence to the untrained eye, but Quinn knows better.

Quinn glances nervously at Santana, who's sitting beside Rachel, but the Latina is scribbling something in her notebook, that is probably not even prefect-related.

With a sigh, Quinn continues with the meeting and does her best to ignore the sensations of Rachel Berry merely touching her. She was already rather worked up earlier, and Rachel's ministrations definitely aren't helping.

By some miracle, Quinn manages to get to her last point. "And, finally, we have a Valentine's Dance to plan and organise. Like with the Halloween dance, we'll need a committee to be headed by a few of us. Are there any takers?"

Almost predictably, Kurt raises his hand, and she smiles at him all too knowingly. He texted her numerous times over their Break about it, shooting out theme ideas and all the various ways he intends to add a certain Kurt Hummel spin on the entire event.

"Don't you worry about a thing," he says, almost bouncing in his seat. "I'll take care of everything."

Quinn can't help the relief she feels at the sound of that, because planning a dance is literally the last thing she wants to do. She does take note of the prefects who are willing to help. She'll bring up the committee to their entire year during their next class meeting, and she's going to have to fill in Mr Schuester on all the newest developments.

And, somewhere in all of that, she's going to have to handle this Rachel situation.

On the one hand, Quinn is immensely relieved that Rachel is pushing the limits of their physical relationship, but Quinn’s unsure what to do when it gets turned into a game.

She doesn't know how to compete without knowing the rules.

It's a conversation they should probably have at some point, and preferably before Rachel's foot rises any higher, because it's getting dangerously close to -

Oh.

Quinn squeaks, which gets her a curious look from the other prefects. She blushes madly, and swats at Rachel's foot with her left hand. The girl giggles without any sound, and Quinn resists the urge to glare at her.

"With that decided, I think that's it," Quinn finally says. "Are there any questions?"

Just one.

From Blaine.

About what to do with some of the complaints he's received from various students about a range of school matters.

"Well, you know we have a Student Representative Council," Quinn answers. "They shouldn't be coming to you, Blaine. Each class has a representative, and they should go to them with their complaints, and we'll deal with them in the monthly Council meeting."

Blaine just nods because, yes, he does know.
"They go to him because they like him," Lauren says.

Candice nods. "He's totally approachable and no offence guys, but some of you are so intense; it's actually quite scary." She says this with a pointed look at Quinn, Rachel and Santana.

And, okay, it may or may not be completely inappropriate, but Quinn can't stop herself from laughing. Rachel joins in a beat later, and then Kurt does, and the three of them just die of laughter as everyone else looks at them as if they're losing their minds.

Quinn meets Rachel's gaze, and something passes between them that feels both heavy and light. It's almost magical, she stupidly thinks. This thing between them is everything and nothing, and the world is exactly as it should be.

Quinn finally ends the meeting, wishing them a good new semester and making sure they know they can contact her whenever they need to. Her door, while closed sometimes, is always open, which earns her a good chuckle.

Quinn remains in her seat as she watches the prefects start to leave, chatting away to one another and actually smiling about being back. Dalton Academy has been her safe haven for some years now, and she has to admit that whatever happens after she leaves this place terrifies her.

Well, a lot of things terrify her, but she's working on it.

And, right now, the thing she's still coming to accept is that Rachel Berry is quite possibly the love of her life, and she's going to do everything she can to hold onto her.

Said girl is lingering a bit, even though she knows Santana is in a rush to get back to Brittany, and then slowly make their way down to the dining hall.

She almost expects the voice, and she lets out a breath of relief when Quinn speaks.

"Rachel," she says, and both she and Santana turn to look at the blonde. "A word, please?"


And, the thing is, Rachel suspects she's right. Quinn doesn't look particularly amused by her antics, but Quinn is generally difficult to read on her good days, and Rachel has gone a few days without seeing her, so anything could be happening right now.

"I'll meet you for dinner," Rachel tells Santana, and then watches as the girl leaves the boardroom, closing the door behind her.

It takes Rachel a moment to turn around to face Quinn, looking particularly sheepish. "Hi," she says.

Quinn doesn't immediately respond. Rather, she finishes packing her things away, and then she finally looks up. It's with a commanding, serious tone that she says, "Sit down."

Rachel frowns for a beat, and then resumes her seat.

For the longest time, they just stare at each other. But, then, Quinn is moving, and Rachel feels the need to brace herself. Quinn rises to her feet, and then steps closer to Rachel, a curious look on her face.

"Quinn, what are you - "
"Don't talk," Quinn says, and Rachel's mouth snaps shut. "I'm not sure what the protocol is here, but I think you and I need to have a little chat."

Now, Rachel understands that her girlfriend is undeniably good looking. She's physically stunning, and her general appeal is amplified by her intensity and apparent mystery.

She's beautiful, and she's hot. She has this… swagger about her that sets Rachel's entire being on edge. She's desperate to touch at all times, and she finds herself always just… looking.

Quinn is many, many things.

But this is the first time Rachel truly thinks of her as sexy.

Dangerously sexy.

Quinn moves to lean against the large table, her arms folding across her chest and regards Rachel carefully. She's close enough that her thigh is pressed against Rachel's, and the contact is buzzing.

It's heated, and Rachel has the sudden urge to rise up and, well, kiss Quinn senseless. She burns with the desire, and she digs her nails into her palms to stop herself from launching at the unsuspecting blonde.

"Rachel," Quinn says. "Do we need to have another talk about our physical relationship?"

They both already know the answer to that question, but Rachel still nods. "We probably should," she says; "but I, more or less, want to kiss you until we both can't breathe."

Quinn sucks in a sharp breath. "Right now?"

Rachel nods as she rises to her feet, and then moves to stand between Quinn's legs, forcing her to spread them slightly. "Sit," she gently instructs, and Quinn shifts backwards until she's sitting comfortably on the tabletop.

"Are we really doing this?"

Rachel doesn't answer her, choosing rather to close the distance between their mouths. Her arms automatically move up to Quinn's neck, drawing their bodies closer together.

Quinn moans softly, her lips parting to grant Rachel access. Their kiss is moderately slow, but definitely heated. There's an undercurrent of danger and the general sense that they could get caught that makes the experience that bit more, and Quinn's fingers reflexively close around the fabric of Rachel's sweater.

"Rachel," Quinn warns when Rachel's hands slide down the front of her chest. "Someone could walk past any second."

"I don't care," Rachel murmurs. "I haven't had the opportunity to kiss you in way too long."

Quinn forces their kiss to slow, and then pulls back deliberately. She chuckles at Rachel's pout, and then pecks her slightly-swollen lips. "We can make out later, I promise," she says.

"We also should probably talk," she says in return.

"But, kiss first, right?"

Rachel smiles all too knowingly. "Of course, baby. There's no other way."
And then, contrary to what they've both reluctantly decided, Rachel drags her nails down Quinn's stomach, and then along her thighs. It forces a pleasurable hum from the blonde, and Rachel smiles in victorious response.

"I love you," Rachel says, stepping even further into Quinn, who has no choice but to lock her ankles behind Rachel's knees.

"I missed you so much," Quinn murmurs, and then they're kissing again. It's faster, now. Almost desperate, as their mouths move against each other, tongues and teeth clashing in the proverbial fight for dominance.

Quinn leans back, and Rachel almost falls into her.

"One day, we're going to make out on this table," Rachel says, practically crawling into her. "I swear, baby, before we leave…"

Quinn nips at her bottom lip, her breathing unsteady. "God, I love you," she whispers. "I love you."

For the first time, Rachel wonders why Quinn actually has no qualms about expressing her love. It's something she's been meaning to ask, and she wonders if Quinn has ever spoken to her therapist about the fact she was starved of the emotion as a child.

Hasn't really experienced it, bar for Mary, probably.

Tori, to some extent.

And, now, Rachel.

Rachel's hands untuck Quinn's shirt, and then slide along her warm skim.

"Oh, fuck," Quinn complains, pulling back to peer at her with irritation. "Rachel, no, it's actually not okay that your hands are always so fucking cold. They are not going anywhere near my body until you sort that shit out."

Rachel blatantly ignores her, moving her hands up until she's cupping Quinn's breasts with both hands. Her smile turns smug when Quinn gasps, and then moans.

"Shut up," Quinn forces out, just before Rachel leans in to kiss her again. She has no choice but to give in because, while Rachel is usually the one who initiates their make-out sessions, she's not normally the aggressor.

Quinn wasn't sure she would like it, but Rachel taking control is kind of a turn-on, and she finds herself almost pulling Rachel onto the table with her.

Which, okay, really might have happened, if there wasn't a sudden slamming of a door somewhere further down the corridor.

Rachel practically flies off her, and Quinn scrambles to her feet as she futilely tries to straighten her uniform.

It all takes a moment, Rachel holding her breath and Quinn walking to the other side of the table, but they eventually realise that nobody is actually heading their way.

Another moment later, they look at each other, exchange significant looks, and then nervously chuckle into the space between them.
"We should probably talk."

"Yeah, we probably should."
Chapter 24

Chapter Twenty-Four

The all important talk happens later that night, even though Quinn is borderline exhausted and Rachel is feeling a little vulnerable and exposed.

But, they do need to talk and, okay, it might be the worst time to have this kind of conversation, because of who they are, intrinsically, and yet it's happening.

Rachel waits in Quinn's bedroom, while the Head Student does a nightly check that all the freshmen are, in fact, all in bed by nine-thirty.

Quinn does random checks during the four staggered bedtimes - sophomores at ten, juniors at ten-thirty and seniors at eleven - just to make sure the prefects are actually doing their jobs.

Rachel is trying not to read into the fact that she chose to do it tonight. Quinn does these things, because she's kind of an amazing Head Student, and she realises that the students are going to be particularly excitable tonight and, if Quinn doesn't enforce their bedtime, they're going to be grumpy and irritable in the morning.

Rachel loves her for it, even if she's a little irritated that their very important conversation has been postponed by an hour. In the meantime, though, she goes over what she intends to say when Quinn does get back. She knows they need to talk about their physical relationship, but she intends to talk about other things as well.

About college, and the future.

About New York and, possibly, babies.

About love, and about family.

She's had a lot on her mind these past few days, without Quinn, and they need to get everything out in the open if they're going to be successful going forward in this relationship.

Rachel doesn't think it's going to be an easy conversation, but it's necessary, and she's told herself that they're not going to kiss until they have a few things cleared up.

If that isn't incentive, she doesn't know what is, because Quinn really is the Devil to kiss.

Quinn looks slightly windswept when she finally gets back, and Rachel immediately starts to rethink her decision not to kiss her until they've talked.

"Sorry," Quinn says, smiling sheepishly. "I got caught in a discussion about the Goblet of Fire with the Brady twins when I was saying goodnight."

Rachel feels herself fall even deeper in love, and she can barely keep herself seated.

Quinn slips out of her shoes, setting them down beside her school bag, and then makes her way to where Rachel is sitting cross-legged Indian style on her bed.

"No," Rachel suddenly says, and Quinn freezes mid-step. "I'm sorry, I love you, but you can't sit with me while we do this," she explains. "Sit in your desk chair."
Quinn gives her a curious look, and then does as she's told. She suddenly looks apprehensive, and Rachel just wants to ease her discomfort.

Sucking in a deep breath, Rachel starts to speak. "Firstly, I love you," she says. "I love you, I love you. Before you told me about - about your parents, you asked me for some assurance, and I'm willingly giving it now. I don't really know how this conversation is going to go, because there are actually a few things I want to talk to you about, but I need you to know that the outcome of this talk changes nothing about what I feel for you. This, I promise you." She lets out a shaky breath. "I - I need the same from you."

Quinn barely hesitates. "I love you," she says. "I know we've both been through things in the past, and we've got a ways to go, but I can't imagine my life without you, and I never want to." She runs a hand over her face. "Whatever happens today or any day that comes, I know we're going to figure it out. I mean, we've made it this far, haven't we?"

Rachel snorts. "That shouldn't make me feel better, but it actually does."

Quinn laughs softly. "I'm here, Rachel. I'm constantly terrified, but I'm here, because I love you, and I'm in this with you. I love you."

Rachel feels something settle within her, and it's enough to get her talking. "There were already things we needed to talk about, but I think discussing what happened today is important for us." She swallows nervously. "I think it's pretty obvious that I'm attracted to you," she starts; "because I can't really stop myself from thinking about you and your body, or about how much I always want to be touching you."

Quinn opens her mouth to say something, but Rachel raises a hand to keep her quiet.

"I think - I think maybe I should talk and you should listen, and then you'll talk and I'll listen, and then we can have a conversation after that. Is that okay?"

Quinn just nods, absently shifting in her seat to get more comfortable.

"I didn't think I would actually want much of a physical relationship after everything that happened with Justin. It just didn't appeal to me, and I forced myself with Finn, because I needed to prove to myself that I could, you know?" She bites her bottom lip, feeling herself flush. "That I could like it. Being touched again, and actually touching. With him, it was different. I wouldn't go so far as to say I was uncomfortable, but I didn't really like it. Not the way I do with you."

"God, Quinn, all I want to do is be with you. Touch you, hold you and kiss you, and just be with you, and I find it terrifying, because I'm constantly on this edge, and all I want is to give myself to you." She closes her eyes for a moment. "I talked to Dr Howell at length about this, and about us. I was worried, you know, that we were both too screwed up to be in a healthy relationship. She made me explain how I see myself, and how I see you, and then try to explain how you see yourself and how you possibly see me, and what I've been able to conclude is that we're pretty much as messed up as we can be at this age, but that has no bearing on just how much I love you."

"This isn't some high school fling. It isn't even a 'for now' kind of relationship. We're dealing with forever here, and I really want to be a 'whole' part of this relationship. I don't want to give you just parts of me, because we both deserve all of me to be invested in us. The thing is that, sometimes, I'm not quite all right, and the fact that you love me regardless of that means everything to me. Do you even know what you do for me? Do you have any idea how fucking happy you make me?"

"That day, that man took so many things from me. He robbed me of my sense of self and safety,
and he took away my ability to trust and just be, and then you came along, and you were probably
more guarded than I was. Helping you helps me, and I figure it's the same for you, because I get
this sense or purpose when I'm with you. Like, you make me happy, and I make you happy, too. I
wake up smiling, you know? It's completely ridiculous, and you can laugh if you want to, but I
wake up in such an annoyingly good mood because I am just so happy that I get to love you.

"A lot of my happiness is to do with you, and I asked Dr Howell if that was something to be
worried about. Like, if things go sideways between us, what happens to me? And, really, my
dependency might not be entirely healthy and, yeah, she agrees with that part, but it might not be as
bad as I think. I love you and you love me, and we're in a committed relationship, so it's okay that
you and my general happiness go hand in hand.

"Because, God, I'm in this, Quinn," she says. "I'm with you and I'm in this relationship, and I can't
imagine wanting to be with anyone else. I've never felt this way about anyone else and, yeah, I've
had relationships before. Finn was the only one of note in Wallingford, but there were a few in
New York. I've been 'happy' in relationships, but it's nothing like this.

"Sometimes, I just look at you and I can't believe my luck. I honestly can't believe that every
decision I've ever made has led me to you, and this is the part that unsettles me. I was very, very
different before my assault. I was outspoken and forward, friendly to a fault and entirely too
trusting. I can't say that you and I would have been as compatible before, and I hate that there's a
part of me that's sometimes grateful that I've been through some kind of trauma.

"It disgusts me, really," she says. "But, then, I take a step back and reevaluate what I deem
important in my life now. Before, singing was my entire world. Dancing and acting, and my voice;
it was all I focused on, and I was borderline insufferable because of it. But then Justin did this
thing, and life just kind of shifted into perspective, and I've been able to see past my dreams of
fame and look at what else will make my life full.

"Don't get me wrong, I love to sing, and I'm so grateful that I've managed to hold onto that through
all the other changes in my life. But, it's not everything. If I had to choose between my family and a
potential career, I would choose my family. I would choose you, and I sometimes have to
acknowledge the part that Justin may or may not have played in making me see that before I lost
other pieces of myself."

Rachel sucks in a breath, trying to bring them back to the topic on hand: their physical intimacy.

"I've really missed you these past few days," she says. "Not just being able to touch you physically,
but being able to see you as a whole. I know we talked every day and there was Skype, but being in
the same room as you is different. I missed you, Quinn, and I don't want to go through any number
of days without you, okay? I can't.

"Which makes me think about graduation a little too much, and about what happens afterwards.
My intention is to go to New York. You know I've applied to a handful of schools there, and I
suspect it might be presumptuous of me, but I want you with me. I want us to have this strong,
adult relationship where we live together and get through domestic life together. I want to go
grocery shopping with you and cook in our kitchen with you.

"I know it sounds crazy. We've barely officially been together for two months, but this is it for me.
You are it for me, and I want this. I want this forever relationship with you, which forces me to
acknowledge that the kind of relationship I intend to have with you will require some level of
physical intimacy."

Rachel reads the slight distress in Quinn's features, and then she amends her own statement.
"Okay, not a requirement, but I won't expect you to stay with me forever without sex, Quinn. That's not fair to either of us. I did promise you that I would try, and I will. Just, not yet. I mean, I know I want to have sex with you." She flushes at the same time Quinn does. "I imagine it'll be quite great."

A slow, almost predatory, smirk spreads across Quinn's gorgeous face.

Rachel laughs softly. "I don't think it's going to happen any time soon, but you're the one, okay? I know you have more experience than me when it comes to... girl sex, and I trust you enough to make it... special. I just - I don't really trust myself at this moment. I don't know how I'll react to being... touched that way, and I'm not willing to risk it. Is - is that okay?"

Quinn blinks, and then nods.

"I don't - God, this is embarrassing - touch myself anymore," Rachel carefully admits. "I haven't since before that day, because I'm generally afraid to. I didn't really have much of a reason before you, either, but I think I might try."

Quinn is beet red, and Rachel just has to laugh at her.

"I think, maybe, I'd be okay with us pushing the limit a bit," Rachel says. "I love our make-out sessions. I love the feel of you pressed against me, and I love being able to touch you. You're gentle with me, and you use just the right amount of force. I don't feel unsafe with you, and I really just want to keep doing what we've been doing, and more."

Rachel drops her gaze, feeling small in ways she hasn't in a while.

"I haven't really told you this, but I - I actually, God, orgasmed when he was - " she stops, horrified. "There's very little I remember about the actual nineteen minutes, but I can't get over the way my - my body betrayed me." She scrubs at her face. "They - they said that I must have liked it," she forces out. "During the trial. It was part of his defence. It - it was horrible, and I don't, shit, I don't trust my - "

Quinn makes a pained sound, and Rachel's eyes snap towards her. "Rach," she whispers. "Please."

Rachel just nods, and then Quinn is shooting out of her seat and moving to hold her. She's careful, almost too afraid to hold Rachel too tightly when she's in this state.

Rachel leans into Quinn's gentle embrace, burying her face in her neck and breathing in the familiar and comforting scent of apples and cinnamon.

"I hate this," she forces out in a harsh breath. "I hate him, and I hate this."

Quinn just holds her, gently rubbing a hand up and down her back in an attempt to soothe her.

Rachel just sits for a while, focusing on her own breathing, and tries to time it against the beating of Quinn's heart.

Eventually, when she's calm enough, she says, "You can talk now."

Quinn lets out a small, amused breath, and then sighs. "I'm not really sure what to say," she carefully admits. "There were a lot of things said, and I'm not sure where to begin. The thing that sticks out for me is that you believe sex is a requirement for this relationship, which it's not. It's not, Rachel. Do I want it? Yes. Do I want it with you? Yes. Will I ever leave you because you won't put out? No."
Rachel just stares at her.

"I want it for you," she says. "I - I wish you could have a good, wonderful experience that could just erase everything he did. I know it doesn't necessarily work like that, but it's something I think about. Sex - it's supposed to make you feel good, and I hate that - " her voice catches. "God, I want to do that for you, Rachel, and I hope, one day, you'll be comfortable enough to let me."

Rachel just presses a kiss to her neck.

"I'm yours, you know?" Quinn says. "I'm entirely yours. I don't even belong to myself anymore and, okay, it fucking scares me, but I - I don't trust anyone else, which is a feat in itself, and I get that you have your own hang-ups about that, because… I do too."

Rachel lifts her head to look at her.

"I know you worry that you're the first person I've told 'I love you' and actually meant it."

Rachel blinks in response, absently wondering how she figured that out when she said nothing about it.

"I'll figure out a way to explain it," Quinn says, smiling slightly. "Right now, I just want to assure you that I want the same things you do. In terms of our official dating, yeah, it hasn't been all that long, but none of that means anything, Rachel. I want that life you're describing, because I don't want to spend any more days without you, either.

"Being away from you is horrible. I hate it. Maybe we're spoiled here at Dalton, with our rooms right across from each other, but I don't want anything different. I'm selfish, and I want more. I want all of you."

Here, Quinn pauses, thinking over all the words that have already been said.

"As for New York, I've applied to some schools in the area," she says. "I wanted Yale," she confesses quietly. "It always seemed like the place for me, but it's a Fabray Alma Mater, and I'm trying to keep clear of anything to do with my family. So, I could, and I would. I want to be with you, and I can see us together in New York, just going about life and facing every day and all its problems… together.

"Because, I think we're getting better at that, right? I'm… trying. There are things we need to discuss about what happened at home, and I know we still need to talk about your mother, Noah and Eric."

Rachel visibly flinches.

"I know," Quinn murmurs sympathetically. "But, we're here and we're together, and I love you, and we're going to figure this all out." She smiles lopsidedly. "I imagine you have this Dr Howell on speed dial, right?"

Rachel chuckles, and then hides her face in Quinn's neck again.

Quinn adjusts her hold, and draws Rachel closer, almost into her lap. "I'm as scared as you are," she says. "Maybe more, maybe less, about different things, but I'm in this, Rachel. I've been committed since, well, a long time ago. I'm in with both feet, and both hands, and all my belongings and all my fucking baggage and, if you're willing to put up with me, then I guess I kind of have to put up with you too, right?"
Rachel exaggerates a gasp as she pulls back sharply. "Quinn Fabray, I never."

"Ssh," Quinn says. "I'm talking."

Rachel pouts, and Quinn can't resist pecking her lips. Which turns into more of a kiss than she expected, and Rachel practically crawls into her lap, moving to straddle her legs and supporting her own weight on her knees.

"Rachel," Quinn breathes; "I thought we were supposed to be having a conversation."

"We are," Rachel whispers back, her hips shifting as she settles more comfortably. "My mouth is talking to your mouth."

Quinn laughs, and then surrenders, because she has no reason to fight this. Why would she, when the girl she intends to spend the rest of her foreseeable future with is literally sitting in her lap? "So, you think the sex with me is going to be quite great, huh?"

Rachel responds by sliding her tongue into Quinn's warm and inviting mouth, effectively shutting them both up.

"Why have I never been here before?"

Rachel asks the question with undisguised wonder in her voice, and Kurt can't help grinning at her enthusiasm.

"I thought I knew everything about this school."

Kurt laughs. "Rachel, you're acting as if I've taken you to Narnia," he says. "We're just coming to watch Quinn play soccer."

"Again, why have I never done that before?" she asks, and it's more to herself. Quinn is her girlfriend. She's supposed to be more supportive than this.

Kurt just shakes his head as he turns his attention to the field where the Dalton Academy Griffins are warming up for their first home game of the new year.

Quinn is leading her team through a few drills, and he's always marvelled at how unburdened she is when she's on the field. As if she can just let go of every expectation and just play.

It's actually beautiful to see.

"Why is their schedule so jam-packed?" Rachel asks him, and he tears his eyes away from the girls as they warm up on the grass.

"I don't know," he admits. "It's always been like that." Then: "And, in answer to your question about never having watched her before; you two weren't exactly friends before. And then she got injured and couldn't play, and then we went on Break, and now you're here."

"Now, I'm here," she murmurs, her eyes tracking Quinn as she guides her team through several exercises. She's dressed in her school tracksuit, looking as calm and foreboding as ever.

She looks… intense, and Rachel shouldn't be as turned on as she is just watching her… run.

But, she is.
God, she really, really is.

Kurt leans back slightly. "You should probably know that Quinn is actually really good," he says. "Like, really really good."

Rachel looks at him. "How good?"

"She could probably be playing for the national team."

Her brow furrows. "Why isn't she?"

"You're going to have to ask her about that yourself," he says. "It's my understanding that she's started to…open up to you about some things."

"She has," she reveals. "We're trying."

"I suppose that's the best we can ask for," he says, sighing.

"Does she talk to you?"

"Not really," he says. "She talks to me about prefect things and soccer things. Or fashion, and my dad. She likes talking about the choir but, other than that, we don't really delve any deeper. I'm the one who does most of the talking. She's a good listener."


"Oh, I'm sure," he says with a laugh.

A whistle sounds somewhere on the pitch, and Rachel watches as Quinn and the rest of the team head back into the locker rooms to strip to their kits and have their final team talk. Rachel can only imagine how intense that will be.

It's Quinn's first game in almost three months, and she's been a ball of nervous energy for a few days now.

Making out has been intense.

Everything about Quinn has been intense.

She's been a little distracted, too, but that could be for any number of reasons, right?

"Kurt," Rachel says; "Has Quinn mentioned anything to you about her birthday?"

He frowns. "Uh, no," he says. "I don't even know when it is."

Rachel suspects that the only person who might know is probably Santana, but that's not a talk she's ready to have. She can almost feel Brittany and Santana possibly working up to bringing up what they may or may not know about her relationship with Quinn in conversation.

"Why?" Kurt asks.

"I don't like not knowing," she says with a slight shrug. "And she knows it."

"It's driving you crazy, huh?"
"Like you wouldn't believe."

Kurt just laughs, and then falls silent when the two competing teams lead out and line up alongside the referees for the game.

Quinn looks tall and foreboding, her face set and giving nothing away. She's standing with her hands behind her back, and Rachel is tempted to take out her phone and take a picture of this particular facet of her gorgeous girlfriend.

Somehow, she resists.

After the National Anthem plays from the PA System, the teams move into position, and Quinn and the other team's captain meet with the referee for the coin toss.

Quinn wins, of course, and then it begins.

Kurt and Rachel are sitting in the third row, close enough to see all the action, and for Quinn to spot them easily.

"Oh, shit," Rachel finds herself saying the first time Quinn picks up the ball in the midfield and runs with it.

She gets unfairly tackled, but oh, shit.

Kurt nods, not taking his eyes off the field. "What did I tell you?"

For ten minutes, Rachel can barely look away from the way Quinn commands the field. She leads from the front in such a way that she seems so much older than she is. She barks out instructions and offers praise and direction as the play goes on.

"I don't even know what I'm watching," Rachel eventually says. "I mean, Quinn tried to explain some of it to me the other day, but I couldn't really follow."

Which is really because Quinn was topless, and her bra-clad breasts were right there. How was Rachel supposed to concentrate on anything else, really?

Kurt leans into her. "I know I'm about as gay as they come, but I actually like watching sports," he says. "And, not just the male ones," he adds with a saucy wink. "It's something my dad and I bond over, because there's very little else we have in common. I don't play sports, but we watch games together."

Rachel smiles at him, because she really likes learning pieces about him, and about Blaine, who she thinks would be perfect for Kurt, but she's trying not to get involved in that.

Apparently, Blaine has his sights set on an older guy who works in retail in the city.

"Anyway, I'm quite well versed in soccer," Kurt says. "I can help you figure it out, if you want?"

"Please."

And, so begins Rachel's soccer education.

Kurt talks her through the plays as they're happening, commentating quietly. He even successfully explains the offside rule when Quinn gets flagged, and Rachel is so proud that she finally understands that she shouts in discontent at the decision.
Kurt laughs, and Quinn shoots her an amused look.

The stands aren't exactly full. It is a Saturday morning, after all, but there are enough people to make substantial noise. Most are boys, and Rachel won't blame them, even if far too many are actually ogling her girlfriend.

Rachel can't deny it.

Quinn looks hot.

"Okay, look at this," Kurt says, grabbing her forearm. "Look at how Quinn draws the central defender with her into the midfield. It creates space for number seven to run in behind. Watch."

Rachel does.

She sees Quinn receive the ball, turn immediately, which leaves the defender flat-footed, and then she feeds a through-ball that number seven latches onto. Rachel recognises her as Gina Doherty, who shoots, only for the keeper to save it by pushing it outwards… straight into Quinn's path.

It's almost too easy the way Quinn slots the ball home, and then runs off towards the corner to celebrate the goal with her team.

Kurt and Rachel jump up together and shout their praises for Dalton's number nineteen. They even do a little dance, shimmy left and then right, and Quinn waves at them when she heads back to the centre circle for the restart.

Rachel swoons, and Kurt waves back with a stupid smile. Out of everyone who's come to see Quinn, they are the ones deemed important enough to be acknowledged.

It draws attention to them that they don't really see coming, until Kurt explains the way Quinn bends her run to get in behind the defence, and number ten - Sarah Goodman - feeds her the ball, which she turns into her second goal by shooting through the keeper's legs.

Quinn's celebration is a little more subdued this time, but her smile is wide and true, and she waves at Rachel and Kurt again, which makes them both blush.

"She's really good, isn't she?" a foreign voice says behind them, and both of them turn to see a tall, dark man sitting on the bench just above theirs. He's just dropped his phone from where he appears to have been filming the game.

Kurt recovers first. "Number nineteen?" he asks.

The man nods. "I've been watching Quinn Fabray for some years now, and she's constantly improving. Even in this environment."

Rachel's eyes widen in sudden realisation. "You're a scout," she states.

He nods, before holding out his hand for them both to shake. "Something like that, yeah. My name is Owen Masterson, and I've been trying to recruit your friend since she blew up in the girls' Varsity soccer league her freshmen year."

Rachel frowns. "I assume you're here because you've been unsuccessful?"

"Me and many others," he says solemnly. "She won't even hear what I have to say."

"But you keep coming back," Kurt points out. "Because she's that good."
Owen nods. "She's ageing out now, but we could have used her at Under Seventeen level."

Rachel blinks. "National level?"

Owen nods. "She's far too good for this," he says, absently gesturing at the field of play, where Quinn has just been unfairly tackled… again. "Excuse my eavesdropping, but I've been listening in on your commentary, and I think you both know the truth of what I'm saying."

Kurt nods with a sigh. "Her teammates don't read the game the same way she does," he says. "They can't find her when she makes her runs, and they don't - " he halts. "Yeah, she's too good for this," he concludes.

Owen looks at the field again, where Quinn is lining up to take the free kick she just won. "Watch this," he says as he reaches for his phone again, and both teens tense in anticipation. The stands actually fall silent. "The angle would probably suit a left-footer," Owen says, more to himself than anything. "I'm surprised she's taking it."

Kurt glances at him. "She's the only one she trusts to do it justice," he says.

Owen just nods.

Kurt keeps talking, mainly to Rachel. "We came out here last night, so she could practice. She made me stand in goal, which was just ridiculous. I think she shot from like fifty different angles, and this is one of them."

Rachel watches the concentration on Quinn's face, her own heartbeat rising as she waits. Quinn barely looks away from the ball until the referee blows her whistle for the free kick to be taken. And, then, with one glance up, Quinn decides, and then runs up to the ball.

Rachel sucks in a breath, and holds it as Quinn kicks the ball with the inside of her foot, bending it around the wall, and into the top corner of the goal.

The net ripples, and then the crowd goes wild.

Quinn just turns to face her team with her arms in the air and the goofiest smile on her face, because this girl has just scored a hat trick before half time.

Rachel waves back when Quinn acknowledges them again, clearly not seeing Owen sitting behind them.

Owen sighs when the half comes to an end, and the teams disappear into the locker rooms. "I would do anything to get her to…" he trails off. "If she doesn't want to play nationally, I can live with that, but college soccer is there, and she could do wonders if she wanted to. Full rides are in the cards for her, as long as she's got the grades."

"She's our Valedictorian," Kurt automatically says.

Owen huffs. "Is there anything she can't do?" he asks, almost rhetorically.

Kurt answers, anyway. "Probably not," he says. "She's athletically gifted, creative in unbelievable ways and she's generally a nice person. It's the worst, you know, when someone is pretty and smart and can actually sing and play the piano, and they're actually kind of nice to be around. It's like, seriously, can there be one thing wrong with you?"

"I'm serious, Rach," he protests. "She even bought me a vintage sewing machine for Christmas. I'm an Atheist, but she just wanted to get me a gift, so she did. Like, what the hell?"

Rachel shakes her head in amusement. "Would you believe me when I tell you she snores?"

"No fucking way."

Rachel laughs out loud. "Totally."

"I bet it's that dainty, princess kind of snoring," he grumbles, and she bumps him with her shoulder. "She caught a nap on my floor the other day, and I heard no such thing."

"Don't mention it to her," she says; "she'll develop a complex."

Kurt nods. "Of course."

It's something unspoken between them that the two of them have tasked themselves as two of Quinn's protectors. They've seen enough to know that behind all the bravado is a quiet little girl, whose only mistake was seeking love from people who were unable and unwilling to give it to her.

Owen butts into their conversation then. "You're both her friends," he starts. "You obviously care about her. I mean, what I can offer her is a fast track to a very promising future. I don't really know why she won't give any of us the light of day, but I'll keep coming. I want her."

In any other context, his words would probably be cause for concern, but Rachel can sense his devotion to Quinn's talent.

Rachel pins him with a look. "What colleges are you representing?" she asks.

"Right now, Princeton," he says. "Their program is one of the best, and she would get the most out of it. They're willing to deal, and I would really like the opportunity to present it to her. Hell, I could probably also get the Head Coach to come out here herself just to meet her."

Kurt furrows his brow. "You want us to talk to her, don't you?"

Owen presses his lips together. "I have to try another tactic," he says. "She's not going for anything else, and I figure her friends could probably get her to consider hearing what I have to say. That's all I ask. One meeting. If she doesn't like it, I'll leave her alone, however reluctantly. I'll probably cry about it for a few days, but I won't bother her again, I promise."

Rachel can't help her smile. "You're probably just the right side of dramatic for me," she says.

"And me," Kurt adds.

Rachel sighs. "Look, I won't speak for Quinn, but you must know she's her own person. I don't mind bringing it up to her, because we've all been discussing colleges lately, and it's nice to know we have all these options when Acceptances and Rejections start being sent out." She sighs. "All I'm saying is I make no promises. I'm not going to try to... manipulate her."

"Of course not," Owen quickly says. "I would never ask you to do something like that."

For whatever reason, Rachel believes him.

Owen reaches into his jacket pocket and produces his business card. "Here," he says, handing it to Rachel. "This is my number. I'll probably try to make it out to a few more games this season, so we can schedule a meeting around one of them, if she agrees."
"Okay," Rachel says.

"Okay," Owen echoes.

Kurt smiles at them both. "Okay," he says, drawing out the word. "They're coming back on. Enough business talk. Five bucks says Quinn scores a fourth."

"Ten says she scores five in total."

Owen chips in. "Double hat trick, for twenty."

None of them win.

"How did I not know?" Rachel muses as she and Quinn head back to their rooms from the soccer field. "Like, how did I not know you were this soccer demon?"

Quinn groans. "I don't think I like being referred to as a demon," she says.

Rachel ignores her. "I didn't think it was even humanly possible to single-handedly destroy another team the way you dismantled Reading House. It - it was appalling, and yet so satisfying."

Quinn rolls her eyes, hiking her gym bag further up her shoulder. She's still in her uniform and cleats, choosing rather to shower and change in her bedroom.

She's also not completely oblivious to the way Rachel has been checking her out since she stepped onto the field.

"Quinn," Rachel says. "You scored seven goals. Seven." She raises her hands to show her the number with her fingers, and then drops them. "I'm not really in the know with this whole soccer thing yet, but even I know that's intense. How do you feel?"

"Sweaty and grimy, and in desperate need of a shower."

"Quinn."

She sighs. "I feel a little bad, to be honest," she admits as they near the residence building. "I didn't set out to embarrass them. I guess I was a little excited to be back, and I got carried away. I usually have better control than that."

Rachel stops walking immediately. "Wait," she says. "Are you trying to tell me that you normally deliberately play at less than your level?"

Quinn doesn't respond, which is answer enough.

"Why?" Rachel asks, as she gets them moving again.

Quinn sighs again. "I - I just do," she says; "otherwise days like this happen, and I score seven goals without really meaning to."

Rachel lets out a small laugh. "I'll give you that one, because you had no idea about that seventh one," she says. "It just bounced off of you."

"Totally not my fault," Quinn agrees.

Rachel bumps her slightly. "I still don't know why."
Quinn glances around, just making sure nobody is actually within listening distance. "I love soccer," she says. "It's probably my favourite sport. The problem is that it's not considered a very... feminine sport, which really means that my parents don't approve. I managed to strike a deal with them that, if I continued playing the piano, kept up with my grades and didn't fuck up, then I could play whichever sport I wanted to.

"I didn't expect to be rather decent at it, and I was scouted pretty early. I - I made the mistake of mentioning it to my parents, stupidly thinking they would be proud of me, but I got the opposite reaction."

Rachel just adds yet another thing to the list of reasons why she hates Quinn's parents. What kind of people would make their child hide his or her talent?

"The deal was amended. If I wanted to play, it had to be for the school and for the school, only. They'd pull me out of it if I got recognised for my talent, so I tried to... temper it, as it were. But, I don't know, I love the sport too much to just... sit back. It's fun for me, and I love scoring goals. It's this... accomplishment for me, and I don't want to lose that. So, I guess, I made a decision to stay playing, even at a lower level than I'm capable, than not to play at all."

Rachel isn't even sure what to say at this point, so she says nothing.

Instead, she steps a little closer to Quinn, so their arms brush as they walk. It's all she can offer while she tries to figure out just what she's feeling about what she's just been told.

Every day, she learns a bit more about Quinn and her past, and the pieces are threatening to break her. It just doesn't seem fair that this one, perfect and broken girl has had to endure so much.

When they get to Quinn's room, Rachel decides they're not going to tackle all of that today.

It's Saturday, and they have a trip to the city planned, so they'll worry about everything else later.

Right now, though, Quinn is in her red uniform, and Rachel has been dying to touch for far too long.

Quinn sets her gym bag on the floor, and then moves to her closet to pick out some clothes. She starts humming to herself as she shifts through her shirts, trying to decide what is appropriate for her non-date with Rachel in the city later.

She gasps in surprise when she feels Rachel press the front of her body against her back. Rachel's hands slide around her waist and settle on her uniform-covered abdomen.

"Rachel," Quinn murmurs when the brunette presses a soft kiss to the skin of her neck. "I've been running around for ninety minutes. I'm sweaty and gross."

"I beg to differ," Rachel practically purrs.

Quinn lets out an amused breath.

"You taste salty."

"That's sweat and grime," she points out.

Rachel just kisses her neck again, her tongue darting out, which makes them both moan. She drags her nails over Quinn's abdomen, and Quinn presses back into her, inviting more contact.
"Rachel," Quinn breathes.

"You were amazing today," Rachel says, trailing kisses along her neck. "And this uniform… God, Quinn, I didn't even know uniforms were a thing for me until I saw you out there. I don't even want you to take it off."

Quinn sucks in a breath, and then spins around abruptly. Before either of them can settle, Quinn's mouth descends on Rachel's, and this kiss is everything.

Everything they've been building up to.

Rachel feels the irrepressible urge to touch every inch of Quinn's heated skin, and her mouth asks, "Can I see you?" before she can think too much about it.

Quinn just nods, her arms automatically lifting up when Rachel tugs on her soccer jersey. The garment gets thrown across the room uncaringly, because Rachel is back to kissing her, their tongues fighting for dominance.

It's moments like these that make Quinn wonder about her own control. She imagines it's taken years to get her to this point, and she wonders if they'll ever be a day when both she and Rachel feel comfortable enough for them both to, essentially, lose control.

Still, Quinn bends slightly, cups Rachel's ass with her hands and lifts. With a squeal, Rachel adjusts her grip on Quinn's neck, and automatically wraps her legs around Quinn's waist.

As Quinn shuffles towards her bed, Rachel continues to devour her neck, sure that she's going to end up leaving a mark. At this point, neither of them actually cares.

Quinn sets Rachel down as gently as she can, and then climbs on top of her. She rises up onto her knees, reties her ponytail, and then settles her body weight half on the bed and half on Rachel.

"Oh."

And then they're kissing again. It's slower now, languid and lazy, and Rachel hums into the contact, her skin heating up.

"Can I?"

Rachel isn't sure what Quinn is asking, but she nods anyway, and then Quinn is lifting her shirt, and pressing kisses to her abdomen. She squirms at the feel of her lips, hands sliding into damp, blonde hair.

Quinn's hands explore Rachel's skin, warm and slightly calloused, and Rachel wants to give her everything she is. It would be so simple.

But, not at all.

Quinn's lips find hers again, which stops her from saying something stupid.

Barely.

"More," Rachel forces out.

"What?"

Rachel grips the edges of Quinn's shorts and shifts her hips until the girl is settled between her own
legs. "There," Rachel says. "Just, stay there, okay?"

Quinn looks as if she's in a daze, but she just nods with some difficulty, and then their kisses steadily restart.

It's something, Quinn muses, as she shifts to get more comfortable, and Rachel lets out the most amazing sound that isn't helping at all with Quinn's situation in her shorts.

"Don't," Rachel says, tensing slightly. "Don't move. Just, stay."

Quinn nods. "Okay."

It takes all of her control, but Quinn doesn't move.

She won't until Rachel tells her to.
Chapter Twenty-Five

"Is that a hickey?"

Quinn startles at the voice behind her, her hand automatically flying up to her neck where she knows Rachel left a mark earlier. Quinn covered it up with makeup, but she's a little antsy about it.

There's a little laugh. "I'm sorry."

Quinn spins around. "Don't do that," she says quietly, her voice giving away her spiked anxiety.

Rachel's features soften in apology. "Oh, baby, I'm sorry," she whispers, stepping closer to her but not risking touching her while they're in public.

Quinn, still, takes an involuntary step back, and Rachel kicks herself for forcing a regression.

And, they were in such a good place.

Rachel curses herself, and then tries to distract Quinn by pointing at the shelf of books in front of her. "That's one of my favourites," she says. "I've always been partial to Jodi Picoult, and Nineteen Minutes was, well..." she trails off. "It's a horrible, horrific story, and I don't condone any of it, but - " she stops. "I don't know how to say what I want to say without sounding sympathetic to the kid who took a gun to school and shot into crowds of students."

Quinn glances at her. "Did you ever think about it?"

Rachel's eyes widen. "What?"

"Getting back at your bullies?"

Rachel shakes her head. "I don't condone violence, Quinn," she says. "I realise that those people are probably more broken than I am, and they just don't know how to channel it in a way that doesn't hurt other people."

"You could forgive them?"

"I don't know," she says. "If they apologised, maybe. If they proved to me that they've actually changed, I would consider it."

Quinn regards her carefully. "I don't think I have the capacity for that," she says. "I've envisioned so many ways to hurt the people who hurt me."

"Your father?"

Quinn's frowns. "No," she says; "my bullies."


"Lucy was bullied a lot," Quinn says, almost matter-of-factly. "I mean, you saw her. Who wouldn't bully that snot-nosed little shit?"

"Quinn."
She looks away, in an attempt to steady her breathing. "Are you ready?" she asks. "Can we go?"

Rachel is tempted to make them stay here between the shelves of this bookstore, and just duke it out, but she realises they're probably going to need more privacy for the conversation she intends to have.

"We can go," Rachel says, and then Quinn is leading the way. They're supposed to be going for cheesecake again, but Quinn rather leads her to the cinema, and Rachel follows in silence.

Quinn buys tickets to a movie that's already started and that's obviously been in circuit for a while from the relative emptiness of the theatre. Quinn ducks into the darkest row at the back, far enough away from the large room's only other two occupants, who are sitting near the front and talking loudly.

They haven't even noticed the girls' entrance, and both of them are perfectly fine with that.

Quinn settles into a seat, and then pulls Rachel down into her lap, her arms automatically wrapping around the brunette's waist and holding her close.

Rachel realises this is Quinn seeking comfort after something that legitimately scared her - like with Declan asking about their being girlfriends - instead of pushing her away, and that means a lot.

They've come a long way since that truly horrific fight they had on Christmas Eve.

Rachel rests her arms over Quinn's. "I'm here," she whispers. "Baby, I'm right here, and I'm sorry. You're okay, and we're okay. I promise everything is okay."

Quinn just holds her tighter, burying her face in the back of Rachel's neck. She doesn't say anything, which is a reaction Rachel will take at this point.

Rachel just can't figure how they went from, uh, second base this morning to this. The ups and downs of their relationship have the power to give her whiplash, but she'll take this over nothing.

Any part of Quinn is more than enough.

It takes Quinn almost twenty minutes to relax, and Rachel even manages to get into the ridiculous movie they're supposed to be watching in that time. Her attention shifts when she feels Quinn move behind her.

And then a pair of lips on her shoulder.

"I'm sorry," Quinn murmurs.

Rachel sinks into her. "Don't be."

"You don't be either, then," she instructs gently. "I'm just having a reaction and, yeah, you scared me, and I kept thinking that I'm going to have to lie, and I'm just so sick of lying about our relationship, and fuck, Rach, maybe just don't give me a hickey where people can see it, okay?"

"Okay."

Quinn turns Rachel's head with her fingers, and then kisses her. "I love you," she says, and then kisses her again, and again.

Rachel twists in Quinn's lap until she's straddling her. "You know, I've always wanted to make out
in a movie theatre," she says.

Quinn glances over Rachel's shoulder for a moment, and then sighs. She breathes out slowly, and then reaches up to kiss her again. It's a steady kiss, slow and lazy, and Rachel loves every second of it.

This is just Quinn, and she's just Rachel, and they're just two teenagers making out at the back of a movie theatre, and Rachel just wants them to have something simple and normal.

Quinn's hands are idle at her waist, and Rachel keeps her fingers threaded through Quinn's blonde locks. They're just kissing, almost reaffirming their relationship to each other, and Rachel could spend the rest of her life here.

With Quinn.

Always, with Quinn.

"Your lips are swollen," Quinn says as they finally make their way to what has now become their place.

Mainly, just to get cheesecake, but still theirs.

Rachel's entire body is still buzzing, and she doesn't find the fact that she's actually aroused particularly unpleasant. It's odd, because it's something she's been wary of, but she likes to think the talk she had with Quinn has helped her accept that wanting Quinn is actually okay.

Because, she does.

She really wants Quinn, but they were never going to do anything in a dark movie theatre.

"I really like that I'm the only one who knows why," Quinn adds, and Rachel has the urge to drag her into another dark room and devour her, which she forces herself to suppress.

Rachel just shakes her head.

At herself or at Quinn, she doesn't even know.

They have a bit of a routine now, when they get to the cafe. Quinn gets Rachel's verbal preference, and then goes to place their order while Rachel finds them a private, secluded table. She doesn't recognise anyone from Dalton in the establishment, so she's a bit more relaxed as she settles into her seat and watches Quinn at the front counter.

Her blonde girlfriend is ridiculously stunning, and Rachel sometimes gets struck by the very idea that Quinn is hers. There's always just something about her, even as she stands there, that just draws people in. She does it unintentionally, and Rachel doesn't think she's even aware of it, because she would be unstoppable if she were.

Right now, as she stands at the counter, absently pointing to her preferred cheesecake in the display case; Rachel feels this odd sense of contentment settle in her chest.

*This girl is mine*, she thinks.

It seems more permanent now, for some reason. As if Quinn has divorced her parents, and Rachel has adopted her.
In an entirely not weird, unethical way, because she likes to kiss this girl, and that would be wrong on so many levels.

Quinn is just hers, now, and that's that about that.

There's a particular grin on Quinn's face when she makes her way towards Rachel, and the brunette wants to freeze time and just soak in this moment. The look on Quinn's face is in such stark contrast to the panic that was making her tremble earlier.

"What?" Rachel asks once Quinn is in her seat and hasn't stopped with her shit-eating grin.

"I just got hit on," she says; "and I got far too much satisfaction out of making sure he knew I was taken."

Rachel just stares at her. "By me?"

Quinn rolls her eyes. "Just, taken," she says. "And happy."

"You are, aren't you?" Rachel asks, and she sounds more vulnerable than she intends. "I mean, you look happier than before, but sometimes I worry that - "

"I love you," Quinn says. "And, yeah, I'm definitely happier than before, and it's to do with you and… other things. I'm definitely more settled, Rach, and you have a lot to do with that, but I don't think we need to voice all of that out loud because I don't want to put that kind of pressure on our relationship. It's been barely two months."

Rachel can't decide how she feels about what Quinn has just said, but she's saved from a response by the arrival of their desserts and hot beverages.

They sit in silence as they prepare their drinks.

Well, as Rachel fixes hers with cream and sugar, because Quinn doesn't really indulge. Especially now that she's hitting the soccer field as hard as she is, and Rachel's sure she's going to hear a complaint about the cheesecake Quinn is about to consume.

"Quinn?"

"Hmm?"

"I want to talk about the whole soccer thing again," she starts. "Are you consciously, umm, going to turn up the heat, as it were?"

"What?" Quinn asks, looking particularly amused.

"I guess I just don't like the idea of your limiting yourself," she says. "I hate that it's what you've been reduced to, and I just want you to shine to the best of your ability, regardless of what your parents say."

Quinn buys herself time by taking a sip of her Latte. "I'm - I'm done with them, Rachel," she says carefully. "Well, as done as my emotional state will let me be. As far as I know, they don't have any control over me, and I would like to start playing the sport I love to the best of my ability."

Rachel bites her bottom lip. "You're very good, Quinn."

Quinn regards her for a moment, and then says, "I know," as if she's merely stating a fact, which she is.
"Like, the kind of good that's probably going to take you places."

"I know."

Rachel sips at her cappuccino. "Do you know what I'm about to ask you?"

"Not in so many words," she muses; "But I did see you talking to Owen." She rolls her eyes. "He's very persistent, isn't he?"

"He really wants you."

"I know."

"You could go anywhere, Quinn."

"I know."

Rachel sighs. "Are you at least going to talk to him? Maybe, hear what he has to say, and then, I don't know, give yourself more options?"

"I don't know what you expect to happen, Rach," she says, as calmly as she possibly can. "I don't think giving me more options is a good thing. It's already hard enough making a decision."

"I just - I don't want you to think that you don't have choices if things go south with your parents."

Quinn sucks in a breath. "I have money, if that's what you're worried about. I won't get access to my trust fund until I'm eighteen, but I have parents who confuse affection with money, and my savings account is quite substantial, and it's all mine. Your dad helped me set everything up, and I should be good to go regardless of what happens between now and my birthday."

"Speaking of your birthday…"

"Na ah," Quinn says with a gentle smile. "You're not getting it out of me."

"How am I supposed to know when to give you your present?"

"Oh, Rach," Quinn almost purrs. "You give me the greatest gift every day by just being with me."

Rachel's heart skips several beats, and it's not even fair that Quinn can actually do this to her. She's cheesy and sweet, and it works on Rachel so well that she's capable of swooning without Quinn even having to touch her.

"February is a little less than three weeks away," Rachel says, sounding determined. "I'm going to figure it out."

"I don't doubt that."

Rachel desperately wants to lean across the table and kiss Quinn, but she forces herself to remain in her seat, biting her lip to stop herself from doing or saying something particularly scandalous.

Rachel refocuses on her cheesecake, constantly sneaking looks at the gorgeous object of her affection. They're exploring their physical relationship in ways that should make Rachel uncomfortable, but there's something about Quinn that makes her feel so, so safe.

It's been that way from the very beginning.
From the flyers and their aftermath.

Quinn is safety.

"What?" Quinn suddenly asks when she's obviously been staring for too long. "Something on my face?" She licks her lips out of habit, and Rachel watches the act with undisguised interest.

Rachel just really wants to kiss her. "Do we have to stay here?" she asks. "I find that all I want to do at the moment is kiss you, and I can't exactly do that here."

Quinn just hums, a steady smile on her face, as she continues eating her indulgence for the week-month, maybe. She enjoys this part of their relationship in ways she didn't even know she could. The banter is lovely, and one of her favourite things to do is rile Rachel up by being intentionally difficult.

Like, right now.

"Quinn," Rachel whines, knowing exactly what Quinn is up to. It usually makes their make-out sessions that bit more exciting, but she's impatient. She can't actually say that they would currently be kissing if Quinn were a boy, but she would probably appreciate the lack of social implications if such a thing were to happen.

A lot of things would be different if this wasn't a same-sex relationship.

Still, there's very little Rachel would change, because Quinn is hers, and that might not be the case in another life.

She shudders to think about it, and her foot slides across the floor to press against Quinn's.

"Rachel," Quinn says, clearly noticing the slight melancholy in Rachel's eyes. "What's wrong?"

"Do you ever wonder what your life would be like if you didn't know me?"

Quinn shifts uncomfortably. "Sometimes," she admits. "I don't like to dwell on that kind of thing, because I do believe everything happens for a reason, you know?"

"I know we don't talk about it all that much, but does that belief have anything to do with your religion?"

"Partly," Quinn confesses. "I believe in God's plan for me. That, exactly who I am and everything I'll ever be and do has been written, and there is nothing I could do any different. It's one of the reasons that I finally accepted that I can be gay and still believe in Him." She glances around nervously, suddenly afraid someone will overhear her.

"It's okay," Rachel assures her. "Nobody's even paying attention to us."

Quinn smiles sadly. "People always ask the question of, you know, if God is everywhere and sees everything, then why does he allow all this suffering to go on, right?"

Rachel nods to show she's following.

"But, I believe that He's just doing the best He can, just like the rest of us. The bad is the Devil's work, and God can only do so much if we don't… believe, as it were. Collectively." She shakes her head. "It sounds childish when I say it out loud," she says. "I know I'm, essentially, a good person. There are outside influences that have wanted to lead me astray and, yeah, people believe that it's
the Devil that makes people gay."

She rolls her eyes. "But I have belief and faith, and the Devil's influence hasn't managed to break that, so I don't accept that I've essentially allowed him to sic homosexuality on me. I just can't believe that being able to love someone as much as I love you, regardless of your gender, is something the Devil is even capable of influencing. How is that even the worst thing in the world when there are people killing each other and children starving to death all over the world?"

Rachel's smile is gentle. "You are beautiful," she whispers, and she's not even talking about Quinn's physical beauty.

Quinn seems to realise this, and she blushes prettily. "Do you hate that I am religious?"

"Of course not," Rachel says, frowning. "I might not practice any one religion, but I respect them all in their own ways. People have their beliefs and, while I may or may not agree with some of them, I will respect them… until they get shoved in my face, that is."

Quinn chuckles softly.

"You know the entire Holt family is Anglican, right?"

Quinn nods. "Grandpa Holt mentioned it," she says.

"And yet they're the ones more accommodating to my dads' relationship," Rachel says bitterly. "Dad's family hasn't really spoken to him since he and Lee got together, which, I know hurts him. He doesn't really talk about it, but I can tell. We're both pretty lucky to have the Holt family in our corners."

Quinn sips at her drink. "You are, yeah."

"And, now you have them as well," Rachel says. "And the Berry family."

Quinn's smile spreads across her face. "I'm yours, aren't I?"

"You are," Rachel agrees. "Now, can we finish up here, so I can prove it to you?"

Rachel's proposed time spent with Quinn is thwarted by her two best friends. Splitting her time between Quinn, and Brittany and Santana is proving to be difficult, and she's determined to fix it. Whatever it takes.

Quinn presses a kiss to her cheek when she drops the blonde off at her bedroom when they get back from their trip to the city, and then Rachel makes her way to Brittany's room.

Quinn mentioned something about possibly hanging out with Kurt and Blaine, and it's becoming increasingly difficult for Rachel not to find it particularly amusing that they've both managed to find best friends who all happen to be gay.

She's almost whistling to herself as she walks down the corridor, and it's the only reason she doesn't see him coming.

Rachel wouldn't go so far as to call him the bane of her existence, but Sam Evans gets on her nerves purely because he exists. She wonders if it's something primal, that just knowing that he's kissed Quinn and had her attention makes her not like him on sight.
It's not hatred.

That emotion is reserved for the Prescott family.

Sam hasn't actually done anything to her, and she knows she's acting irrational, but there's nothing she can do. He just rubs her the wrong way, and she kind of wishes they never had to interact.

But, she's Rachel Berry and she's nothing if not polite. Also, Kurt and Blaine seem to like him, so he can't be the worst person in the world.

Right now, however, it looks as if he's seeking her out, and Rachel feels as if this kind of meeting definitely wouldn't have happened if she were walking with Quinn.

Rachel is tempted to bypass him entirely, just slipping past without acknowledging him, but he makes it impossible by stepping into her path and forcing her to slow to a stop in front of him.

"Sam," she simply says.

"Rachel."

His smile is present, but oddly hesitant. He's definitely apprehensive about something, and she just knows she's not going to like whatever he's going to say when he finally does speak.

"What can I do for you, Sam?"

He shifts his weight from one foot to the other. "I was, umm, just wondering what was up with Quinn," he starts, and she frowns in confusion. "It's just, you know, she seems… different, now that we're back, and I wanted to ask what happened."

Rachel just stares at him, unsure how she's supposed to feel about someone spending so much time focused on her girlfriend. It's unsettling, to say the least, and she can't help but worry about what he's managed to see.

It's something she thinks about, sometimes: what people would actually see if they bothered to look.

She and Quinn probably aren't as careful as they should be, for two people in a secret relationship. Quinn seems to be caring less and less about that, as each day passes.

Maybe that's what Sam has noticed.

Still, she says, "I don't know what you're talking about."

Sam frowns. "We both know that's not true."

Rachel tries not to feel indignant, but he's making it very difficult. She owes him nothing, and she hates that he just thinks he can come up to her and ask her things. They aren't even friends.

And, with the way things are going, it's doubtful they'll ever be.

"Why don't you just ask Quinn?" she says, bitterness creeping into her tone.

Sam shifts his weight again. "You and I both know I can't do that," he says. "I'd never get a straight answer from her."
A part of Rachel wants to smile at his word choice, but she still kind of wants to strangle him. She's generally not a violent person - unless completely required - but there's just something about Sam's face that makes her want to consider it. She has no doubt she could take him.

She wonders if this is some kind of primal reaction to the idea that Sam may or may not be harbouring feelings for her girlfriend. She likes to think she's more evolved than that. She's definitely not about to have some kind of pissing contest with a boy who she knows doesn't stand a chance.

Quinn is gay.

She's very, very gay, and she's in love with Rachel.

That's all there is to it.

Rachel clears her throat. "What makes you think you'll get any kind of answer from me?"

"Because you care about Quinn, and you know I do, too."

"I still don't see what that has to do with anything."

Sam sighs. "If I'm noticing, it's likely others are too," he says. "Quinn's always been one for her privacy, and you and I both know scoring seven goals in one game isn't exactly going to help with that."

Of course, Rachel knows that. Quinn does, too, and she doesn't seem to care as much as she once did.

She's almost out.

She's almost free.

Maybe Rachel needs to remind her that she's not quite there yet.

Maybe that's what Sam is getting at.

"Sam," Rachel suddenly says; "do you know when Quinn's birthday is?"

The boy looks momentarily thrown by the question, and then he frowns. "I don't, actually," he says. "She's never told me. Why?"


"I think you do, yes."

Rachel just nods, and then she gets going again, momentarily surprised that he lets her.

The conversation was full of unanswered questions and hidden meanings, and Rachel wonders, once again, if Sam knows about Quinn's sexuality.

That's yet another thing the two of them need to talk about.

"Where are you right now?"

The question catches Rachel a little off guard, but she manages to snap to attention at the sound of
Brittany's voice. "Hmm?"

"Your head," Brittany says; "where is it?"

Rachel sighs, giving Brittany her full attention. "I'm just thinking," she says.

"About Quinn?"

Rachel audibly swallows. She doesn't know how to answer that question. "She's my best friend," she says. "Is it so outrageous that - " she stops, suddenly unsure what she even wants to say. She and Quinn haven't really made decisions on who gets to know about their relationship now.

Nearly all of Rachel's family knows - the really important ones, anyway - and Tori knows on Quinn's side.

Now, they just have to consider their friends.

Rachel desperately wants to talk to Brittany about it. She imagines her best friend - who isn't Quinn - will have some sound advice for her.

While Brittany and Santana's own relationship isn't exactly a secret; nobody really knows about it. Santana is still particularly wary about her parents finding out, but she doesn't hide from Brittany or from Rachel. She's accepted her sexuality the same way Quinn has.

Rachel knows the consequences of Santana being outed are less than if it were to happen to Quinn, but Rachel wishes it on nobody.

Technically, even she isn't out.

Her family doesn't care, but she's never really thought about what it would mean to her if people at school learned that she's in love with a girl.

That she's attracted to a female.

Owing to her understanding of human thinking, she's sure that some people will assume that she's chosen the fairer sex because of what happened to her. Because a man hurt her, and she's unable to be in a relationship with one.

For a while, it was a legitimate fear of hers, but Finn helped with that.

Kind of.

But, Quinn has helped the most. Rachel worried she wouldn't be able to feel safe in a relationship. She worried she wouldn't be able to trust herself or her partner in a new relationship, but everything with Quinn has come naturally… in that department, at least.

Rachel wouldn't call anything about their time together particularly easy, but it hasn't been difficult either. They… fit, somehow, and Rachel can't imagine loving anyone more than she loves Quinn.

Brittany touches Rachel's hand, getting her attention once more. "She's your best friend?"

Rachel blushes, unable to meet Brittany's gaze. "Are you mad?"

"No," Brittany says. "I think it's wonderful to be in love with your best friend."

Rachel bites the inside of her left cheek to stop herself from speaking. She doesn't even know what
she would say at this point.

"I am," Brittany says. "I'm in love with my best friend, and I wish that for everyone. Especially you."

Rachel just squeezes her hand. "I love you, Britt," she says.

"I love you too, Rach," she immediately returns. "I hope you know I'll always be here for you."

"I know," Rachel says. "Thank you, B."

"San?"

For the most part, Santana might know what's coming from this conversation, but she still fakes innocence as she turns her attention to her friend.

In another life, Santana knows they probably would never have got along. If she's being honest, she has to admit that, even now, without Brittany, she doesn't know if they would be the kind of friends that talk about things.

That's not who Santana is, intrinsically, but it seems it's who Rachel is. And Brittany. So, being with them has really forced Santana out of her comfort zone and into a place where she feels content to make her friends happy.

"What's up?" Santana asks.

Rachel blinks slowly. "Do you ever miss Quinn?"

Okay.

Santana definitely wasn't expecting that.

"What?"

"Do you miss her?" Rachel asks. "As in, you know, she was your friend for so long, and then she wasn't. Don't you miss her?"

The question is so unexpected and out of the blue; her mouth drops open. "Why are you asking me that?"

Rachel can't exactly admit that she's asking because she can't imagine anyone not missing Quinn. Even her fathers mention Quinn in every conversation she has with either of them, and she knows Hiram and Quinn talk on occasion.

"I just wonder," Rachel says, suddenly wishing she were with Quinn. She's tempted to take out her phone and text her girlfriend, just because she misses her.

Now that Quinn's taking several Art classes - she fulfilled all her required credits last semester, so she has some time in her timetable to explore her creative side - Quinn has taken to spending quite a bit of her limited free time working in the art studios, and Rachel always feels a little awkward interrupting her when she's in the zone.

Santana shifts in her seat, looking uncomfortable. "I've decided not to think about it," she says. "It's better this way."
Rachel shakes her head at the girl's stubbornness. "I told her about me," she finally says. "That I like girls, I mean. She met my dads, San, and she was fine with it. She loves them, and the homosexuality doesn't bother her at all, okay? She is fine. God, just tell her, so we can all just, I don't know, get along."

"It's not that simple, Rachel," Santana protests, because it really can't be that easy. "I've met her father, you know? He's horrible, and he hates people like us. I mean, not only am I... gay, but I'm also Latina, and he hated me on sight." She closes her eyes. "Quinn didn't even... say anything. She just stood there and let him..." she trails off. "I mean, I don't blame her or anything, because he's fucking scary and I'm convinced he hurts her, but she could have said something to me afterwards, you know? She could have just said that his opinions weren't her own. I just - it's not that simple, Rachel. It's not."

Rachel sighs. "It really is that simple," she argues. "Quinn is... special. I know you know he hurt her, and of course her opinions aren't the same as his, so what's the real problem here, Santana? Because, it's not as if I don't already know you want to fix things, so what's the hold up?"

Santana glances away for a moment. "It doesn't matter what I want, okay?" she says, sounding defeated. "I hurt her. She looked at me with - with these eyes... with such betrayal. And, I know Quinn, Rachel; I know she'll never forgive me for that because I know I would never forgive her. It's - it's just who we are, and I'm sorry it's not all fitting into your narrative, but that's just the way things are, okay? Even if she can look past the whole gay thing, she won't look past the part where I - I gave up on her; where I left her; abandoned her when - when I promised I wouldn't."

"What?"

Santana fiddles with the edge of her workbook. "She had a rough time of it after she ended things with Sam. I don't really know why they broke up, but she was a wreck, and she kept asking me why I liked her." She frowns at the memory. "And she kept making me tell her that I would always be her friend, no matter what."

Rachel feels herself grow still at the knowledge that the story Santana is telling is probably around the time Quinn first suspected and started to accept that she was gay.

And she felt she couldn't even talk to her best friend about it, because it can never ever get back to her family. Rachel feels her heart hurt at the thought of Quinn going through all of that alone.

And then with Tori.

Rachel's face twists into a slight scowl.

Santana shrinks back at the look on her face, and she whispers, "I broke my promise." She shakes her head. "When she asked me not to leave her the way everybody else did, I promised I wouldn't. And, now, look where we are." She sighs. "It's even worse that I couldn't even tell her what was going on. I wouldn't accept that I chose... love over friendship any more than she would. Especially when I wasn't brave enough to give either of us a chance."

Rachel just nods, reaching for her phone because she can't resist the temptation to check in with Quinn.

**Rachel:** Not that this is clingy at all, but I really miss you.

**Rachel:** And, I love you.
Rachel: Please tell me I get to kiss you today :D

Rachel looks at Santana, making a decision she may or may not end up regretting. "If I could get her to agree to sit down with you, and just... talk; would you?"

"She won't," Santana argues.

"Just, if she did, would you?"

Santana sighs. "Fine," she says. "But you need to get your expectations in line. Quinn has issues neither of us even knows about."

Rachel smiles to herself, because that's just hilarious.

Really, Santana has no idea.

Rachel's slowly learning about all of Quinn's issues, and she's always worrying that Quinn will, one day, run from Rachel's.

Rachel mentioned to Dr Howell that she wondered if the reason she and Quinn seem to be so compatible is because they're both determined to hold onto the one person they've found who's willing to look past all their problems.

Or, really, the one person who's almost as messed up as they are.

Dr Howell took her worries in stride, and then asked her, again, if she would still be with Quinn if she were less damaged, or even more.

Rachel scoffed. "I love her. I love who she is. None of that other stuff even matters."

And, she supposes, that was that.

Rachel just smiles knowingly at Santana. "I'll set it up," she says.

Santana looks unaffected. "I'm not holding my breath."

Rachel just rolls her eyes, and then glances down at her phone when it buzzes.

Quinn: I'll be in my room from eight onwards, so you can come love me in person ;)

Quinn: I miss you too, dear :*

"Rachel?"

She lifts her gaze. "Hmm?"

Santana's eyes dart about for a moment, and then they settle on Rachel. She looks the most vulnerable Rachel has ever seen her, and Rachel holds her breath at the revelation. "Do - do you really think she'd actually want to talk to me?" Santana asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Of course."

"I said no."

Rachel sighs in exasperation, and has to force herself not to throw something at Quinn. It would be
in jest, but even playful violence isn't something she's willing to risk with her girlfriend.

"I'm not going to tell you again, Rachel," Quinn says. "Please stop nagging me about this."

Rachel rolls over onto her back and stares at Quinn's ceiling, because she really can't handle looking at the stubborn blonde right now. "All I'm asking is that you just sit down with me, Britt and Santana and just have a conversation. God, is that too much to ask?"

"Actually, it is," Quinn forces out, keeping her gaze on the books open on the desk in front of her. Her entire body is tense, and she's sorely tempted to walk out of her own bedroom to get out of this conversation. "They're your friends."

"They are," Rachel agrees. "And you're my girlfriend. I think that gives me the right to request that you both... meet, as it were."

"What's the point?" Quinn argues. "They both already don't like me."

"That's not true," Rachel shoots right back. "Britt barely even knows you, and Santana is a special case."

Quinn clenches her jaw. "No," she says. "I love you, and I'll happily meet Brittany officially, but not Santana. I'm sorry, but I'm drawing the line there."

If Rachel didn't know Quinn as well as she does, she would probably hear the conviction in the blonde's voice and call it a day.

But, Rachel does know Quinn, and she can't mistake the longing and apprehension and thinly-masked fear she hears. Quinn wants this to happen, but she's too angry and hurt - still, all these months later - to allow herself to want it.

"Oh, baby," Rachel finally says, sitting up on Quinn's bed and looking at her with the softest expression.

Quinn's own features harden. "Don't," she says. "Don't pity me, Rachel. It happened, okay? The one person I finally trusted not to... fuck me over like everyone else in my stupid life did, and I got over it. Why should I even attempt to fix what we always knew was going to break? I'm - I'm unlovable - don't cringe like that, because it's true - and Santana left when she figured it out, and you will too."

Rachel immediately gets up from the bed and walks towards her. "Stop it," she gently says. "You're getting so far into your head right now. Think about what you're saying, just take a deep breath."

Quinn just stares up at her, looking a little lost.

"You know that's not going to happen," Rachel murmurs, coming to a stop in front of Quinn. "You know it. I love you, and I'm not leaving you." She cups Quinn's cheeks and tilts her head upwards, forcing the blonde to look at her properly. "How did we even get here, Quinn?"

Quinn instantly deflates. "I don't know."

"She really hurt you, didn't she?"

Quinn can't bring herself to reply.

"You haven't even allowed yourself to grieve the end of your friendship," Rachel points out, her
Quinn shakes her head. "I'm not about to start crying, if that's what you're expecting to happen," she puffs out.

"Are you sure?" Rachel asks, leaning forward to press a kiss to Quinn's forehead. "It might make you feel better."

"You're ridiculous."

"You're ridiculous."

Quinn sighs. "I am," she allows. "I'm sorry."

"Baby, I don't want you to be sorry," Rachel says. "I just want you to talk to me."

Quinn wraps her arms around Rachel's waist, and presses her face into a warm abdomen. "Do we have to talk about this right now?" she mumbles.

Rachel drags her nails along the back of Quinn's neck, down past her shoulders. "No, we don't."

"Because, I'm pretty sure you mentioned something about kissing me today."

Rachel lets out a small laugh, and then presses a noisy kiss to the top of Quinn's head. "I am so in love with you."

"Even when I'm being unreasonable?"

"Even then."

"You're totally messed up."

Rachel pinches her shoulder, and she lets out the cutest surprised yelp. "Takes one to know one, baby."

Quinn chuckles, and then lifts her head. "Are you going to kiss me now?"

"I thought you said you had homework."

"Fuck homework," Quinn says so offhandedly that Rachel has no choice but to laugh. "You love me."

"I really, really do," she easily agrees, and then leans in to kiss her. It's a gentle press of lips that has them both sighing in content. And then Rachel pulls back. "You have homework to finish, because you have an away game tomorrow, and we both know you're going to be exhausted."

Quinn blinks up at her. "So, no to kissing?"

"Later, baby."

"Yes, dear."
"Guess who scored another hat trick," Rachel practically sings as she drops into a chair beside Kurt the next night at dinner. "That's two games in a row."

"And ten goals," Kurt says.

"Eleven, actually," Rachel corrects, wincing slightly. She suspects she's going to be dealing with the fact that her girlfriend is ridiculously talented at this sport for many years to come.

"Wow," Blaine murmurs from Kurt's other side. "I didn't know she was that good."

Kurt muses over that for a moment. "I think she's finally allowing herself to be," he says softly. "I mean, I can't remember her being this prolific before. The entire school was talking about her seven goals on Saturday, and I'm pretty sure that's never happened."

"The school blog is going bonkers," Blaine adds. "The Dalton Chronicle even dubbed her Captain Griffin."

"She's practically the poster child for Dalton," Kurt says.

"They should pay her," Rachel muses, laughing softly.

"I'm assuming they won," Kurt says, and Rachel nods. "She was talking about going for a full sweep of victories this season. Do you reckon, if we asked, we could ask her to try to score a hat trick in every game?"

Rachel laughs, and then produces her phone. "We'll ask her right now."

Together, the three of them send Quinn a congratulatory voice note, and then ask her their burning question.

The reply arrives a minute later, in the form of another voice note, and Rachel practically swoons at the sound of Quinn's perfect - though tired - voice.

"Hey, Weirdoes, thank you! We're on the bus back now and, you were right, Rach, I am pretty exhausted. A hat trick every game, huh? That's quite a lofty goal you're setting for me there. I bet it was your idea, Kurt." She pauses. "Tell me, what's in it for me?"

Rachel is possibly the only one who hears the suggestiveness in Quinn's voice, and she shifts in her seat.

Blaine laughs. "And that is exactly why Quinn is going to go far in life," he muses. "What does she get out of it?"

"Recognition," Kurt offers. "Her choice of people to date. A soccer scholarship to the college of her choice. So many things, really."

Rachel presses her lips together, bristling slightly at the idea of Quinn becoming even remotely more appealing to the masses. Her general aloofness keeps people away, in general but, ever since she started her campaign for Head Student, she's offered up pieces of herself that have made her
even more likeable. Rachel didn't think she would have a problem with it until this moment.

"About that," Rachel starts, her eyes on Kurt. "I kind of need your help."

"Oh, is that why you've come to sit with us after you're done eating with Santana and Brittany?"

Blaine rolls his eyes. "He's totally not sour about it," he sarcastically tells Rachel. "Ignore him."

Rachel leans into Kurt for a brief moment. "I know you probably find this a little insulting, but you and Santana are actually startlingly alike."

Kurt gasps. "Consider me insulted."

Rachel giggles, and Blaine just smiles.

"I actually want to talk to you about Owen Masterson."

Kurt perks up. "Oh?"

"Who?" Blaine questions.

After briefly explaining the sort-of scout to the other boy, Kurt looks at Rachel. "I assume you've spoken to Quinn then?"

Rachel nods. "She knows about him, and she's not against talking to him. She's just... conflicted. I know she'll never actually tell me straight, but there's a part of her that's always really had her heart set on Yale, but that's not really an option anymore."

"Oh?"

Rachel sighs. "It's complicated."

"I imagine it is."

Rachel knows she can't quite give much away, and she's going to have to have another talk with Quinn about who they're going to start letting into their little world.

Kurt is, of course, high up on Quinn's list.

Santana and Brittany are practically at the top of Rachel's.

"I think you should talk to her, as well," Rachel says. "It's important that she knows you'd support her, whatever she decides. And, you know, if you happen to drop into conversation that you're definitely headed to New York, then that's just helping my cause to keep her as close to the East Coast as possible."

Kurt grins at her. "You want her in New York?"

"Don't you?"

Kurt shrugs. "I want her where she's going to be happiest and, if that happens to be in New York, with us, then I want that too."

Rachel's features soften considerably, and she feels herself getting emotional. She could kiss him in this moment. "God, Kurt, she's lucky to have you, isn't she?"
Kurt smiles at her. "She's lucky to have you too, you know?" There's something knowing in his eyes, and Rachel wonders if he actually knows they're more than just friends.

Has she given them away?

Rachel clears her throat. "So, that's the whole Owen thing," she says; "but there's something else."

"Oh?"

"My project for the month is to get Quinn and Santana to talk."

Kurt lets out an unexpected laugh, and then shakes his head. "You're insane."

"Quinn calls me ridiculous," she says proudly. "But I'm determined. I know it will do them both good."

"How?" Kurt questions. "How can forcing her into a situation she clearly doesn't want be helpful?"

Rachel presses her lips together, and then asks, "Is that what she's told you?"

"Not in so many words."

"Kurt," Rachel says, and she's suddenly exhausted. "What happened between them isn't healthy, and it's not helping Quinn with her trust issues. I know I can help, and the only way to do that is to get them to talk and have the whole truth out in the open."

Kurt stares at her. "Are you sure you don't just want all your friends to get along?"

"I won't lie and say that's not a part of it," she admits; "but it's more about Quinn."

Kurt soberly. "I don't know why I'm so protective of her," he whispers. "I mean, it's you."

"Don't stop, even if it is me," Rachel says. "Actually, especially if it's me. The closer we get; the more power I have to hurt her, and I don't want to do that, so I'm okay with you keeping me in check." She smiles sadly. "For what it's worth, I do believe Quinn wants this. Santana was her friend, and the fact that she doesn't even know why they're no longer friends... hurts her. And I don't want her to hurt, Kurt. She hurts enough."

Kurt wraps his arm around her shoulders. "You're a good friend, Rachel."

Rachel sighs. She's more than that, but she can't say those words. At a certain point, all this secrecy is going to be too much for her to handle, and she hopes nothing she does gives them away before she has a chance to talk to Quinn about it.

Honestly, it feels as if they constantly have things to talk about, and yet nothing seems to get resolved. The list just keeps on growing.

"We should probably reply to Quinn," Blaine says, cutting into their moment.

Rachel ignores the tears threatening behind her eyes. "What is she getting out of the deal?" she asks.

"My first born child," Blaine offers because, really, there's no way Quinn can maintain her already prolific scoring record.

For a moment, Rachel allows herself to acknowledge that she and Quinn may or may not require
donor sperm if ever they decide to have a baby, and Blaine may or may not have just signed a verbal contract.

If Quinn can do it, of course.

Kurt straightens. "That seems a little overboard, Anderson," he comments. "I was just going to say I would design and sew a jacket for her, free of charge. She'll end up making me famous when she's famous, so, really, it's a win-win for me."

Rachel laughs. "I'll probably dedicate my first Tony win to her," she says, which she thinks she probably would have done, anyway.

Rachel won't admit it to Quinn yet, but the girl has played such a big role in ensuring she still has the drive to reach the dream Justin almost robbed from her.

Just, she's doing it more calmly.

And, with the potential love of her life at her side.

Or, a little in front of her, shielding her, protecting her, but never hiding her.

"Intense," Kurt comments.

"Or, I'll just go with my first born child as well," Rachel says with a secret smile, and then she's opening Quinn's chat again and they're recording the voice note, all three of them caught in a bout of giggles at the absurdity of their offerings.

Quinn's reply, once again, arrives a minute later, and she sounds so adorably sleepy that Rachel has to force herself not to whimper.

"I'm about to fall asleep, so I'll talk to you guys later," Quinn drowsily says. "Thank you for your offerings, though. Consider it done. Your babies are mine."

Rachel just laughs, Kurt looks a little smug, and Blaine looks positively mortified.

"She's going to do it, isn't she?" Blaine whispers.

"Definitely," Rachel says.

Kurt just pats his arm in sympathy, and then turns back to Rachel. "Distract him with your plans to reunite possibly the two most intimidating girls in this school."

Rachel just laughs as her phone buzzes again.

Quinn: For Rachel's eyes only.

Quinn: I can't wait to make a baby with you. We're getting started as soon as I get back.

This time, Rachel actually squeaks, and then has to fumble for something, anything, to tell Kurt and Blaine, who are both looking at her as if she's lost her mind.

Maybe she has.

Quinn has barely any time to set down her bag or even close her door before she's immediately accosted by a very determined Rachel Berry.
"Quinn Fabray," Rachel demands, pushing Quinn up against the door and effectively slamming it shut. "I was in public. You can't say things like that to me when I'm in public."

Quinn opens her mouth to defend herself, only to find it suddenly engaged in the kind of kiss that immediately has her knees buckling.

"Oh, God," she breathes, suddenly helpless. "Rachel."

"Do you have any idea how much I've missed you today?" Rachel murmurs, dragging her lips away from Quinn's and kissing along her jaw. She has a destination in mind, and she licks the length of Quinn's neck, down to her collarbone.

Quinn's head drops back with a thud against the door, a moan escaping from between her lips as Rachel sucks on her skin.

And then bites.

Quinn gasps, and then scrambles for purchase on any part of Rachel she can reach. One hand grips her waist, and the other slides into her hair, fisting hard and lifting Rachel's head to kiss her again.

It's a hot, sloppy kiss, and Quinn can't seem to catch her breath. She doesn't want to, because more breathing equals less kissing, and she's not willing to deal.

Quinn starts to dictate the kiss, which is so not what Rachel intended, but she's not complaining.

"More," Rachel whimpers, and Quinn immediately switches their positions, so now Rachel is pressed against the door, with the length of Quinn's body engulfing hers.

More.

They kiss, a mashing of teeth and tongues and lips for endless minutes before Rachel pushes on Quinn's chest to get some much needed air, and the blonde pulls back, looking totally dazed.

"I - wow," Rachel stammers, because they've never kissed like that. She shakes her head to try to clear it, and then asks, "did you eat?"

It takes Quinn a bit longer to recover, and she gently tucks a lock of hair behind her ear. "I'm sorry, but did you just stop me from tasting you to ask me if I've had dinner?"

Rachel tilts her head to the side. "I'm asking because I intend to get you on that bed and undress you, so I'd rather have no distractions once you're horizontal."

Quinn sucks in a sharp breath.

"Got a problem with that?"

Quinn reaches blindly with her right hand and locks her door, and then she smiles so affectionately at Rachel that Rachel's sure she's going to start crying. "I love you," Quinn says.

Rachel just presses a soft kiss to her lips, and then pushes her back until she's taking steps towards the bed.

"Lie down," Rachel gently instructs. "I want to make you feel good."

"You already do," Quinn murmurs, but she still moves to lie on her bed, her eyes never once drifting away from Rachel's face.
"I want to make you feel better, then."

Quinn just smiles. "I don't know what that means."

"It means that you're going to lie there and let me kiss every inch of skin we're both ready for."

Quinn stares at her. "Are you sure?"

"Take off your shirt, Quinn," she instructs, and the blonde immediately does as she's told, quickly removing her school tracksuit top and then her polo shirt and chucking them across the room, which makes both girls laugh.

Rachel studies her as she stands at the edge of the bed, her eyes roaming over Quinn's defined muscles and her pale skin... that's probably going to develop some colour with the amount of time she's going to be spending in the sun.

"The bra is mine," Rachel finds herself saying, and then moves to straddle Quinn on the bed. She supports her weight with her knees, because there are things she's ready for, and one of those is not grinding against a topless Quinn Fabray when she's determined to make her feel good.

Better.

Rachel starts with her lips, kissing her chastely, before she moves on to all the skin within kissing distance. She traces the angle of Quinn's jaw with her own lips, breathing unsteadily. She can't reliably claim that her breathing hasn't been out of sorts from the moment she acknowledged Quinn Fabray was someone she needed to know.

With a deep sigh, she noses the shell of Quinn's ear, and then nibbles at her lobe, which makes Quinn squirm helplessly. There's a certain level of power to be found in being able to turn Quinn into this quivering mess, and Rachel basks in it.

"Captain Griffin," Rachel murmurs into Quinn's ear. "Striker Extraordinaire. Dalton's very own Number Nineteen. So, so sexy." Her right hand rises up to cup Quinn's breast through her bra, gently squeezing.

"Oh, my God," Quinn breathes.

Rachel continues to massage Quinn's flesh, rolling a stiff nipple between her fingers through the fabric. It's one of the first times Quinn hasn't complained about her having cold hands, and Rachel reasons that might be because they're both burning hot.

Rachel has to kiss her mouth again, and it's a deep, all-consuming kiss that has them both panting uncontrollably.

"Can - can I take this off?" Rachel asks, breathless and wanting.

Quinn is incoherent, her body arching into Rachel's hands. "Wha - "

"This," Rachel murmurs, tugging on Quinn's bra strap. "Please, baby, I want to see you."

"God."

"I want to touch you."

What happens next is a hazy scramble, both of them reaching for each other at the same time. Rachel's hands find the clasp of Quinn's bra, while Quinn tugs on her shirt, desperately wanting to
lift it off her body.

Somehow, they manage not to take an eye out, and Rachel is reduced to her bra at the same time Quinn is completely bare.

Rachel has caught glimpses before, but this is the first time she's presented with Quinn Fabray in all her glory.

"You're gorgeous," Rachel breathes, unabashedly staring at the flesh before her. "So, so beautiful."

Quinn's first instinct is to cover herself up, but the way Rachel is staring at her makes her feel more powerful than vulnerable. There's unexplainable wonder in the brunette's eyes, and Quinn feels herself start to relax.

Which proves to be pointless, because her body is tensing again when Rachel's mouth descends on her warm skin. She's only ever done this with Tori, but it's different now. There's so much care in Rachel's approach.

Besides the first few times with Tori, she and Quinn were never quite so gentle.

This.

*This* is love.

Rachel's mouth is warm against her skin, kissing, suckling and nipping. Quinn thinks she's ready for it, but she's really not. The very second she feels that warm mouth around her left nipple, all coherent thought escapes her.

God, it's never felt like this.

Quinn's fingers find their way into Rachel's hair, gently guiding her, even as her own body squirms from the pleasure. Her breathing is ragged and uncontrolled, and she can feel Rachel smile against her.

Rachel switches her mouth's attention to her other breast, her hand taking over on the left, and the sensation is almost too much for Quinn to handle.

"Oh, fuck," Quinn hisses when Rachel tugs with her teeth, and then releases with a pop.

The brunette lifts her head, looking smug. "Good?" she asks.

Quinn drags her in for a searing kiss. "Better."

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It's later, when Quinn is half asleep and looking all kinds of adorable that Rachel brings up something she's been wary of bringing up prior to this moment.

Well, she's still anxious about it, but Quinn is smiling dopily, and Rachel has literally never been more in love than she is in this moment.

"Quinn," Rachel whispers.

"Hmm?"

Rachel presses a soft kiss to her cheek, smiling at the way her nose crinkles but her eyes stay closed. "My mom wants to meet you," she says. "Like, officially."

Rachel smooths a hand over blonde hair. "Relax," she murmurs. "Everything's okay."

"Rach?"

"She wanted to get you a Christmas present," Rachel starts, watching Quinn's face carefully. "It was going to be something extravagant and totally garish, but I managed to curb her excitement, somewhat." She bites her bottom lip for a moment. "So, instead, she purchased two tickets for us to spend Spring Break with her in New York."

The fact that all Quinn does is openly stare at her prompts Rachel to keep talking.

"I mean, you'll get to meet her, officially, and possibly play mediator if things start going south between us because, let's face it, it's bound to happen. We can also go to the NYADA campus, and I could show you where I'll probably be living, because I'll probably know if I've been accepted by then. And, I mean, we can also look at the other New York schools, if you wanted. We could also pop out to Jersey to look at Princeton. I hear it's a lovely school, and their girls' soccer program is one of the better ones."

Quinn sighs. "Rachel," she breathes; "you're telling me a lot of things, right now."

"I want to go to New York with you," she says. "Over Spring Break." She shifts in closer to Quinn. "I want to experience the city I love with you, and maybe have you fall in love with it, too, so you won't absolutely hate visiting me from wherever you end up."

Quinn shifts slightly. "New York, huh?"

"New York," Rachel confirms. "Is that something you'd be interested in doing? Visiting my mom, for like a full week?"

"What if she doesn't like me?"

"She already likes you."

Quinn waits in silence for a moment. "This is a gift," she eventually says; "I don't know how I could possibly refuse it."

"You can if you want to," Rachel offers. "Baby, you're under no obligation to accept. You know that, right?"

"I know," Quinn murmurs, her arms tightening around Rachel. "But I want to. Accept, I mean." She closes her eyes. "I want to go to New York with you, and I want to experience all the things you love about it."

Rachel can't help her beaming smile, even though Quinn can't see it.

"We can even go see Princeton," Quinn murmurs, drifting to sleep. "Columbia is also on my list. It'll be closer to you."

And, okay, Rachel knows she's suddenly far too excited by the prospect of having Quinn right there to follow Quinn into slumber.

Oh, the possibilities are endless.
Rachel thinks waiting a few days to bring up a possible meal with Santana and Brittany to Quinn is what's needed, so she forces herself to hold her tongue.

Santana doesn't ask her about it, and neither does Kurt. He claims the best thing to do is to be patient, which Rachel, admittedly, isn't all that great at. She can be, but it takes a lot out of her.

In the days leading up to the date Rachel sets for herself to bring it up again, several things happen.

First, Quinn scores another hat trick against St Andrew's, which makes it a hat trick of hat tricks.

Second, Rachel fights with her mother about, well, Brody, without either of them even mentioning his name.

Third, Quinn receives a call from Tori that she hesitates to take, but does, just to say that Tori shouldn't be calling her.

Fourth, Rachel receives a call from Noah that she decidedly doesn't take, because she's been ignoring his calls since she left Wallingford.

Fifth, Quinn sketches a picture of Rachel's completely bare upper body, who blushes madly when Quinn presents it to her (and then kisses the blonde completely senseless).

Sixth, Rachel finally decides on the perfect song she wants to sing for/with Quinn, as she once promised.

Seventh, Quinn decides and so declares that she won't be considering attending any schools on the West Coast.

Eighth, Rachel receives two texts from Eric, asking how she's doing at school and telling her he misses her (which she tries to forget about without mentioning them to Quinn or replying to).

And, ninth, this:

"So, I called Owen."

Rachel actually trips over her own feet when Quinn falls into step beside her as they're walking to the choir room for full rehearsals on Monday. While they're going to spend the next seventy-five minutes together, they don't spend them anywhere near each other.

Rachel is front and centre, and Quinn is a part of the female chorus.

"You did?" Rachel questions.

Quinn nods. "I invited him to our game against Redhill on Thursday," she says. "He said he was planning on coming anyway, and then he offered to take me to dinner afterwards, so we can discuss my options for next year and beyond."

"Oh?"

"He thinks I could even be playing professionally, if I wanted."

"Do you?"

Quinn shrugs. "I think I'd like to play in college," she says. "I'm not sure I actually want to make a career out of it."
Rachel slows to a stop. "I don't think I've ever actually asked you this, but what do you want to be when you grow up?"

Quinn smiles this sad, beautiful smile that makes Rachel want to kiss her. "I just want to be happy."

"Doing what?"

"Do I have to be doing something to be happy?" she asks, and she sounds legitimately curious to know the answer.

"I don't think so."

"But, if I must, I would much rather be doing you."

Rachel laughs out loud, tilting her head back. "What am I ever going to do with you?"

Quinn shrugs, and then gets them walking again. "Well, I'm pretty sure I could think of a few things."

Rachel nudge her with her elbow. "Be serious."

"I am," Quinn says with a grin. "But, really, for quite a large chunk of my life, I wanted to be a doctor."

"Oh?"

"Because of Frannie," Quinn confesses quietly. "I wanted to be the one to save the little kids, you know?" She shakes her head. "It was mainly Lucy's dream, really."

"It can still be yours," Rachel tells her. "Your dreams don't have to be separate from Lucy's, just because you're the one who's old enough to realise them."

"I'm not sure it's what I want, anymore, though."

Rachel waits patiently, even if they are nearing the choir room. They'll have to go their separate ways, and she's not sure leaving Quinn in this almost-vulnerable state is a good idea.

So, Rachel drags her to a stop. "Baby," she starts; "it doesn't have to be some kind of forever decision, okay? I'm going to help you figure it out. If all you want is to be happy, then I reckon that's a lofty goal you've set for yourself, and I'm going to be with you every step of the way."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

Rachel doesn't think she's really accomplished anything, but Quinn does give her a relieved, lopsided smile that gives her some hope. They still have so much with which to deal, but they have no choice but to take it one step at a time.

They're bound to stumble, otherwise.

They stumble.

It happens the morning of Quinn's home game against Redhill. Rachel doesn't really see it coming until she returns to her room after her morning shower to find Quinn sitting on the edge of the bed,
a pensive look on her face.

"Quinn," Rachel squeaks in surprise, freezing in the doorway.

For the longest time, Quinn doesn't say anything. Then, with a controlled voice, she asks, "Rachel, is there something you need to tell me?"

And, okay, there are quite a few things to which Quinn could be referring, and Rachel knows she needs to be careful, in case she ends up opening an entirely different can of worms.

Rachel closes her bedroom door, and then sets her toiletry bag on her desk before hanging up her towel to buy herself some time. Eventually, she has no choice but to turn and face Quinn. "Maybe," she offers. "What are we talking about here?"

Quinn's face pinches slightly. "Could we be talking about more than one thing?" she asks.

Shit.

Rachel audibly swallows, but she doesn't say anything.

Quinn shifts, folding her arms across her chest. "Why is Kurt under the impression Santana and I are supposed to be resuming our friendship?"

Rachel blinks. "What?"

"Why does he think I'm even going to entertain the idea of something like that?"

*Because you are,* Rachel thinks, but her mouth says, "When did he tell you that?"

"Rachel."

She moves to sit beside Quinn. "Okay," she starts; "so, I might have mentioned to him that I'm trying to get you and Santana to sit together and talk. I thought I could use his help."

Quinn frowns. "So, what, you thought you could orchestrate this whole thing, and we'd just be these pawns in your grand scheme?"

"No," she says, ignoring the lingering anger in Quinn's voice. "Nothing like that."

"Has it ever occurred to you that I mean it when I say this isn't what I want?"

"Of course it has," she says; "but we both know better, Quinn. Your mouth says one thing, but you're really saying something else."

"I don't know what it is you think you're hearing, but I can assure you I mean what I say," Quinn counters, and she sounds about as serious as Rachel has ever heard her. "Why can't you just listen to the words that are actually coming out of my mouth? I don't want to have to repeat myself, and I really don't need you talking to my friends about something that isn't ever going to happen."

"But, it can," Rachel argues. "I don't understand why you won't even try."

"Why should I?" Quinn asks. "It's not like she's made any effort before, so why should I?"

"Quinn?"

"No, Rachel," she says. "I don't need Santana, okay? I have you, and I have Kurt and I have Blaine,
and I don't need her, okay? I don't." She looks away. "I don't need anyone. I'm not going to let anyone have that kind of power over me again." She looks at Rachel. "Not even you."

Rachel isn't exactly sure what's happening right now. How did they even get to talking about this? What are they even talking about?

"Quinn?"

"Please," Quinn says tiredly. "Please, just stop. I don't want this to become a thing, Rachel. I respect your decision to have Santana as your friend, so I'm asking you to respect mine not to."

Rachel watches her imploringly. "I'm sorry," she finally says. Then: "I love you."

Quinn smiles sadly. "I know you do," she says; "and I know you think you're just trying to help, but I've made peace with this, and it looks like she has, too."

"She hasn't," Rachel says, deflating. "She wants to talk to you, but she doesn't know how, and I just wanted to make it easier for both of you."

Quinn visibly stiffens. "She wants to talk?"

Rachel nods slowly. "I'm just playing mediator, baby," she says. "She's wanted to explain for a while, but the more time passed, the harder it got, so she just kind of left it alone."

Quinn considers this for a moment, and then shakes her head. "No," she finally says. "I'm not doing this. I've made peace with it, and now so should the both of you."

Rachel has more she has to say, but she holds her tongue. It won't do to overwhelm Quinn with all her worries about how she's supposed to navigate life when her girlfriend and one of her best friends can barely look at each other.

What happens in New York?

Santana has plans to go to NYU or Columbia, and Brittany is likely to attend Tisch when the admissions committee inevitably approves her audition tape.

Rachel won't even get started on Kurt's desire to attend FIT or Blaine's aspirations to join her at NYADA.

The six of them have the opportunity to take the city by storm, but Rachel gets the feeling Quinn is resisting for a reason. Maybe she's decided it's too dangerous to get so attached.

"Rachel?" Quinn says, her voice quiet.

"Hmm?"

"I do have you, right?" she asks, and she sounds so vulnerable. "You're - you're not going anywhere, right?"

Rachel slips an arm around Quinn's waist, hugging her close. "Of course, baby," she says; "I'm not going anywhere."

For whatever reason, Rachel believes they've just managed to avoid some kind of crisis.

Just to land themselves in another one.
Because, well, then the worst thing that can happen, happens.

Rachel's phone pings on her nightstand, and Quinn reaches for it with the intention of handing it to Rachel.

But.

Quinn's eyes drop to the screen without her say-so, and she freezes. "Rachel," she says, her voice strangled. "Eric is texting you."

And, really, Rachel doesn't know how to respond to that.

"Rachel," Quinn says again, and this time she looks at the texts. "He's asking if you're okay. He's asking why you haven't been replying to him." Quinn stares at her, trying to read her face. "How - how long has this been going on?" It isn't asked like an accusation - it's more curious than anything - but Rachel immediately goes on the defensive.

They stumble.

Quinn falls to the ground, and Rachel feels as if she's the one who's pushed her.

It's been almost a month since their worst fight to date, but this one is right up there. Quinn doesn't even really see it coming. She came here to get clarification on Rachel's intentions to get her to talk to Santana, and now Rachel is screaming at her.

"He's my brother!" She's up on her feet, pacing. "I don't have to tell you everything, you know? If he wants to text me, then he should be able to. As far as he knows, I don't even know how he feels."

And, Quinn has never been one to take things lying down. "And, yeah, not replying to him isn't going to freak him out," she shoots right back, sarcasm lacing her tone. "He's probably going out of his mind thinking I told you."

"And who's fault is that?"

Quinn actually sputters. "My fault? How is any of this my fault?"

"You're the one who kept Skype on," she accuses. "I could have been fine, blissfully unaware of what my brother feels about me, but now I know, and it's ruined everything about our relationship and it's all because of you!" It's an irrational accusation, she knows, but maybe she and Quinn are destined to have these kinds of fights at least once a month.

It's not really all that ugly until Rachel makes it, because Quinn just doesn't understand. How could she possibly understand what it's like to be Rachel in this position?

"You don't get it," Rachel shoots at her. "You don't have any siblings, so you don't know what it's like."

They freeze at the same time.

Rachel gasps in horror at the sound of her own words, a hand flying up to cover her mouth, and Quinn can barely look at her. She feels cold all over, and she doesn't even know what she could possibly say.

Quinn doesn't have a sibling.
She did, once, but not anymore.

Quinn slowly rises to her feet and smoothes down her pristine uniform. "You're right," she calmly says. "I don't get it, and I probably never will. What you do about your situation with Eric is up to you. I shouldn't be getting involved when it obviously has nothing to do with me; you're right." And then she walks out of the room.

Rachel has no choice but to let her.

Rachel doesn't see Quinn all day and, even if she did, she has no idea what she could even say at the point. An apology just seems moot, but she reasons it'll have to be a start.

It messes with her mood and, when she receives a text from Kurt, asking her what's up with Quinn, she excuses herself from class and spends five minutes crying in the bathroom.

She doesn't reply to Eric because she doesn't know what to say to him.

It doesn't help that her father and LeRoy have also got involved, each of them wondering if she's just not receiving Eric's messages. At some point, she knows she's going to have to deal with all of this, and she was kind of hoping that Quinn would be at her side.

Now, though, the blonde seems to be avoiding her, and Rachel can't even bring herself to be mad about it.

She would probably do the same.

Quinn scores a hat trick against Redhill.

And then she gets herself sent off in the eighty-third minute.

Rachel sits in the stands with Kurt and Blaine, her eyes tracking every move Quinn makes on and off the pitch.

She spies Owen early during the game. He's sitting pitch side, and Quinn spends a few minutes speaking to him during half time, which is the least of the excitement the captain of the Dalton Academy Griffins experiences.

Rachel can almost see it coming.

It's born of frustration, because Quinn has been tackled left right and centre, and she's been in the referee's ear all game because she's convinced she's not getting enough protection.

When it happens, Quinn loses the ball in the midfield, and it's a foul that isn't given. As a result, she chases back and pulls on the other girl's jersey to halt her progress.

It's supposedly a cynical foul because it stopped a fast break.

Quinn receives her second yellow card and her marching orders in quick succession. For a moment, she looks as if she wants to protest, but she doesn't. Rachel watches the slump of her shoulders; the moment the fight leaves her.

The referee says something to her, and Quinn's features darken considerably. Rachel can only imagine what was said, but she doubts she's going to get anything out of Quinn tonight.
Quinn barely looks up when she's forced to leave the field, and Rachel feels her heart twist painfully in her chest and the utter defeat in her body language.

"Shit," Kurt says under his breath.

Rachel repeats the sentiment.

"It could have happened to anyone."

Quinn knows, on some level, that Owen is just trying to help. It's obvious in the nervous way he fidgets that he's not sure how to handle her in this moment. He came out here to sell the college dream to her, and he clearly doesn't know how to go about it now that he's faced with a sullen teenager.

"No, it couldn't," Quinn says, and she sounds entirely too calm.

"The ref was biased," he says. "It happens."

Quinn looks up at him, ignoring her still-untouched steak. "It couldn't have happened to 'anyone,' because I'm the only Fabray in the league," she says.

It takes him a moment, and then he clicks. "Oh."

Quinn shrugs. "I suppose I should get used to it," she says. "I mean, I am used to it, but I've never had to deal with it this way before."

Owen leans forward at the small table they're sharing. "We could report her."

"What good would that do?"

"She shouldn't be allowed to treat you unfairly, Quinn," he says. "It shouldn't matter who you are."

"But it does," she says. "It's always going to matter."

There's something broken in her voice, and Owen is suddenly sure he's way out of his depth. He's dedicated his life to locating talent and trying to get them as far as he possibly can, but he's never had to get this involved.

Usually, kids are flocking to him when he shows up at their games, but not this kid. This one has been resisting him for far too long, and it's the first time he realises why.

"Your parents," he says, as if it's the answer to everything he doesn't understand about her.

Quinn glances at him, and then looks down again. "My parents," she confirms quietly.

Owen shifts his half-eaten steak out of the way. He's not even that hungry. "What I can offer you, Quinn, you won't even need them," he says. "I can promise you that."

"Can you promise you can protect me from them?" she asks. "Because, that's the only kind of promise that means anything to me."

Owen sucks in a sharp breath. He's definitely not cut out for this. "I can't," he finally says. "I thought so."
Owen leans back. "What do you want?" he asks. "What are we even doing here?"

Quinn sighs, and she looks so defeated. "I want a lot of things," she whispers, more to herself than anything. Then, louder, she says, "You said Princeton is interested."

"They're just one of many," he confirms. "With the way you've been playing, I'm sure you're going to receive renewed interest. Especially when people find out you've been talking to me."

"Are they?"

"What?"

"Going to find out?"

Owen shrugs. "Maybe."

Quinn shifts slightly. "Okay," she says. "Okay."

"Okay what?"

"I'm not going to pick my college for soccer," she says. "I know the best place for that would probably be the West Coast, but I'm staying this side, okay?"

He nods, because it's obvious she's getting down to business. If she only knew how much power she holds, he knows he would be screwed. He needs her far more than she needs him.

"I expect to have an actual career once I'm done, which means I need a good degree." She pauses, visibly thinking over her next words. "I also need to be somewhere that's... liberal."

His eyebrows shoot up in question.

Quinn gives him a very significant look, and she's saying a hell of a lot without opening her mouth. "You've met my best friends," is what she does end up saying.

Owen just nods.

"I would prefer to be as close to New York as possible, but I was willing to stay in Connecticut, so I'm open to as far as Boston or even D.C."

Owen thinks he should be taking notes, but he doesn't want to disrupt her flow by making too sudden a movement.

"You're not actually a scout, are you?"

"I'm an agent," he says. "But, technically, I am still a scout; just not in the terms normally understood."

Quinn thinks it over. "Does this mean I'm essentially hiring you to represent me?"

Owen chuckles. "No, Quinn," he says. "But, you will, one day, when you inevitably go pro."

"Is that a condition for us to do this?"

"No," he's quick to say. "There are no conditions."

Quinn shakes her head. "That isn't how the world works," she says. "There are always conditions."
"Not when it comes to me," he says. Then, because she suddenly looks far too tense, he adds, "Though, if you do spend a little more time considering Cornell, I'm definitely down with that."

Quinn rolls her eyes. "Let me guess: your alma mater?"

He grins at her. "What gave me away?"

Quinn gives him a look. "It's probably the haircut."

Rachel waits for Quinn in the blonde's bedroom. It's the only place Rachel can be sure Quinn will go once she gets back from her dinner with Owen.

During that time, Rachel has allowed herself to go over the events of this morning in startling detail. It was a fight that never should have been, and Rachel can pinpoint the exact moment it turned into one.

It also hasn't helped that the two of them actually haven't discussed anything to do with Eric since the night of the revelation.

Eric.

Rachel glances down at her phone. She received another set of texts from him earlier (when she didn't reply to the morning pair) and the boy is starting to sound more and more desperate.

She reasons that he's bound to figure out that she knows, with the way things are going, which is going to make their relationship even more awkward.

And it also may or may not put Quinn in the line of fire. Eric doesn't know she was listening in, and he'll just assume that Quinn spilled the beans, as it were.

One thing.

Why can't just one thing be easy?

Well, this is.

Rachel gets to her feet the second Quinn's door opens and the blonde steps through. Rachel has her arms around her before Quinn can even register her presence, and they're both a little surprised that the blonde doesn't resist the contact.

Instead, Quinn sinks into the embrace.

"I'm sorry," Rachel murmurs, face pressed into the crook of Quinn's cool neck. "I love you."

This is the easy part: loving Quinn.

Then, there's this:

Quinn pulls back, her expression guarded. "We should probably talk."
Chapter Twenty-Seven

Things with Quinn generally aren't awkward.

Rachel has literally had Quinn's nipple in her mouth, so she likes to think they're beyond such things.

And yet, here they find themselves, barely able to look at each other as they sit on Quinn's bed, this emotional and physical distance between them.

"Quinn?" Rachel starts; "baby, please talk to me."

Quinn waits another three minutes and fourteen seconds before she speaks. "I'm not following you to New York," she says, and the start of this conversation is so unexpected that Rachel actually flinches. "I won't," she says. "Our relationship will never survive something like that, because I'll keep waiting for the other shoe to drop, and that's no way for either of us to live."

Rachel isn't sure what to say.

"I love you, Rachel," she says. "I want nothing more than to be with you, today and tomorrow and every day from here on out, but I don't know if - if I can be the person you need me to be." She wrings her fingers together. "We'll never work if you insist on trying to change my mind. People have been manipulating my life since before I was conceived, and I don't need that from my girlfriend, okay?"

"So, you need to give up on trying to reunite me and Santana. I don't want it, and I honestly don't care if Santana suddenly does." She says the words as resolutely as she can manage, but it's obvious Rachel still doesn't believe her.

Still, the brunette says, "Okay."

Quinn sighs. "Is this going to be one of those things we just agree to disagree on, then?"

"Maybe that's best," Rachel offers.

Quinn rolls her eyes. "You're lucky I love you so much."

"I am, yes."

Quinn's small smile grows into a full-blown grin, and the awkwardness has dissipated somewhat. Well, enough for Rachel to reach out and take hold of Quinn's hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. "I'm sorry if you feel as if I pushed," she says. "I probably shouldn't have involved Kurt." She smiles sheepishly. "If it makes you feel better, he did call me insane when I told him, so there's that."

Quinn laughs softly. "Did he, really?"

"Totally," she says; "but I made sure he knew that you call me ridiculous. It's far superior."

"You are such a dork."

"I really am sorry, though," she says. "For the Santana thing, and for not telling you about Eric and
his texts." She sighs heavily. "They started after New Year's, and I tried not to think too much about them. I mean, before this Winter Break, the two of us exchanged very little communication, and I reasoned that was just because he was a boy in college who probably thought he was too cool for his kid sister. But, now that I know better, the fact that he's texting at all is alarming.

"I - I didn't tell you about them because I didn't want this to happen. I really didn't think it would be this bad, though. We're fighting, and it's awkward, and I'm certain there's no handbook to help guide us through a situation like this."

"No, there probably isn't," Quinn soberly agrees. "But, I mean, that's why you have me, Rach. To help you deal with all of this, because you're not alone, okay? We're together, and we're supposed to face everything that way, as far as I know." She pauses. "Unless I'm mistaken,"

"You're not," Rachel agrees with a heavy sigh. "I think, because I don't know what to do in this situation, I didn't really want to lump it onto everything else with which we need to deal. Doesn't it just feel as if the list is endless?"

"I don't care about any of that," Quinn says. "You're with me, and I'm with you. We'll deal with what life throws at us together, and that's that, okay?"

Rachel nods numbly. "I don't really know what to do about Eric," she confesses. "I mean, I can barely manage it over the phone, so he's bound to figure it out the second we're in the same place again."

"Is - is it something you think you could talk to him about?" Quinn asks. "I mean, it might do you both some good to get it all out in the open, you know? Clear the air, as it were."

"I wouldn't even know where to start," she says. "I don't think I'm ready for that."

"Okay," Quinn says. "There's no pressure for you to do anything. If it's not something you think you're ready to talk to him about, then I'm not going to force you. Nobody is."

Rachel breathes out in relief.

"You don't even have to talk to me about it," Quinn offers. "Just, I don't know, it would be nice to be kept a little in the loop. I don't like being blindsided by things that lead to us fighting the way we did."

Rachel winces. "About that," she murmurs; "I'm sorry about what I said about you not understanding what it's like to have a sibling. I wasn't thinking, Quinn, and I hate that I brought up something that's obviously painful for you."

Quinn shakes her head. "I accept your apology, Rachel," she says; "but you were right."

Rachel sputters, caught off guard. "What?"

"I mean, I really don't get it," she clarifies; "and it's likely I never will. So, I'm going to need you to explain it to me if ever we do get around to discussing it, okay?"

Rachel nods slowly. "Okay, Quinn."

Quinn shifts slightly, allowing them both to take a moment to compose themselves. A lot of this conversation is long overdue, and they still have far too many things to discuss. For the moment, though, all she wants to do is pull Rachel into her lap and just hold her.
Soon.

"Do we need to talk about Noah?" Quinn asks.

Rachel groans. "Am I allowed to say no?"

"Of course."

"But, we do need to talk about that, don't we?"

"I think it'll help."

Rachel takes a breath, almost as if she's gathering herself. "I am so mad at him," she says. "For putting us in this position, and for blindsiding me the way he did. He's - he's been apologising endlessly, but he hasn't said that - " she stops, sighing. "He hasn't specified that he's actually going to *do* anything."

"What do you want him to do?"

Rachel hesitates for a moment, and then eventually confesses, "I want him to break up with her." She looks caught off guard by her own admission. "I want him to pick me. I want him to make it clear he's not going to see her again, because he's *my* friend, and he chooses me. I want to know that I'm more important."

Rachel looks distressed now, and Quinn's heart breaks for her.

"Does that make me selfish?" Rachel asks.

"No," Quinn immediately says. "It doesn't."

"Part of me imagines he thinks I should understand, just because he seems to understand that I'm also in a relationship the general society doesn't approve of."

Quinn winces. "Like your mother?"

"Like my mother," she confirms.

Quinn looks thoughtful.

"What?"

"I think you're right," she says. "After you and Daniel left Proof, he said something to that effect, but more about me."

"You?"

"How my family wouldn't understand, but I still choose to be with you," Quinn explains. "I told him that I knew the consequences of my choices, and that I was more than likely to lose people because of it. I warned him that he would have to face the same thing."

Rachel bites her bottom lip. "He has," she says softly. "My family doesn't talk to him, and Tina's been giving him the cold shoulder. As far as I know, Finn is the only one who still talks to him."

Quinn rolls her eyes. "I really don't like that Finn."

"I think he's legitimately scared of you," Rachel says with a giggle. "Baby, you can be terrifying
when you really want to be."

"It's a useful talent to have."

"Before we even started out, I always felt safe with you," she says, revealing something she hasn't thought she ever would. "I still do, of course, but it's probably one of the first things that attracted me to you. Or, you to me. Whichever. All I know is I wanted to spend all this time with you, even if all we did was fight, because you've always made me feel secure."

Quinn laughs softly. "Fighting with me gets you hot, huh?"

Rachel can't stop her blush, even if she tries.

Because, Quinn already knows it does. It turns her on in ways she can't really understand or describe. It's also worried her in ways she's discussed with her therapist, because wanting Quinn as much as she does is terrifying.

"It does," Rachel confirms, and then she launches herself at Quinn, because she just can't resist. She loves this girl, and she loves the way Quinn makes her feel.

Especially when they're like this: just the two of them, together, working through life's trials and tribulations.

Rachel wraps her arms around Quinn's shoulders, and the two of them fall back against Quinn's pillows.

Quinn laughs softly, her own arms coming around Rachel's waist as she draws their bodies closer together.

"I love you," Rachel says, and then proceeds to kiss Quinn into what Rachel would call oblivion.

If Quinn would let her, at least.

Rachel frowns when Quinn prematurely ends the kiss. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," Quinn assures her. "I just - I want to be clear about something."

"What?"

"I won't follow you to New York," Quinn says. "I won't go to New York for you, Rachel, but I can go for myself, and that will make all the difference."

"Okay," Rachel says. "I can live with that."

"You say that now…"

Rachel giggles. "I mean it, Fabray."

Quinn smiles widely at her, and then reaches up to close the space between them, her lips immediately seeking out Rachel's. Quinn kisses her slowly, gently, as if she's afraid of this moment and what it means.

It's a seal of sorts; a promise of forever.

And, when Quinn says, "We have the rest of our lives together," Rachel knows there will never be anybody else for her.
She wouldn't have it any other way.

Rachel eventually texts Eric back over the weekend.

It's simple, succinct and it reveals nothing of her thoughts on the truth she now knows. Quinn sits right beside her when she clicks 'Send,' and the blonde keeps her arm around her long after Eric has replied.

"Do you want me to read them for you?" Quinn offers about Eric's fresh texts, and the reluctance is clear in her voice. Yet, she still offers, and Rachel loves her just that bit more for it.

"No, it's okay," Rachel says, thinking this crazy situation has hurt her girlfriend enough for one lifetime. It must be so weird for her, Rachel muses quietly, as she looks down at her phone's screen.

It's odd, she thinks, how easy it is to placate Eric. She wonders if he's likely to believe what he's desperately trying to. She imagines it would be jarring to make the leap to accepting your (step)sister is aware of your feelings for her.

If Rachel can help both herself and Eric keep hold of this fantasy where none of this is happening, then she's all too willing to do so.

Quinn presses a kiss to her temple. "You okay?"

Rachel closes her eyes in an attempt to soak up this moment. "I think so, yes," she says. "I will be. We will be."

Quinn just hums.

"Thank you for being so understanding about this," she says in a bit of wonder. "I count myself pretty lucky to have you."

"As you should."

Rachel giggles, and then nuzzles Quinn's shoulder, smiling when she feels Quinn drop a kiss to the top of her head. "I missed you this morning," she mumbles into Quinn's sweater.

"I missed you, too," Quinn automatically returns. "I hope you know I would always want to be here with you, instead."

"Instead of scoring hat tricks, you mean to say," Rachel teases lightly. "You should have seen the way Blaine was panicking in Kurt's room when you texted us the score. I think he loses more and more hair with every hat trick you score."

Quinn laughs. "It's his own fault he chose to offer up his first-born."

"Oh, he's definitely regretting it," Rachel confirms with a giggle. "He's normally so calm and composed and, I know this sounds bad, but Kurt and I get way too much satisfaction at seeing him panic."

"That does sound bad," Quinn confirms, earning herself a glare and a pout.

Which she immediately kisses away. They've had an intense few days, and they could probably do with a reprieve.

Like now.
Quinn kisses her with such a reverence, as if she's asking permission for something, and Rachel gives it by nibbling on Quinn's bottom lip.

Quinn lets out a soft moan, her hands immediately finding purchase on Rachel's hips. "C'mere," she murmurs, and softly tugs.

Rachel doesn't need to be told twice as she rises to her feet for a moment, and then straddles Quinn's lap, settling until she's comfortable. Her mouth has barely detached from Quinn's, and her fingers slide into blonde hair with the intention of never letting go.

Rachel shifts her hips enough to force a gasp from Quinn. "I am so in love with you," she whispers against Quinn's lips, and feels the blonde smile.

"You don't need to convince me," she says.

Rachel pulls back slightly. "Do you want me to?" she asks, "I mean, do you want to be having sex?"

Quinn freezes, thoroughly caught off guard by the abrupt questions. "What?"

"I mean, if you were with anyone else, you probably would be, right?"

Quinn blinks a few times, trying to clear the haze in her head. They were literally five seconds away from a steamy make-out session, and now they're talking about this. She needs a moment to gather her thoughts, which is made increasingly difficult by the fact that Rachel is still in her lap.

"What?" Quinn asks, still incoherent.

Rachel kisses her lips once, twice. "You would be having sex if you were dating anyone other than me."

"Uh," Quinn starts; "what?"

"Quinn."

She blinks repeatedly. "I don't know if there's a right way to respond to this," she says. "Do I want to have sex with you? Of course. Am I content with what we're doing right now? Definitely."

"But - "

Quinn shakes her head. "Baby, just listen to me, okay," she says. "It doesn't matter about what I could or couldn't have with someone else, because I don't want anyone other than you. I don't care how long it takes. I don't even care if it never happens."

"You can't say that."

"I can, and I will," Quinn counters. "I just - I want you to have proper experiences, which means that I hope you'll at least try."

"Try," she repeats. "With you?"

"With me," she confirms; "or, with someone else, if - if things don't work out between us. As - as long as you know they'll treat you the way you deserve: the right way and with the utmost respect. It shouldn't be a scary thing, Rach. Wanting me, or wanting someone shouldn't fill you with dread, and that's all I want for you, okay? Happiness and love and kindness and all those lovely things someone as great as you deserves."
Rachel doesn't know what to say to that, so she just kisses Quinn, harder than she ever has before. Her tongue slides into Quinn's mouth without pretence, drawing a delightful moan from her blonde girlfriend. She licks into every crevice on offer, her heart thundering in her chest.

Rachel can't imagine finding anyone better for her than Quinn Fabray, and she intends to prove it to her.

Somehow.

Without taking off her clothes, preferably.

Still, it's what she does when she removes her own shirt, immediately taking hold of Quinn's hands and placing them on her bra-clad breasts. It gives Quinn the silent permission to touch, and it's all the direction Quinn needs.

The second she feels the pressure of Quinn's palms, Rachel moans, low and long. Her hips shift again, and it feels so good.

It's terrifying.

Quinn must sense something in her, because she pulls back slowly, her eyes searching Rachel's face for something, anything. "Are you okay?" she asks.

Rachel can't bring herself to respond verbally, so she just nods, and then kisses Quinn again.

And, really, with Quinn's mouth doing that and her hands right there; Rachel thinks of nothing and nobody else, which is exactly the way it's supposed to be.

While Quinn's schedule is erratic at best - each week can result in a soccer game on a completely different day - Rachel's is set. She's decided to dedicate all her free time and energy to bettering her dancing and her singing, which is definitely going to be needed when she gets to New York.

To NYADA.

Which, if she's being honest, she's not entirely keen on anymore.

Rachel knows it's to do with her mother and Brody. God, she doesn't want to go to the same school as her mother's much younger boyfriend, and have him be in the next class over. It's the number one thing she and Shelby have been fighting about.

She knows her reluctance is adding to what she believes is Shelby's guilt, but it's not Rachel's job to assuage it. Shelby's made her choices, and it's now up to Rachel to make her own, as a result of her mother's.

It's something she still needs to speak to Quinn about, as well.

While NYADA boasts one of the best musical theatre programs in the country, Rachel still has options. She made sure she had them, because she watched Daniel make a mess of his own future by not having a fallback, and then she witnessed Levi struggle with his decision to pursue Law (he worried that it would conflict with his own Christian beliefs, but he's coming to terms with it).

She's not even going to think about Eric's lack of ambition when he was first considering college, or the role she may or may not have unwittingly played.

For a while, Rachel worried about having too many options. She sees it with Quinn, who has the
literal world at her feet, and still can't bring herself to make a definitive decision.

Rachel knows it's only going to get worse for her girlfriend, once other colleges start hearing that she's actually talking to Owen now and considering her options.

*Options.*

Rachel's second choice is NYU's Tisch, which she knows is an equally brilliant program. It's just that NYADA might allow her to hone a specialty more easily, but that's something to worry about in the future.

Then, there's Juilliard. They don't have a musical theatre program, but Rachel applied for her Voice. She was tempted to attempt a double major with Acting, but her mother advised against it.

Rachel thinks she's done taking her mother's advice.

Fighting with Shelby has been exhausting, and hiding her relationship with Quinn is slowly sucking her dry. In the beginning, the novelty of being Quinn's in secret was enough to get them through. Rachel didn't and still doesn't want to deal with the aftermath of her sexuality becoming public knowledge, but she would *really* like to tell their friends about their romance.

She just wants the important people in their lives to know that she's found *the one* and that she's happy. Because, she is. It's difficult and they're probably going to be testing each other and their relationship for the rest of their lives, but Rachel wouldn't trade her life with or her love for Quinn for anything.

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It's a Monday when Rachel gets a bit of a reality check. It's nothing really monumental, but it does force her to evaluate her life's goals. She wants musical theatre and Broadway and success, and she wants Quinn.

It's the first time she considers she might not be able to have it all.

After rehearsals with the large school choir, the ConChords break off to have their additional practice. They've been preparing for Regionals endlessly, and the excitement of what's to come is catching.

Quinn is going to come to this one.

Like Sectionals, Rachel has a solo.

Just her, centre stage, with her voice and her talent.

Jesse knows, with her, they're a step above the rest, and he's already planning their Nationals' set lists. She's his ticket to the big leagues, and he has to make sure he doesn't mess this up.

Rachel isn't sure how they get to talking about it, but Blaine mentions something about serenading his crush at his workplace, and the conversation spirals from there.

Sexuality versus Success.

"The world is a lot more accepting now," Kurt says, stretching his calves as a few of them stay behind after Jesse dismisses them from practice. It's him, Blaine, Rachel, Jesse, a boy named Jamal Rubin, and another girl named Sunshine Corazon who, until Rachel's arrival, was Jesse's star.

They all reason she'll reclaim the mantle when Rachel graduates in a few months.
"Of who?" Blaine asks. "Gay people?"

"Foreigners?" Sunshine questions.

Kurt purses his lips. "It has to be more accepting."

"It depends," Jesse says, looking up from where he's reading some sheet music. "How much of yourself are you capable of hiding?"

Kurt frowns. "What do you mean?"

Jesse looks between him and Blaine. "You're both gay," he says; "but, realistically, only one of you could really make it in the entertainment business." He looks at Rachel. "Which one would it be?"

She hesitates for a beat, and then says, "Blaine."

Kurt clears his throat. "I'm not setting out to perform beyond high school," he says. "I'm going to be a fashion designer."

Jesse nods. "That's a profession where it's largely socially acceptable to be gay - for a man, at least," he says. "In theatre, it's different, but more accepting than film and television."

Rachel and Blaine exchange a look.

"I was in L.A.," Jesse says. "I went to school there… for a while. It's a whole other world out there, and you're going to have to face reality when you leave these walls. People are unkind, and they don't really want you to succeed, even if they say they do."

He's speaking from experience, they can all tell.

"They make you hide it," Jesse says.

"Who you are," he says. "To fit into this mould they've already determined you belong in. To be exactly what they want." He looks at Blaine. "You'll have to change," he says. "And, you will do it, because they'll ask, and you want the work." He glances at all of them. "They kid you into thinking they want unique and special, but they all want the same, cookie-cutter people."

He sounds so bitter all of a sudden, and Rachel just wants him to stop talking.

He doesn't.

"Your family, your relationships, your appearance, your heritage, your past, your everything will be scrutinised and judged until you just… come home… a failure." He finishes lamely, and then seems to come back to himself, realising that he may or may not have crushed his students' dreams.

They're all staring at him with wide eyes.

Jesse laughs nervously. "But, what do I know?" he asks with a shrug.

A lot, apparently.

Rachel lingers a while, after the rest of the group has filed out of the auditorium. She intends to belt out something, just to ease the anxiety that's threatening to build in her chest.
Of course, she's thought about it all before.

Her trial is public record, which means anyone can find it if they decide to go looking.

Her father was once a famous corporate lawyer, and her mother is a failed almost-Broadway star and now vocal coach to some of the biggest names in the business.

Rachel's father is gay.

Her mother is dating a twenty-year-old.

Rachel's dating a girl, whose family has political power enough to derail everything for which she's worked so hard.

She's dating a girl.

Rachel knows she's not a traditional beauty. She's tanned, short and her nose doesn't exactly fit proportionally with the rest of her face.

The one thing going for her has always been her voice and, until recently, it was enough.

Before the assault, she believed it counted for everything, but it's different now. There are all these new aspects of her life that are going to make reaching success in the 'public' business very difficult.

The world might appear to be more accepting, but it's not. It just hides it better. *Before*, the lack of acceptance was out in the open, but it's all undercover now.

Well, some of it.

You still get people like Russell Fabray.

The reality of her position hasn't hit her until this moment, and she feels the weight of it settle on her chest. If she becomes as famous as she intends to - she's going to make it on Broadway and become a household name - then every aspect of her life is going to be up for grabs.

Everything will be dissected, analysed.

*Judged.*

She'll be dragging Quinn into all of it as well, and they aren't going to be able to hide anything once they're out there. Very little is going to be just theirs, and her heart hurts at just the thought.

Can she even ask that of Quinn? Would that be fair to her? Would it be fair to either of them?

Quinn intends to run and hide when the time comes, and any potential fame Rachel garners will put them both in the spotlight.

Rachel lets out a long sigh as she settles at the piano, her fingers automatically lifting to press lightly at the keys. She's not as gifted at the instrument as Quinn is, but she can hold her own enough to accompany her own voice.

Monday is one of her longest days, and Rachel is borderline exhausted. She saw Quinn a few hours ago, but she still misses her. She finds that she always misses her, and there's this cloud of melancholy that follows her in the silence.
Which is why she fills it with music.

She's just finished the last note of her second song when a voice sounds behind her, startling her. "Kurt said I would find you here."

Rachel spins around on the piano bench, her eyes widening for a moment. Then she smiles, almost relieved. "Hey, you," she says.

Quinn's smile grows wider as she approaches, and Rachel automatically reaches out for her. They both accept they're safe and alone, because they both lean in for a chaste kiss.

"I missed you," Quinn says.

Rachel cups her cheek, letting her lips linger. "Missed you, too."

Quinn kisses her once, twice, and then straightens. "What are you doing?" she asks. "You missed dinner."

Rachel frowns, glancing at the time on the wall as she turns back to face the piano.

"Don't worry," Quinn says; "I saved you some."

Rachel tilts her head backwards, silently asking for another kiss, which Quinn happily gives. They linger a while, both of them humming in pleasure.

"You know," Quinn says as she pulls away; "I have so many fantasies involving you and a piano."

Rachel sucks in a breath. "Oh?"

Quinn steps up behind her, hands gently massaging her shoulders before they trail down her chest. Quinn's hands cup her breasts and gently squeeze before dragging over her stomach down to her thighs. As if that's not enough, she presses kisses to a tanned neck, tongue poking out to taste warm skin.

Rachel leans back into her, moaning softly. "Quinn," she breathes.

"So many fantasies," Quinn murmurs, and Rachel is lost. Willingly and wholeheartedly.

"Tell me," Rachel says on the exhale.

"Well," Quinn starts, and she sounds so mischievous; "We sit at the piano and I play while you sing."

Rachel sucks in a breath. "That's it?"

"And then we make out against the keys, my body pressing into yours as we create this harmony, which would probably be more of a cacophony of sound."

"People would hear us."

"Damn."

Rachel giggles softly, and then shifts to the side, silently inviting Quinn to sit beside her. Quinn immediately does, sitting unnecessarily close - not that Rachel is complaining.

"What are we playing?" Rachel asks.
"I don't know," Quinn says. "What do you feel like?"

"Well, Fabray, if you must know, I have compiled a list of songs for us to sing together," she says.

Quinn gives her a look.

"Or, you know, you could surprise me," she says lamely, smiling innocently.

Quinn steals a quick kiss, and then settles her fingers over the keys. She thinks for a moment, trying to decide on a suitable song, and then starts to play *A Whole New World* from Aladdin.

Rachel smiles when she recognises it, and leans against Quinn as she softly starts to sing. It's one of those songs that can be belted out, but she likes it this way, because it almost invites Quinn to join her, and the two of them sing their very first duet together.

*Ooh*
*I can show you the world*
*Shining, shimmering, splendid*
*Tell me, princess, now when did*
*You last let your heart decide?*

*I can open your eyes*
*Take you wonder by wonder*
*Over, sideways and under*
*On a magic carpet ride*

*A whole new world*
*A new fantastic point of view*
*No one to tell us no*
*Or where to go*
*Or say we're only dreaming*

*A whole new world*
*A dazzling place I never knew*
*But now from way up here*
*It's crystal clear*
*That now I'm in a whole new world with you*

*Unbelievable sights*
*Indescribable feeling*
*Soaring, tumbling, freewheeling*
*Through an endless diamond sky*

*A whole new world*
*(Don't you dare close your eyes)*
*A hundred thousand things to see*
*(Hold your breath - it gets better)*
*I'm like a shooting star*
*I've come so far*
*I can't go back to where I used to be*

*A whole new world*
*With new horizons to pursue*
*I'll chase them anywhere*
There's time to spare
Let me share this whole new world with you

A whole new world
(A whole new world)
A new fantastic point of view
No one to tell us no
Or where to go
Or say we're only dreaming

A whole new world
(Every turn a surprise)
With new horizons to pursue
(Every moment gets better)
I'll chase them anywhere
There's time to spare
Anywhere
There's time to spare
Let me share this whole new world with you

A whole new world
(A whole new world)
That's where we'll be
(Where we will be)
A thrilling chase
A wondrous place
For you and me

As if Rachel could find her girlfriend any more attractive, Quinn has to go and actually be able to
sing, her voice mellow and beautiful.

"It's not fair," Rachel concludes when the song has come to an end and Quinn just presses on
random keys so softly that they barely make a sound.

"What?"

"You," she says.

"Me?"

She sighs dreamily, dropping her head onto Quinn's shoulder. "How did I get so lucky?" she
murmurs. "Sometimes, it just catches me off guard, and I can't even believe it."

"You deserve the world, Rachel, so you have no choice but to believe it," Quinn says in response,
one hand coming up to cup Rachel's cheek. "I count myself pretty lucky that I get to be the one to
try to give it to you."

Rachel puffs out a breath. "That's exactly what I'm talking about," she says. "How do you always
just know what to say?"

"It's a talent," she quips, playfully nibbling at the tip of Rachel's nose. "But, I love you, so it comes
really easily to me. I - I like to make you smile. It makes me feel good, and I - "

"Quinn?"
"Hmm?"

"I love you, too."

Quinn meets her gaze. "I can't shake the feeling that something's wrong, though," she says. "Is something wrong?"

Rachel hesitates, which results in Quinn's eyebrows shooting up.

"Baby," Quinn whispers. "Tell me what's wrong."

Rachel sucks in a slow breath. "Nothing is… wrong," she starts. "I've just been thinking… about… the future."

Quinn waits patiently, if not nervously. She's not really sure what to expect from whatever Rachel is trying to allude to. Her mind is capable of coming up with some of the worst scenarios, so she tries to quiet it and pay attention to the girl beside her.

"I love you," Rachel starts. "I love you so much, Quinn, and I know I want to be with you, for now and in the future."

Quinn doesn't even realise she's holding her breath.

"But, do - do you ever wonder about it?"

"About what?"

"What it's going to be like for us in the future."

Quinn audibly swallows. "Baby, you're going to have to be more specific," she says. "What are we talking about here?"

Rachel sighs. "I guess I'm just getting scared of what this means for our future careers."

"This?"

"Our sexuality."

"Oh."

Rachel sucks in a breath. "I don't even think the fact we're gay will be the biggest problem," she says. "It's just, if you add everything together, it kind of…" she trails off.

"It's a lot," Quinn finishes for her. "It's okay to be worried."

"It is?"

Quinn nods. "I'm concerned about it, too," she confesses. "Maybe not to the same levels as you are, but I do worry. About how I'm going to protect you once we're outside in the great big world. About how it's going to be actually to be out. I worry, every second, if my family and where I come from is going to hinder my own career, let alone yours. I constantly think about - "

Rachel kisses her.

She has to, because Quinn is difficult to resist on any day, but she also really needs her to stop talking. Voicing her worries was not what Rachel asked for, but there is a certain comfort to be
found in the fact she's seemingly not alone with all these worrying thoughts of the future.

This is really all Rachel needs to hear; nothing more. As long as she's not alone with all these worries; she's sure that she and Quinn can make it through anything. They've survived this long, wading their way through all the world has already thrown at them, but now they have each other, and that means everything to her.

Eventually, Rachel breaks the kiss, smiling softly. "Play another song," she says. "I just - I want to hear you play."

Quinn regards her carefully for a moment, and then nods. She straightens slightly and lifts her hands, immediately starting to play Canon in D by Pachelbel.

"Don't people walk down the aisle to this?" Rachel asks in a whisper, dropping her head onto Quinn's shoulder.

"I believe they do," Quinn whispers back. "Would you?"

"I'm not about to give up on the dream of having Barbra Streisand singing live for me," she says, giggling softly.

Quinn turns her neck to press a soft kiss to the top of Rachel's head. "I'm going to do my best to make it happen," she promises.

"I'm going to hold you to that, Fabray."

Quinn just hums, and then segue-ways into My Heart Will Go On from Titanic. Rachel starts to sing along quietly, resisting the urge to belt out the notes, because she's far too comfortable where she is, just soaking in the music and the warmth of Quinn.

Quinn plays one more song, and then brings slows to a stop, her foot resting on the pedal. "So, how about we get you some supper, and then you can help me procrastinate my English homework?"

Rachel kisses her cheek. "Sure," she says. "Warm it up for me, and I'll meet you in the kitchen."

"Okay," Quinn says, leaning down for another kiss, and then getting to her feet. "Don't take too long, though, because my procrastination time ends strictly at nine o'clock."

Rachel laughs. "You do know you're doing it wrong, right?"

"Semantics," Quinn dismisses with a smile, and then turns on her heel and starts to leave the auditorium.

Rachel just watches her go until she's disappeared, and then lets out a dreamy sigh. She's still thinking quite hard about her worries, and Quinn's worries, as she packs up her things and prepares to leave.

Rachel doesn't know when she notices him, but she does. She doesn't startle or jump in place, but her heart rate does spike because Jesse is just standing there and, from the look on his face, he's seen something Rachel isn't sure she'll be able to tell Quinn he's seen.

Which is just confirmed when he speaks.

"They'll make you hide it," is all he ends up saying.

Rachel clenches her jaw for a moment, a myriad of emotions flashing across her face. She could
deny, confirm or just ignore. She could do so many things, but the one thing that comes to mind is this:

"They already do."

And, then, she walks away.

Quinn's next game is a home one against Parker Bowl, which is a game that Rachel wishes never happened. If it could be wiped from time, she'll never be happier.

It starts off… odd, and gets progressively worse from there.

Kurt is tense at her side the entire time, and the two of them are caught between watching the game all unfold or covering their eyes, so they can try to imagine none of it is happening.

When it begins, it's difficult to tell anything is actually wrong. Quinn steps up for the coin toss, wins, and then they all get into position to start the game. It's supposed to be fine. It's a high school soccer game; what's the worst that can happen?

The first tackle isn't terrible. Quinn just looks a little miffed at the fact the defender lunged a little aggressively, but she continues on her way, her eyes constantly on the move as she searches for the right play to get her to the goal.

The second tackle happens in the midfield, and it's regarded as mistimed. Quinn seems to accept it, but Rachel notices the way she casts a curious look at her coach in the dugout. There's just something in the air that isn't quite right, but Rachel can't put her finger on it.

Well, not until around the seventh tackle on Quinn that goes unpunished. It's a terrible one, and Quinn ends up on the grass for a full minute as she nurses a knock to her left ankle. She asks the referee about it when she eventually gets to her feet, and what is said forces a dark look to pass over her normally-easy features when she's playing soccer.

Quinn hobbles to the sidelines and exchanges a few words with her coach, and Rachel can only imagine what they're discussing. Still, Quinn goes back onto the field, and seems to do her best to avoid the tackles that continually come flying in.

"What is happening?" Kurt mutters, his own eyes darting about. "What on earth is happening?"

And, Rachel has absolutely no idea.

It gets worse during the second half, and then infinitely ridiculous when Quinn scores her first goal. It comes from a corner, which she expertly heads, even though it's obvious to everyone but the referee that there was a defender practically hanging off of her.

Quinn doesn't even celebrate. She just retrieves the ball and carries it to the middle before moving to have another word with her coach. Rachel gets the feeling Quinn asks to be substituted, but Parker Bowl equalises moments later, and the only way they can win this game is with Quinn on the pitch and everyone knows it.

So, Parker Bowl are determined to get her off one way or the other, and that may or may not require taking Quinn out the old-fashioned way.

"Why?" Kurt asks nobody in particular. "Just, why?"
There's a particularly high tackle that catches Quinn on the shin, and Rachel hears her cry out all the way from the bleachers, which has her heart in her throat, especially when Quinn stays down, unmoving.

Rachel's entire focus is on her, her breath held and her nails digging into Kurt's forearm. He doesn't seem to mind, which she'll appreciate later, but, God, what are they doing to her girlfriend right now?

And, then, Rachel sees Owen emerge from somewhere and practically storm towards the dugout area. He exchanges words with the coach, and Rachel shifts to the edge of her seat. A moment later, he's yelling something at the referee, but she blatantly ignores him. He shakes his head, clearly frustrated, and then storms away again.

Well, towards where she and Kurt are sitting.

"Kurt," Owen says, and he sounds agitated. "Take out your phone. Film this."

Kurt just blinks, and then scrambles to do exactly that.

"Film Quinn. Film those girls who keep tackling her. Film that fucking referee." He practically growls the words, the sound low and dangerous. "They have to take Quinn off right now," he says gruffly. "They're going to end up breaking her leg if she stays on."

Rachel tenses. "Why? What's going on?"

Owen glances at her. "Didn't Quinn tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"Russell Fabray just announced he intends to run for president," he says, disgust clouding his features. "His announcement video came out this morning, and it's not… pretty."

Rachel has a moment to wonder why Quinn didn't tell her, but that matters very little in this moment. "And they're, what, taking it out on Quinn?"

Owen jerks a nod. "Sending a message, I suppose. I don't know. People don't particularly like his politics, so it's a wonder how he got into office in the first place." He shakes his head, and then surprises them when he says, "Oh, fuck."

Rachel's eyes snap towards him, and then to Quinn, who's just scored a second goal.

Owen jumps down and rushes towards the dugout again.

"I can't handle this," Rachel finds herself saying. "I can't handle this at all."

Kurt gives her a curious look, his eyes studying her face in a way that makes her a little confused. Eventually, he sighs. "She's going to be okay, you know?"

Rachel tries to smile, even though it's obvious to them both she doesn't particularly believe him.

"She's scored again, so they can take her out now," Kurt says, trying to sound reassuring. "There are thirteen minutes left. I think the rest of the team can hold on for that long."

Rachel almost hates herself for thinking that Quinn won't be able to complete her hat-trick if they take her out now.
But, they can't make the switch, apparently, because the Griffins concede while Quinn's replacement is waiting on the sidelines, and Rachel just wants them to make the substitution anyway. A draw is better than being without their best player for the rest of the season because of some injury, surely.

If Rachel thought the beginning of the game was something to write home about, then the last ten minutes are almost comical.

Almost.

If this were some kind of movie she were watching, she would probably find it a little funny. She can't help thinking about the film *She's The Man*, for some reason, and *that* last soccer game draws on all kinds of suspension of disbelief.

This one is, well, similar and different, all at the same time.

Owen heads down to the dugout again, and he looks particularly manic as he tries to convince the coach to make the substitution anyway.

She doesn't, and the tackles continue to come flying in. Quinn does her best to dodge them, hopping over girls that go to ground and staying constantly on the move.

"She's tiring," Kurt murmurs at some point, and Rachel thinks it's the only reason it happens.

Quinn makes a slow run into the midfield, inviting her teammates to fill the spaces ahead of her, and she stays put. Maybe she thinks it's safer, Rachel doesn't know, but she hovers outside the box, just waiting.

From her seat, Rachel can tell Quinn's exhausted. She's been dodging tackles by running left and right, avoiding the attention of the persistent defenders, and she's bent over with her hands on her knees more often than not.

But, then, the ball is played out to her, and Rachel knows exactly what she's going to do before she does it.

Quinn has just enough energy to make the decision, and then she's stepping one, two, and putting her foot right through the ball with all the strength she has left, just as two defenders come running out to close her down.

Quinn doesn't really know what happens next because, as soon as the ball is gone, those two defenders diverge on her, and, well, she screams, the pain that follows overwhelming everything else.

Rachel jumps to her feet, her heart leaping into her throat in the process and her fingers digging painfully into Kurt's shoulder.

Owen turns back to look at them, and then yells, "Did you get that?"

Kurt doesn't know if he's referring to the goal Quinn's just scored or the tackle that's just taken her out, but he still nods and shouts back, "Yes."

Owen looks satisfied for a moment, and then his facial expression shifts to something hard; something dark. Rachel feels a shiver run down and then back up her spine, as Owen turns and runs onto the field.
Towards where Quinn still hasn't moved.
Chapter Twenty-Eight

Quinn hears Owen before she sees him, and there's a part of her that's so relieved he's here, she doesn't even know what to do with herself, even if she can't bring herself to open her eyes right now. She doesn't have many adults who actually seem to care about her, and, based on the way he was going crazy on the sidelines, she knows he considers her as more than just a meal ticket.

However that happened, Quinn has no idea.

She remembers hearing his voice on the field, but it's even better to know he's here at the hospital with her. She doesn't think she would be able to handle the news on her potential injury with someone who wouldn't understand just what it would mean if the scans reveal what she and Owen are terrified of them showing.

Sister Henrietta is also with her, filling out forms and telling the hospital nurses her brief medical history. Rachel and Kurt are still at school, and Quinn is almost relieved by that, because she has enough of her own emotions with which to deal without adding on that pool of anger and worry. She's pretty sure Rachel was ready to march to Capitol Hill with a petition of some sort.

Owen is here, though, and it helps, even if all he did for the first hour was yell into his phone about something or the other. Quinn couldn't really pay attention beyond the painkillers and the worry over what type of injury she might have sustained.

If she closes her eyes, she can still feel the metal studs of the one defender's boot scraping along the outside of her leg, tearing at her sock and skin, as well as the impact of the other defender's boot against the inside of her ankle, which resulted in a nasty ankle-roll.

If she opens her eyes, all she sees is her swollen ankle, just staring back at her.

Haunting her.

She needs just one thing to work in her favour, right now.

"The good news is nothing is broken," Dr Evan Cathcart eventually concludes, entering the examination room with a steady smile on his face, a folder tucked under his arm and Owen following closely behind. "X-Ray is clean, and so is the MRI."

Quinn lets out a long sigh in relief.

"As I suspected, you've just rolled your ankle," he says. "We're dealing with a run-of-the-mill sprain, and that accounts for the swelling and the pain, but it should subside with some rest. You'll be out for the rest of this week, minimum, but you should be able to resume light training next week."

Quinn tilts her head back and stares up at the ceiling, her body desperate to sigh in relief, which she's actively holding back from doing. Her heart is beating way too fast, but she's surprisingly calm.

Dr Cathcart gives her a moment, and then says, "I'll need to clean up and bandage the wound here, but you should be able to walk right on out of here once we're done."
Quinn just hums, keeping her eyes closed.

"Of course, you'll need to keep icing the ankle," the doctor continues. "Keep your weight off it. I saw you already arrived with crutches, so that should do, just until the swelling goes down."

She just nods, unsure what she's supposed to say. She's lucky. The fact that it's nothing more serious is just pure, dumb luck. Maybe, if her leg had been at a different angle, or more force was applied; they could have been having an entirely different conversation.

Well.

Quinn is trying not to pay too much attention to that.

Instead, she's made aware of movement near her leg, and then a gentle presence at her right side.

"You okay, Kid?" Owen asks, his tone surprisingly soft - compared to the vitriol he was spewing earlier. "Had me worried for a second there. How am I supposed to protect you if - " he stops suddenly, and there's a low growling sound.

Oh, there it is.

"All of them. I'm going to have all their jobs and, fuck, I'll blacklist all those little punks. No college is going to take them. Just you wait. They'll regret ever even touching you."

Quinn peeks at him through one eye, unsurprised to find him flushed and furious, a heavy crease in his brow. She's quite certain he's aged just in this night, right before her eyes.

"Hey, Cornell," she calls softly, wincing when Dr Cathcart gets started on her leg. She absently wonders why he's bothering doing it himself, but she has a sneaking suspicion Owen has something to do with it. This way, she'll probably end up with as little scarring as possible, and she'll definitely take all she can get. She has enough of them to last a lifetime.

Owen looks at her, still miffed.

"I already have a spitfire in Rachel," she says, smiling fondly at the mention of her girlfriend. "Do you think you could get me some water, please?"

"To put out my fire?"

She grins at him. "You said it."

"I did," he says, nodding, and then quietly leaves the room.

Quinn inhales deeply, and then releases the breath slowly. She lifts her head slightly to see what Dr Cathcart is doing. It's not a pretty sight, but it doesn't hurt. At all. Quinn can't tell if it's because she's numbed from the painkillers or because she's just used to pain.

Huh.

Sister Henrietta comes in before Owen gets back, with a heavy frown on her face. She looks particularly angry about something, if Quinn is honest, and she wonders what could possibly be bothering the normally-unflappable woman.

Quinn gets her answer moments later.

"There's some press outside," Nurse Henrietta says, looking concerned. "They can't actually enter
the hospital and they won't be allowed on school property, but - " she stops, and then zeroes in on Dr Cathcart. "How does one leave here without anyone knowing?"

The man blinks, almost shrivelling under her intent gaze. "Well, I'm sure they've already covered the back of the hospital," he says. "The ambulance bay is an option. Or the morgue."

Quinn shudders at the thought, but, once she's been given the all clear, that's how they leave the hospital. Owen goes out the front as some kind of distraction, and Quinn reasons she's going to be receiving a call from him very soon.

It's quite late when they make it back to Dalton, and Quinn hobbles into her room to dump her things before she intends to cross the corridor to see Rachel to try to assure her and to seek some comfort.

Well, that's the plan, anyway, but it falls through because Rachel comes to her before she even has time to set her bag on the floor. She hears the sound of the door clicking shut and the lock engaging behind her, and she turns slowly, unsure what she's going to find.

Rachel's gaze is actually on her bandaged leg, and Quinn can read the worry as clear as day.

"I'm fine," she immediately says, and then cringes. "I mean, I'm not fine, but my leg is. It's not broken or anything, just sprained, and all my ligaments are still intact, so that's a yay. It really looks worse than it actually is." She offers an awkward little cheer, as if she were some kind of cheerleader in another life, and the action seems to prompt Rachel into action.

Rachel crosses the room quickly and throws her arms around her, hugging her so tightly that Quinn would probably complain if she weren't already hopped up on some pain medication. There's a hint of desperation in the way Rachel clutches at her, and Quinn does her best to match her.

Eventually, the hug loosens, but Rachel doesn't release her. She keeps her face buried in Quinn's neck and whispers, "Are you really okay?"

Rachel's asking a question not related to her injury, Quinn knows, and she's not sure how she's supposed to answer that.

Quinn breathes out, a little shaky. "It was a surprise to me," she finally says. "I didn't even know he was going to be making an announcement. I mean, Tori alluded to it over Winter Break, but I didn't think he would choose now to do it."

Rachel just holds her tighter, and Quinn is suddenly grateful they're not looking at each other.

"I've - I've never really had to be involved in any of the previous campaigns - not since they shipped me off to boarding school - and I highly doubt I will for this one," Quinn explains, her voice quiet. "I've always just been the daughter they send to some of the best private schools in the country; the one they try to pass off as giving her best chance at a life they want for all of America's children."

Rachel doesn't budge.

"Did - did you watch the announcement?"

Rachel deflates slightly, which is answer enough. "Connecticut is supposed to be a progressive state," is what she ends up saying. "It's like he wants to undo all the strides we've taken."

"He's a racist homophobe," Quinn says, her tone flat. "And, yet, there will be people who will vote
"I just hate that the things he says and does are going to affect you," Rachel says, sounding morose. "I don't want him to be able to hurt you when he can't even touch you."

Quinn blinks. "Are you talking about the soccer game?" she asks. "Because, you know, I can handle that. I can handle other people. It's - it's just them that..." she trails off. "I'm not strong enough for them."

Rachel pulls back just enough to meet her gaze. "Quinn, you are the strongest person I know. Hands down."

"You do know you exist, right?" Quinn deflects, blushing slightly. She yawns a moment later, and then chuckles softly. "Sorry."

Rachel kisses her pink cheek. "I saved you some dinner," she says. "Why don't we get you in the shower, into some pyjamas, get some food in you, and then you can get some sleep?"

Quinn agrees, almost absentmindedly. She allows Rachel to lead her through all those things, letting the brunette dote on her in all the ways Quinn was starved of as a child.

An hour later, Quinn is safely curled up in her bed, warm and peaceful as she drifts to sleep.

Rachel watches over her until it's almost bedtime. She presses a kiss to Quinn's forehead, slips out of her bed, puts on her shoes and then leaves as quietly as possible, switching off the light.

Tonight is just a night.

There's tomorrow and the day after and the day after that. Whatever comes their way, though, she's determined to get through it all. Together.

It's really all she has to offer at this point.

If there's more of a backlash to Russell's announcement, Quinn doesn't really feel it within the walls of Dalton. She's generally protected here. She's just Quinn here, and people love and respect her in a way that's separate to their feelings regarding her father.

It's difficult for them to imagine she holds the same ideals as him when her best friends are a Jewish girl and a gay boy. Seriously.

Still, there is a lot to come out of the game and, while Quinn is recovering from her injuries, she's left with a few very important decisions she has to make.

Starting with Owen.

Quinn receives a call from him on Friday evening, while she's lying on her back on her bed, trying to relax for the first time in what feels like forever. It's enforced, of course, and Rachel threatened her with withholding make-out sessions if she didn't use the time to rest.

It goes against her nature in so many ways, but she's willing to try.

So, it's really a relief when her phone rings and Owen's contact comes up. She thinks he has news about whatever action he's decided to take regarding the events of the game, but he surprises her by avoiding that completely and leading with:
"Quinn," Owen says, and he sounds very serious. "They want you."

Quinn relaxes into her mattress, even though her brow furrows in confusion. "You're going to have to be a little more specific, Cornell."

"Team USA," he says. "It's the FIFA Women's U20 World Cup this summer, and they want you, Quinn." He pauses. "Well, if we're going to be honest here, they've always wanted you, but this is the first time you've actually shown an interest in pursuing this as a potential career. So, what do you say?"

Quinn breathes out slowly, forcing herself not to be overwhelmed. "Just like that?"

"Well, no," he says, always so truthful. "There's a training camp first, and then they pick the final squad from the group of hopefuls. You'll have to work for it, obviously, but you're definitely one they've been keeping an eye on. You have the potential to go all the way."

"Why now?"

"I told you I'm going to get you out," he says, and his tone is sombre. Solemn in a way she wishes it didn't have to be. But, it's something she expects since her father's announcement. There's been quite the reaction, and the polls are… going haywire.

"This is how I'm going to do it," Owen says. "You're going to be so free and independent and powerful; he won't even be able to think about you and not burn."

"I think I would be terrified of you, if you weren't on my side."

"I think Kurt said the same thing the other night."

"He's a smart guy," Quinn says. She closes her eyes for a moment. "Do they really want me?"

"Almost desperately," he says. "You're good, Kid. I know you know that, so I'm thinking it's time to show the world, huh? What do you say?"

Quinn takes a moment to wonder about the implications of something like this. In a few weeks, she'll be free of her parents and she'll be able to take on the world. Why not start now?

"Quinn?"

She clears her throat. "Yes," she says. "Okay. Yes."

"Good."

"What do I have to do?"

"There's some paperwork we'll have to go over," he says. "Seeing as you're out of commission this weekend, how's about I take you and Rachel out for a meal tomorrow, huh? I'm sure the food they're feeding you there is subpar."

"Owen, I attend one of the best private boarding schools in the country," she says.

He remains silent.

Quinn chuckles. "You're right," she concedes. "The food is sometimes complete shit."
"Rachel."

If Rachel can hear something very specific in Kurt's tone of voice, she doesn't visibly react to it. The last few days have been a lot to deal with, and there's a level of expectancy in the way Kurt says her name.

"Can I ask you something?" Kurt ventures.

Taking a moment to gather herself, Rachel looks up from her English essay and meets his gaze as steadily as she can manage. They're not usually alone, just the two of them, and she has a fleeting thought that he might have designed it that way.

There's no Blaine, and there's no Quinn.

Just them.

Alone in the library.

Somewhat specifically to have this conversation.

"What is it, Kurt?"

He shifts uncomfortably, which isn't an action she would normally associate with him. "It's just - well - " he pauses. "I noticed something. At the game."

She waits patiently, expectedly.

"To be honest, I've been noticing things for longer than that, but this was one of those I can't ignore it anymore things, you know?" He breathes out. "Do - do you like Quinn?"

Rachel expects the question, obviously, but having it out there still catches her off guard and her eyes widen in response.

Kurt immediately tries to backtrack, suddenly feeling as if he's crossed some kind of boundary. "Oh, God, I shouldn't have -"

"Yes."

They both freeze.

Kurt blinks. "Oh."

"Oh, indeed."

He shifts in his seat, suddenly unsure how this conversation is supposed to go. He hadn't really planned for what would happen if Rachel actually answered his question, whether it was affirmative or not. "Are you okay?" he asks.

Rachel's brow furrows. "Uhm, yes," she says. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"I don't know," he says, sounding slightly exasperated. "You just said you like Quinn and, I mean, if the way you were acting at the game the other day is anything to go on, it seems... serious, and I just don't want you to get hurt."

Rachel just stares at him. "Why would I get hurt?"
Kurt sighs. "Believe me, Rachel, unrequited feelings are some of the worst."

Rachel tilts her head to the side, suddenly relieved that she and Quinn finally decided to tell their mutual friend about their relationship. After the game, it just seemed like the next thing to do. The more people they have in their corner, the better.

They might have a hefty fight coming up.

"I wouldn't really call it that... In the sense you're using it; 'unrequited' implies Quinn isn't aware of my feelings," Rachel says matter-of-factly, and Kurt almost chokes on nothing.

Air, maybe.

"What?"

"I can assure you that Quinn is very aware that I'm in love with her."

Kurt practically sputters now. "You're in - " he starts and stops, his eyes as wide as saucers.

Rachel's smile is entirely too innocent. "I am," she confirms serenely, as if it's the easiest, simplest thing in the world.

Which, really, at this point in her life, it is.

Kurt grabs onto her forearm, squeezing tightly. "Rachel, Rachel, wait, what?"

"I'm in love with Quinn," Rachel says. "Isn't that what you're asking me?"

"Uh, yes?"

Rachel is probably getting far too much satisfaction out of this than she should, but she can't bring herself to end it. His facial expression is priceless, and she really wishes she could snap a picture of him in this moment.

He just continues to sputter, clearly caught off guard by her revelation.

Rachel just offers him one more smile, and then returns her attention to the work in front of her. There's really nothing more she can reveal until Quinn and Kurt have their own little talk. So, she's just going to enjoy this little moment and hope that Quinn gets as much joy messing with Kurt as she does.

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Quinn definitely does.

Kurt barely wastes any time after his confusing conversation with Rachel to track down the blonde and stumble through his own questions that Quinn purposefully pretends not to understand.

She almost feels sorry for him, but she really intends for him to come out and actually ask her.

"Wait," Kurt finally says, holding up a hand and sighing. "What I'm getting out of this is that you know how Rachel feels about you, correct?"

Quinn nods, carefully avoiding his gaze as they sit together on one of the couches in the recreation room. There's a group of students around one of the televisions, watching some kind of reality show, and there's another group involved in a rather heated game of Charades.
Quinn and Kurt are mostly ignored by the entire lot of them.

"And - and you're just okay with it?" Kurt asks, looking perplexed.

Quinn glances at him. "Why wouldn't I be?" she asks.

Kurt looks stumped for a moment, and Quinn suddenly just *gets* what Rachel was talking about. The look is priceless. She really needs to take a picture of it, if only to show him. And Blaine. And the rest of the world, really. She would be doing them a huge disservice if she didn't.

"I don't have a problem with it at all," Quinn finally says, taking pity on him. "I think it's a given by now that I am a LGBT supporter. Do I not come across that way?"

Kurt blinks. "What? No, of course you do," he says. "You're the one who suggested we start an Equality Club, which, okay, may have been rooted in promoting women's rights, but it's turned into this movement for tolerance and understanding. I'll admit, when we first started to be friends, I worried a little bit, but I know better now. Still, Quinn, this is a little different to that, don't you think?"

Quinn shrugs, feeling a stab in her chest that Kurt once thought her unsympathetic. Before her run for Head Student, she was very closed-off, hidden behind the kind of façade that made her appear unapproachable, but that had to change if she wanted to win the election.

Then she did, and she's finally embracing the person she's always wanted to be, her parents be damned.

Kurt purses his lips, looking a little torn. "Thank you," he finally says.

Quinn frowns in confusion. "For what?"

"Not being weird about it," he says. "I can't even tell you what it's like to have a crush on a straight person, and then have them find out, and then want absolutely nothing to do with you."

And, okay, now Quinn feels bad. Shit.

"Kurt," she says, placing a hand on his arm. "I'm not really sure if I should be praised for something like that." In truth, she can't be sure what she would have done had she been straight. She doubts Rachel would have told her, mainly because Quinn wouldn't have given off whatever 'acceptable' vibe she apparently was.

"No, you should," Kurt insists.

She shakes her head, smiling softly. "I'm sorry, you know?"

"For what?"

"Not telling you sooner."

"Not telling me what?"

Quinn meets his gaze for a moment, and then sighs. "Do you think, maybe, we can continue this conversation in your room?" she asks. "Too many ears around here."

If Kurt can sense the severity in her tone, he doesn't mention it. He just nods, and then gets to his feet with the intention of leading her towards his bedroom. He's not entirely sure what he's expecting her to tell him, but he's trying not to think about it too hard.
As expected, Quinn sprawls across his carpeted floor once they're inside, and he closes the door behind them, silently contemplating where he should sit for this. His bed, his chair or also the floor.

To be safe, he chooses the chair at his desk and spins to face her, quiet and patient.

Quinn sits upright eventually, and then sighs. "I'm not some kind of saint, Kurt," she says. "I grew up on the notion that homosexuality is wrong, punishable, and those people who commit such acts are some of the most deplorable." She blinks. "But, then, I also grew up in a family where I haven't experienced any love and, when I went to boarding school, whatever I was supposed to learn from them, I just didn't.

"I've had a plan for a while," she says. "Since I first figured it out. I was supposed to wait until I was old enough, to accept and pursue it, but then Rachel told me she loved me and she was just freaking out about it in that adorable way she does, and, God, I was so relieved."

Kurt stares, dumbfounded.

"The reason why I'm so okay with Rachel being in love with me is because I'm in love with her too, Kurt," she says, her tone careful. "We've been dating since we got back from Thanksgiving Break."

Kurt blinks. Wait. What?

"We didn't want anyone to know," she continues. "Even some embers of Rachel's family don't know for certain. The backlash of my father ever finding out will be… immense, and Rachel has her own reasons for her secrecy." She audibly swallows. "But, well, we're planning for a future together, possibly in the New York area, and that includes you, Kurt, and this is something I want you to know about me."

Kurt doesn't say anything for the longest time, and then he very carefully asks, "So, you and Rachel are together? Like, an actual couple?"

Quinn nods.

"Whoa."

Quinn arches an eyebrow. "Are you actually that surprised?" she asks, genuinely curious.

He sighs. "I don't know," he admits. "Maybe not about Rachel, but you've been entirely unassuming the majority of our friendship."

Quinn presses her lips together, unsure how to feel about that. It's always been by design, of course, but she doesn't want that for herself anymore. She wants the people in her life to know her.

Kurt clears his throat. "How long have you known?"

"That I'm gay?"

Kurt lets out a breath, finding it odd that Quinn is actually as comfortable as she is merely admitting it. For some reason, he thought she would have internalised her struggle, but there's this steady level of acceptance in her eyes that's somewhat surprising. "Yes."

"Since Sam," she answers, easily. "It didn't… feel right with him, and I figured it out rather quickly
after that," she explains, growing slightly pensive. "Rachel isn't really a fan of how I did that, and, looking back, it probably wasn't the healthiest way to go about it, but it helped me."

There's a story there, he's sure, but he doesn't think he's going to hear it today. "Why now?" he asks.

Quinn pauses, giving it a bit of thought. "I'm almost eighteen," she finally says. "I guess, after that, they won't have any power over me." She says the words, even though she's not sure she believes them. The elusive *they* have the words, she knows, to trigger her kill switch, and she just needs to, well, avoid them.

At all costs.

She sighs. "It's also a little exhausting having to keep it from you, and Rachel wants our close friends to know, and I do too, I guess." She meets his gaze. "Besides Rachel, you're the closest friend I have, Kurt, and I want you to know me. One day, I won't have to hide whom I am, and I'm hoping you'll be one of those people who will accept me wholeheartedly."

Kurt can't stop his smile, because she's kind of an idiot, sometimes. "Of course, Quinn."

She smiles at him for a moment, and then sobers. "I'm not sure if I'm ready for Blaine to know, though," she confesses. "I know Rachel is planning on telling Brittany, possibly Santana, and that's already raising my anxiety through the roof."

Kurt thinks he understands that. "Okay," he says.

"And, plus, the guy still hasn't noticed what a catch you are, so he can be left in the dark a little while longer, I reckon."

Kurt can't stop his laugh. "Quinn, that's terrible."

She just shrugs, clearly unapologetic. "It's true, though," she says.

Kurt just rolls his eyes, spends a moment thinking about it, and then really laughs out loud.

"What?" Quinn asks, surprised by his outburst.

"The boy is going to keel over and die when he realises you're actually serious about his firstborn."

And, when Quinn laughs with him, he allows himself to think that maybe everything is going to turn out okay.

With the go-ahead to start telling their friends about their relationship, Rachel jumps at the chance to confirm what she's sure Brittany already knows. It's easy to find the blonde in her bedroom, lying on her bed, with Santana wrapped around her.

Perfect.

Rachel steps into the room, closes the door behind her and simply says, "I'm in love with Quinn."

Neither girl even reacts.

"We already know this," Santana says, bored.

Brittany turns her head, her eyes a little wide. "You're in love with Quinn," she echoes.
Rachel just smiles at her.

"Oh."

Rachel's smile grows impossibly wide. "Yip."

Santana looks between them. "What?" she asks. "Wait, what's happening?"

Rachel doesn't answer her. She just keeps her eyes on Brittany, confirming in silence. This moment is for her blonde friend, anyway.

"Seriously?" Santana asks, still looking completely lost. "What is happening right now?"

Rachel just laughs, feeling lighter in some crazy, ridiculous way. "I'm not going to be at dinner tonight," she says. "I'm going out."

"With?" Brittany asks, ignoring Santana's confusion. She'll consider explaining later. Maybe let the Latina earn it in some way.

"Owen and Quinn," she says. "Soccer stuff."

Brittany sits up, at the same time Santana lets out a frustrated huff. "Is she okay?" she asks. "Her leg, I mean."

"Oh," Rachel says, almost rolling her eyes. "She's fine. More irritated and a little grumpy because she can't train, but she should be back at it in a few days."

"Something happened at that game, didn't it?"


Brittany nods. "Let us know if you need anything, okay?"

Rachel blows her a kiss in gratitude, and then slips out of the room, laughing at Santana's persistent questions. She wonders what Brittany will end up telling her. If she ends up telling her anything at all.

She feels lighter, somehow, knowing that at least Brittany and Kurt are truly aware of her relationship with Quinn. The two of them will be able to help Rachel protect her.

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"I'm just going to come out and say it," Owen says once they've ordered their food; "we're definitely going to be talking a lot of shop." He more or less says the words to Rachel, who's really just along for the free meal.

"Okay," Rachel says, smiling in understanding. "Got it."

She doesn't, really, she comes to learn some fifty minutes later. She manages to follow in the beginning when Owen brings up colleges and training for the National Team.

Then he goes on about the Olympics, which, okay, wow, and Rachel somehow loses them around preparing a written confirmation for when the college offers start officially coming in.

Instead, she just keeps her eyes on Quinn, whose eyes are alight with a certain excitement Rachel rarely sees.
Rachel is so in love with her. God. It's actually ridiculous how much she adores this girl. She would follow her anywhere, she suddenly thinks, and that's terrifying, because she's had her heart set on New York for forever.

But, she would go wherever she gets to be with Quinn, because she can't imagine life without her. Even being with her but being separated isn't something Rachel is willing to entertain.

If Quinn won't follow her, perhaps she'll have to follow Quinn.

No.

Quinn won't let her and, even if she did, Rachel doesn't think they'll survive the pressure and expectation. Quinn is at least right about all of that. She knows herself, and she knows Rachel.

They wouldn't make it, otherwise.

So, Rachel just watches Quinn, imagining their lives in the future together. When they're older and free and living their lives the way they're supposed to be lived. Quinn doing whatever she decides is her passion, and Rachel taking Broadway by storm.

Their lives, in New York, living together in a tiny apartment, fighting over the little things and loving each other so fiercely that nothing the world throws at them will even matter.

They're going to make it work, she's suddenly certain. Somehow, they're going to figure it all out. If Quinn wants to be an international soccer star, then Rachel will support her. If she wants to be an artist, Rachel will be right there. Law, Medicine, whatever she wants.

She knows Quinn is going to do the same for her.

"Rach?"

She snaps to attention at the sound of Quinn's voice. "Hmm?"

Quinn smiles all too knowingly. "I was just telling Owen about our plans for Spring Break," she says. "He said he's also going to be in New York meeting athletes and coaches, so he's going to schedule sit-downs at Princeton, Columbia and NYU."

Rachel looks at Owen, who's smiling sheepishly.

"Sorry to hijack your college tour," he says.

Rachel won't begrudge him this, because he's helping her in ways he'll never quite know or understand. So she smiles. "That's okay," she says. "As long as it won't take up too much time."

"Princeton might be a full day trip," Owen says, wincing slightly. "I think they're going to be pulling out all the stops for this one here."

Quinn rolls her eyes, waving him off, but her cheeks are tinted pink, and Rachel can only hope Owen isn't selling them unrealistic dreams.

Rachel doesn't think either she or Quinn would survive the heartbreak of such a thing.

"Of course, you're welcome to join us," Owen says.

Rachel shakes her head. "If it's just going to be more shop talk, I think I'll stay home," she says. Because they're probably going to be staying with her mother, if she and Shelby can find a way to
get through a conversation without fighting.

Maybe they should just stay in a hotel.

Sure.

That will definitely go down well.

Quinn squeezes her thigh under the table for a moment, and then resumes eating her steak. Rachel's not sure if she's been eating while she's been staring at her girlfriend, so it's a surprise when she's already halfway through her pasta.

Shop talk ends fifteen minutes later, and Owen does the thing and asks Rachel about her singing and her own plans for the future. She's a little nervous to tell him, given she hasn't really talked to Quinn about it.

Still, she says, "I'm seriously considering Tisch."

Quinn turns to look at her, frowning slightly.

"They have a brilliant program," Rachel continues. "I think it would be a good fit."

Owen nods. "New York, huh?"

Rachel smiles. "That's always been the plan," she tells him. "I've known I was always going to go back there for college since I went to live with my father."

"Can't sway you, huh?"

Rachel glances at Quinn for a moment. "Nope," she finally says. "New York is it for me."

Owen looks between the two of them for a few moments, as if he's trying to make a decision about them. Eventually, he nods his head. "I guess New York it is, then." He pauses. "Well, New Jersey, I suppose."

Quinn shakes her head. "Nobody's decided anything yet."

Owen grins at them both. "You keep telling yourselves that."

While Rachel expects Quinn to ask her about her decision to remove NYADA from her potential school choices, the blonde doesn't.

Well, not immediately.

Rachel thinks Quinn is giving her the opportunity to bring it up in her own time, and she's just been unable to do it. She will, of course, once she can wrap her head around the fact she's willing to pass on her dream school because her mother happens to be dating one of the students in attendance.

Jesus.

That's definitely not something she could have ever envisioned happening in her young life.

Well, there are a lot of things that have happened already that she definitely didn't see coming. The list is almost too long even to think about.
All she knows is Quinn is on it.

Somewhere near the top.

Where she'll remain.

Quinn makes a card for Rachel for their two monthiversary.

She draws a picture of them both, laughing at something or the other, and, even though it's not a compromising position, Rachel still blushes.

There's just something about the way Quinn draws her that makes Rachel feel as if the great big world is so small compared to her. The way Quinn sees her is this amazing thing that she just wouldn't be able to explain to anyone else. It makes her heart beat faster and her palms sweat.

She is so in love; she barely knows what to do with herself.

What's worse - or better, depending on how one looks at it - is that Rachel can feel it growing with every day that passes. She falls more and more in love with Quinn every moment they spend together, and she wonders if anything about that is actually normal.

Well, it's normal for them, anyway.

This out-of-this-world feeling has been following Rachel since before they even started dating. She's been so lost in everything Quinn for so long that she can't even remember a time when the blonde girl wasn't her entire world.

And, really, that's what she is. Rachel can barely imagine a life without her now, and she really wouldn't ever want to. She and Quinn are going to be together forever, if Rachel has anything to say about it.

Which is really why Rachel makes the conscious decision that she and Quinn are going to further explore their physical relationship.

The decision is a little terrifying, but Quinn makes it easy. Rachel thinks it's because the blonde is so unaware, watching her so intently as she studies the card and swoons over the - grossly expensive - sweater Quinn bought for her.

Rachel feels a little strange realising she's willing to offer parts of her body as Quinn's gift in exchange. It makes her uncomfortable, the more she thinks about it, so she tries not to.

It isn't as if Quinn is asking anything of her, and that makes all the difference. All Quinn wants is love, though she never says so. Still, Rachel is willing to give, which is why she leans across Quinn's bed and kisses already-waiting lips.

"Thank you," she says when she pulls away.

Quinn shrugs, blushing slightly. "It's nothing," she says. "Just wanted to do something, I guess."

Rachel smiles warmly at her. "Can I take you out this weekend?"

"Of course," Quinn says. "You can take me out whenever you want."

Rachel rolls her eyes, because that's not even remotely true. Quinn's schedule is difficult to work around, and Rachel spends most of her time alone in Quinn's room or sitting on Quinn's bed and
watching the girl work at her desk.

"You can," Quinn insists. "Just, you know, not when it clashes with my schedule."

Rachel just kisses her again. "This weekend."

"This weekend," Quinn confirms.

It's both difficult and not to wait until the weekend. Rachel plans a date that won't look like too much of a date, and she feels almost giddy about it. It helps that Quinn is also keen, smiling secret smiles and stealing touches whenever they're alone.

It feels… good.

It feels great, actually, and she has to try very hard not to give herself away. Give them away.

So, Rachel very patiently waits until the weekend, and it pays off in the best way, because Quinn is currently riding the high of finally being back on the pitch, having scored another hat trick and maintained the Griffins' unbeaten record.

It just so happens that Rachel finds her the most attractive when she's like this, her eyes and smile wide, her affection open and her attention focused on Rachel and only Rachel.

As a result, their non-date is really a challenge not to launch herself across the table and devour Quinn right in front of everyone.

If Quinn senses her impatience - possibly even her undisguised want, because she's honest-to-God lusting over her very gorgeous girlfriend who's sitting right in front of her - she doesn't mention it. She does, however, eat a little faster than she usually does, and Rachel loves her all the more for it.

Getting them to Quinn's bedroom and safely behind a locked door is really where Rachel's excessive planning ends, so she's a little lost as to what to do once she has Quinn sprawled out on her own bed and looking at her expectantly. She just stands there, staring, and trying to figure out what her next move is going to be.

"Hey," Quinn says, propping herself up on her elbows.

"Hey," Rachel says in return, feeling her nerves begin to dissipate. Still, she stands perfectly still as she watches Quinn slowly get to her feet again, as if she can sense she's going to have to take control of this foreign situation.

"Come here," Quinn says, her smile soft.

Rachel doesn't even hesitate, taking steady steps forward to meet Quinn in the middle of her carpet.

It's natural, the way it happens.

Rachel doesn't fight it when Quinn's fingers trail along her upper arm, cup her elbow and draw her closer. The non-existent protest dies on her lips when Quinn's press against them.

And, then, all good sense is lost to the world.

Quinn truly is a phenomenal kisser. It's one thing to feel Quinn's mouth against her own, but Rachel almost forgets her own name when said mouth moves along other parts of her body.
Quinn has this fascination with Rachel's neck, her teeth nipping and her tongue licking at the soft skin as she marvels at the heat and taste. It's the same wonderment Rachel experiences when it comes to Quinn's hair.

It's just so soft, and it smells like perfection. Some kind of mixture between almonds and some type of flowers… maybe gardenias. It really just makes Rachel almost want to crawl into Quinn's skin and just bury herself there.

Which, okay, sounds completely creepy now that she thinks about it.

This kiss is different, though.

It's leading somewhere, Rachel can tell, and she's not afraid of it. She trusts Quinn. She trusts her the most in this moment, when her hands are roaming, her pressure firm but not too forceful.

It's leading to… this.

Quinn lifts Rachel off the ground, and the brunette's legs automatically wrap around her slim waist. She's always marvelled at Quinn's strength, and she doesn't even worry that Quinn can't support her weight.

Quinn wouldn't risk hurting her.

She's gentle as she sets Rachel on the bed, nuzzling her cheek to get her to shift upwards. She follows immediately, impatient to kiss that delectable mouth again.

Rachel grips the front of Quinn's shirt to pull her up with her, and she lets out a sigh of content when Quinn settles some of her weight on her.

Rachel always marvels at the way she's been in love with Quinn for much longer than either of them really knows. Much longer than they've been together, officially or not.

Quinn's kiss is slow, steady, as her tongue explores every crevice of Rachel's mouth. Rachel feels warm under Quinn's body, and she has the sudden urge to take off her clothes.

Quinn seems to have the same thought, because her fingers reach for the hem of Rachel's shirt, pausing to ask if she's okay.

Rachel nods her head, her bottom lip trapped between her teeth.

Quinn kisses her jaw, and then down the column of her throat as pale hands lift the fabric of Rachel's shirt upwards. They have to disengage to get rid of it - it ends up on the floor somewhere - and Rachel barely gets a breath in before Quinn is back to kissing her.

It's when Quinn nibles on her bottom lip that Rachel knows for sure they're going to go further than they've ever gone today. It's not anything she's voiced out loud, but Quinn must sense it, if the way she touches and kisses with such a reverence is anything to go on.

Their clothes get removed slowly. There's no rush, and Quinn's shirt joins Rachel's on the floor. Their bras follow moments later, and then Quinn's hands are massaging her breasts, and Rachel just knows.

"Are you okay?" Quinn asks, and she barely waits for Rachel's nod before she's licking and sucking and nipping her way down Rachel's quivering body.
Rachel's fingers move to Quinn's hair as her body arches at the sensation of warm lips and a slick tongue. "Oh, Quinn," she murmurs, her eyes squeezing shut almost without her consent.

As much as she wants to watch what's happening, it's just too much.

Too much.

Rachel can feel her body reacting to whatever Quinn is doing. She knows it's Quinn. She can feel Quinn, and she tries to force her eyes open so she can see her. She needs to see her.

It's too much.

It's too -

She sucks in a sharp, panicked breath, her hands suddenly freezing in place… and she does the worst thing she could possibly do the second she feels Quinn's stomach shift against her centre.

She screams.

It's involuntary, and she'll kick herself for it later, but a memory of that awful day flashes through her mind, and the sheer fact there's a weight on top of her sets her off.

Before either of them knows it, Quinn has flown across the room, breathing heavily and looking all for the world like she might cry.

She looks completely stricken as she stands there with wide, terrified eyes and her arm thrown across her bare chest.

"Rachel," she squeaks. "Oh, my God. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I thought - " she stops, because she doesn't even know how to finish that sentence, and now she's actually crying, and Rachel can't bring herself to speak.

She's frozen in place.

They both are.

Quinn recovers first, sort of, and she scrambles to throw on her shirt. She makes sure not to approach Rachel as she wipes at her own eyes and tries to get a hold of herself before she makes this worse.

God, could she even make this worse?

What was she thinking?

She's supposed to be better.

Rachel hasn't moved a muscle, and Quinn is helpless.

"Rachel," Quinn tries. "Rachel, please. Please."

Honestly, Quinn has been really worried about something like this happening since the very beginning and, now that it actually has, she's at a loss as to what to do.

She thought, maybe, she would know what to do in the moment, because she's been able to handle everything that's come before, but it's something else entirely when she's the one responsible for landing Rachel in such a terrible flashback.
The guilt is horrible, and she just wants to make it better. She wants to reach out and touch her, comfort her, just something. But, that could just make everything worse, and she just doesn't know.

So, she waits, both of them riding it out in the worst way.

The silence is so loud, and Quinn doesn't want to breathe, in fear of shattering everything they've managed to accomplish. Just for a bit of sexual gratification. God. She's disgusted with herself. She shouldn't have pushed. She should have recognised Rachel wasn't ready. She should have known better.

The self-loathing is seeping into her bones, and she thinks she needs to leave. She has to get away. Rachel needs her to be as far away from her as possible.

But, she can't just go.

She can't just leave Rachel alone and, Jesus, this is her bedroom.

"I'm sorry," she says again. "Baby, I'm so sorry."

It takes another two minutes and forty-three seconds for Rachel to come back to herself, and she emerges from her flashback to a clearly-distraught Quinn and a certain embarrassment she's not sure she'll be able to shake.

Rachel sits up, panting. "Quinn," she says, watching as her blonde girlfriend remains pressed against the wall, as far away from her as possible. "Quinn, baby, what happened?" She thinks she already has an idea, but she's really hoping she's wrong.

She's not.

"Quinn?" Rachel asks again, calming that bit more.

Quinn shakes her head, looking pale and stricken. "I'm sorry," she says, choking on her sobs. "God, I'm so sorry."

Rachel opens her mouth to tell her everything is going to be okay, but, before she can get any words out, Quinn has bolted, slipping out the room so quickly that Rachel barely registers it before the door has slammed shut behind her.

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