Taking Chances

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Taking Chances

by SandyLane

Summary

Rachel is close to her breaking point, and in order to save her sanity, she packs her bags and heads to NYC to finish high school and to attend Juilliard's pre-college program where she will be staying with her cousin Andy.

Notes

Definitely AU, set about 3 years after the conclusion of the movie and during season 1 of Glee.

No pregnancy for Quinn.

I'm also making Caroline and Cassidy be the same age as Rachel.

I finally got around to do some editing, so if anyone notices discrepancies, hopefully once I'm done, things will make a bit more sense.
Chapter 1

Rachel Berry knows that life isn’t fair. She is tired of being the butt of most of the cruel jokes and in the receiving end of most of William McKinley High School’s slushies. She still remembers thinking that perhaps being the main reason New Directions managed to beat Vocal Adrenaline in Regionals and secure a place for Nationals that things would be different. In reality though, nothing could be further from the truth. She is still as unpopular as ever. Aside from a few friends, she is still treated like the plague, and the saddest thing though is the fact that even within the members of New Directions, she is still shunned by most. She realises that is the price she has to pay for being the best, but it still stings when her supposed teammates ridicule her and try to sabotage her. If it weren’t for the fact that she has at least a couple of friends, her time doing one of her favourite things would be unbearable.

Rachel’s sophomore year has been one for self discovery. She knows that no matter how much she wants it and how hard she tries, she will never be popular. She has reached a point where all she wants is to be left alone. Between having her feelings being played with and having one of her dreams come true, all she wants to do now is run. At least she knows her birth mother now, and regardless how it happened, she is glad for the outcome. She has a new friend and hopefully someone who won’t have any strings attached. If she is honest with herself, which she is, Rachel can’t even say she regrets her actions. Sure, she is sad her fathers’ feelings were hurt in the process, but at the same time, she resents them a bit for never understanding her need to know her birth mother. Decision made, she heads down to speak with her fathers about her future and hopefully she will have another reason to smile again, for real now.

Seeing her dads, she hesitates a bit because she knows this will cause them even more distress and pain, but in the end, self preservation wins. “Dad, Daddy, I need to speak to you about something that has been on my mind for a while now.” Rachel says softly, drawing her fathers’ attention to her as she sits down on the floor in front of them.

“Sure, what is it honey?” Leroy, her daddy asks sweetly as he turns off the TV blaring in the background.

“I want to move to New York and finish high school there.” Rachel blurts out of the blue.

Leroy and Hiram (dad) stare at her waiting for the punch line because surely, their little girl didn’t just say she was going to move. When they realise that Rachel is serious, the fireworks begin.
“Does this sudden decision to move to New York have anything to do with the fact that Shelby Corcoran is moving back to New York? Is this your way of punishing us? By reuniting with your birth mother?” Hiram asks, voice rising slightly. He still feels the pain of having Rachel go behind their backs to find her birth mother very close to the surface. He hates the fact that Rachel is trying to have some sort of relationship with the woman.

“No. You know that my dream has always been to be a Broadway star. You know that the moment I’m done with high school, my plans have me moving the New York. The only reason I am still here is because of the two of you. I hate this town. I hate almost every person that lives in this town. I hate what this town stands for. I have reached my limit and I want out before I have a breakdown.” Rachel says in an even voice, barely above a whisper, no theatrics, no melodrama, just the truth for her fathers to hear.

“I know things aren’t perfect here honey, but running away won’t solve anything.” Leroy says softly, trying to play the peace keeper.

Rachel takes a deep breath to calm her nerves and to keep her temper even. “No, things are definitely not perfect. They’re very far from it to be honest. And while it seems as if I am running away, I am merely moving things ahead of schedule here. There is nothing left for me here and I have nothing left to give. I am done. I just want to hold on to what little is left of my sanity.” Rachel finally says, in the same tone as before while looking at her fathers directly in the eyes.

Hiram just sits there and lets his husband Leroy take over because he knows his temper will only make things worse. “Rachel, be reasonable and think about what you’re asking us to do here. Your dad and I shouldn’t have to uproot our lives and move nearly across the country because of a whim.” Leroy says and immediately regrets the last bit at the look of disappointment that crosses Rachel’s face.

Fighting for control, Rachel takes a series of deep breaths and manages to school her face into a blank mask. It would only make things worse if she starts to yell and throw a fit. “First of all, it’s not a whim. I have given this a lot of thought. I am not expecting either of you to just pack up and move with me. It’s not fair. I don’t know how you’ve managed it, since this town is so close-minded; but you both have your lives here. I don’t.” Rachel says, but she is interrupted before she can continue.

“So what? You really think that your daddy and I are just going to let you live by yourself in New York City just because you think you’re having a crisis here? Because if that’s the case, then you’re in for a rude awakening. What you’re going through is nothing compared to what you will face in the real world. You need to grow up and act like the young lady you keep telling us you are. Your daddy is right. Running away doesn’t solve anything. It lets others know how weak you are.” Hiram says, his temper getting the better of him again and forgetting his original plan.
Leroy puts his arm on his shoulder and shakes his head in disappointment. “Hiram, you’re not helping.” He says softly to his partner. Hiram at least has the decency to look ashamed by his outburst. “Rachel, I know you well enough to know that this is not a spurt of the moment decision. Just tell us what’s on your mind because I personally don’t feel like sitting through a PowerPoint presentation of the pros and cons of your big move.” Leroy says with a wistful smile, trying to defuse the tension in the room and lighten up the mood some.

Rachel smiles at Leroy’s words and after a quick “thank you” she takes another deep breath while trying to put some order to the jumble of thoughts swimming in her head.

“I have given this a lot of thought. The only reason I am bringing this up now is because I am on a tight schedule here. I have been in contact with Andy and she has agreed to act as my legal guardian as long as you both agree to it so I won’t be living by myself. I also have sent in an audition DVD for Juilliard for a spot in their pre-college division so that way I won’t be compromising my vocal training. If anything, it’ll be better because if I get accepted, I’ll be training with some of the best voice coaches in the world. And it’s not just some little girl wishful thinking. I have received an invitation for an interview and audition in person at my earliest convenience. I have also applied online for The Dalton School. I have sent them my transcripts and now I have to write their admission exam before January if I want to start next September. I was hoping of doing both during Christmas break and see what happens. You both have said that if I wanted to I could go to private school. Dalton is one of the best schools in New York. They are known for their academics and their extracurricular activities in arts and sports. I should know by spring break. Once I get accepted to Juilliard’s pre-college program I’d only have to worry about continuing my ballet lessons.” Rachel tells Leroy while avoiding all eye contact with Hiram.

“What makes you think you’ll be good enough to get accepted? You’re speaking as if it’s a foregone conclusion that this will happen.” Hiram snaps, not liking how Rachel is basically ignoring him.

Leroy sends Hiram a withering look and only looks away when his husband lowers his head to look at the carpeted floor. He is about to say something to comfort Rachel but only stops when he sees the determination in her young face, even if the pain is still clearly visible to anyone who knows her. “You should have told us about this before you proceeded with those plans Rachel. It seems that you really have thought about this. Does the fact that Shelby is returning to New York have anything to do with this decision of yours? Did she ask you to move?” Leroy says instead. There will be time later for comforting words. For now, he needs to know Rachel’s motivation, and as much as it hurts, he needs to know if Shelby plays a role in this decision. He doesn’t want his baby girl to face another rejection should this decision be based solely on Rachel’s desire to get to know her mother.

“No. As much as I’d love to cultivate a better relationship with her, she has no idea. She doesn’t even know that I know she’s moving to New York or that I’ve been planning to do this. In fact, no one in Ohio does. The only person who knows of my plans is Andy. Before you say anything about my desire for a maternal figure influencing my decision, that is not the case. Yes, having Shelby there will be an added bonus, but I know it’ll be a double edge sword. She can either have my desires to pursue a better relationship between us, or she could tell me to take a hike. I know what
could potentially happen there.

“This plan has been something I’ve been thinking of since I started high school, way before I met Mo, I mean, Shelby. I only waited and hoped that it’d be nothing more than wishful thinking on my end because I truly hoped that things would get better at McKinley. I thought my freshman year was a fluke. Sadly, it wasn’t. My situation here isn’t getting better. I am tired of being on the receiving end of slushie facials and of being the butt of everyone’s jokes. I am tired of being vilified because of my ambition and my desire to sing and act. I am tired of the attitude I get from most of the kids in Glee, even Mr. Schuester. I am tired of always having to prove myself to them even though I am clearly better than every single one of them. I am tired of Mr. Schuester holding me back just so he can spare their egos and make them feel like they have a shred of talent. I am tired of always sacrificing my happiness and convictions all to have the chance to stay in Glee. I thought Glee could be something special, and I thought that for once, if I was part of something special that things would be better. Sadly, that’s not the case. I’m tired of conditions that need to be met in order for me to have friends. I’m just tired of it all.” Rachel says, feeling exhausted all of a sudden.

“You do know that as good as you are you certainly are not the best. I mean, you might think you are since here in Lima, no one can touch you vocally. That won’t the case outside of this sleepy little town. You will probably just be one of the bunch in Juilliard and probably even Dalton; if you get accepted, and that is a big if. It’s not that I am not supporting you, but you need to realise that in a setting like Juilliard and Dalton you will be the proverbial little fish in pond of huge fish, probably sharks even. I would hate to see your dreams shattered because you don’t know your limits. Your daddy and I only want to protect you from that a little longer. You’re too young to be exposed to the competitive world out there. You’re not ready yet. We still have a lot to do to prepare you for that.” Hiram says, not relenting one bit. He hopes this approach will work better.

Rachel’s face drops at those words. Her hard fought grasp for control is nearly gone and her eyes fill with tears. She expects words like those from everyone else but her parents. She had expected concern because of her age. Leroy can’t believe the words coming out of Hiram’s mouth and just stares, as his baby girl seems to deflate even more. Gone is the bright smile that graces her face and lights up a room like a sun. Gone is the spark in her eyes. If he’s honest, those have been gone for a long time. What is left is a defeated and depressed looking girl, much older than the almost fifteen years she has been alive for. The image alone is enough to convince him that perhaps Rachel truly has reached her breaking point and maybe, just maybe letting his baby spread her wings and fly a bit ahead of schedule is the right thing to do.

Rachel blinks a couple of times and successfully holds back the tears that threatened to spill at the words she just heard. She takes another deep breath and steels herself to continue, undaunted. “I may not be the best, but I certainly have enough confidence to know that I am talented. I’m certainly not stupid, nor am I delusional. This is a small town, so the odds are stacked in my favour. I also know that it is my talent alone that earned me an audition and an interview with Juilliard. And before you say something about them humouring me, know that Juilliard’s auditions are usually held closer to May. They are making a huge exception for me, so I know this is an opportunity that shouldn’t be wasted. I know the admission rates for both schools so I know that I will be surrounded by peers with equal amount of talent. I know it will take getting used to, but I also believe that their talent will
also push me to try harder and not become complacent. I expected you to try and talk me out of this Dad, I just never expected you to be one of the many who insist on squashing my dreams by putting me down.” Rachel finishes with tears blurring her vision.

Leroy jumps off the couch to join his little girl on the floor and pulls Rachel into a comforting hug. Eventually he pulls away and silently wipes the tears that are now rolling down her cheeks with the pads of his thumbs. He then brushes her hair back and kisses his baby girl softly, almost reverently on the forehead, hoping to give her some comfort. It kills him that Rachel has spent the majority of her life being treated so poorly because of who her parents are. It makes him nearly explode with anger that one of the people hurting his baby girl is his partner of nearly twenty years. Sometimes he wonders if things might have been better had they decided to settle down in a big city instead of a small town, but at the time, due to Hiram’s parents’ declining health, they thought it best to stay close. He also knows that right now, as much as he wants to hang on to his little girl, forcing her to stay behind will only drive them further apart from each other, not to mention the psychological damage because of the depression that is almost a certainty with Rachel should she stay behind. He realises now that keeping the information about her birth mother from her has been a mistake and that once Rachel started to feel curious about her, they should have answered her questions honestly. It hurts that he let his insecurities and fears drive this wedge between them.

Leroy then makes sure he is looking at his daughter straight in her eyes while he gently cups her face in his hands. “Rachel Baby, don’t cry. You are talented and I have always believed in you. Your voice is a gift from God and the sky is the limit. You just need to know that it won’t be easy, no matter where you are. I will always support you and cheer for you. I will celebrate every victory with you and hold you if and when you stumble. Just like always, I will help you up and brush you off to once again set you in the right direction. Don’t be mad at your dad. He is hurt and he is letting his hurt speak for him. He doesn’t mean those words. Your plans took us both by surprise because we didn’t realise things have been this bad for you here. It’s no excuse, but just keep that in mind and try not to judge him for his poor reaction.” Leroy says with tears in his eyes. He then catches Hiram out of the corner of his eyes. He sends him another withering look and before his partner can say anything, he interrupts.

“Don’t Hiram. Not right now. She doesn’t need this from you. Not now, not ever.” Leroy says in the same even tone Rachel used.

“Fine. It’s clear I am neither needed nor wanted here and that my opinion means nothing. I will speak to the two of you once you’ve both come to your senses.” Hiram stands up and storms out of the entertainment room.

Rachel just clings to her father, tears filling her eyes once again. “Daddy, I didn’t mean to cause you guys problems.” Rachel says in a near whisper.

“You didn’t cause problems honey. We’re just having a difference of opinion. Your dad should
know better. I have my doubts, but I can also see how unhappy you are here. How your unhappiness isn’t just a recent situation, but that is has been an ongoing issue. I should have realised before that things were going to reach their boiling point. Now that I see how my own wishful thinking has affected you, I can’t just sit back, see the light in your eyes die out completely, and not do anything about it. Not anymore. I will talk to your dad later after he calms down. If letting you go to New York is the only way I can bring some happiness back in your life and keep you from having a nervous breakdown, then so be it. Why don’t you tell me what you and Andy have talked about and how you managed to convince her to do this?” Leroy says, getting up to sit back on the couch and patting the spot next to him.

Rachel gets up from the floor to join him on the couch as she gathers her thoughts and sees the proverbial light at the end of a dark and long tunnel. “Thanks Daddy. Why don’t we call Andy and have a conference talk instead? That way you will also know her feelings on this and you won’t have to hear the information twice. You’ll see that I didn’t really have to do much for her to agree to be my legal guardian and how this plan was something we both worked on.” Rachel asks hope colouring her voice, a hint of that radiant smile in her lips that has been absent for so long.

“That, Baby Girl, sounds like a great idea. Let’s go to my study and call Andy.” Leroy says smiling for the first time since Rachel dropped this bomb on them.

Over the next few weeks, Leroy and Rachel make countless calls to Andy and iron out most of the details of Rachel’s possible move to New York. The only down side is the fact that Hiram is barely speaking to any of them now. At least no one in Lima knows anything about it. As it stands, Rachel and Leroy will fly to New York a few days before Christmas break for her audition and interview she has set up with Juilliard. Then she is off to write the admissions exam for Dalton and hope for the best.

* * *

Every one of the Gleeks has noticed that since Thanksgiving, Rachel has been more distracted than ever, and other than singing and giving everyone her opinion on what songs to use for Nationals, she barely speaks to anyone. Instead, she constantly has her nose buried in books and papers, which confuses everyone even more because Rachel is in the Honour Roll. She is in the top five students of the school and she is the top sophomore this year.

“Rachel, is everything ok?” Quinn asks her friend. Surprisingly, Rachel has been one of the few students who didn’t treat her like the plague after her pregnancy scare at the beginning of the school year became public knowledge, and even after the whole who might have been the baby’s father issue came out.

“Oh, yeah Quinn, everything is great. Why do you ask?” Rachel answers, barely looking up from the notes she has been reviewing.
“It’s just that we barely hang out anymore. Did I do something to upset you?” Quinn asks, insecurity now clouding her voice. She still can’t believe the girl she has been tormenting for so long is one of her closest friends now.

Rachel looks from her notes and puts them away after hearing the sadness in Quinn’s voice. “No Quinn. You haven’t done anything at all. I’m sorry that I have been neglecting you. With midterms so close, I have been making sure that I can keep my grades up. You know how competitive getting into a good college can be, so it’s never too early to make sure my grades are up to par.” Rachel says, feeling the usual guilt that washes over her whenever she lies to one of her few friends. She is sure she won’t say a thing about her plans until she knows a bit more, some time in the near future. Her logic is that there is no need to add undue stress to their fledging friendship if it’s unneeded. She does make a point to make more of an effort to spend more time with Quinn.

Over the next few days, Rachel and Quinn hang out as much as possible, and of course study as much as they can cram together in what little free time they have. With a spot at Nationals and with the competition having been moved ahead so much, they are now rehearsing three times a week, so fitting in the practices, her voice lessons, her ballet lessons, time to study and time to hang out with Quinn has been an exercise in juggling for Rachel. At least her social life, which is non-existent, won’t suffer one iota with her new packed schedule.

Quinn still wonders why Rachel is obsessing so much with her grades. Granted, midterms are just around the corner, but they shouldn’t be an issue, still, with things as tense are they are with the rest of the Gleeks, Quinn does her damn best to support her friend. She wonders why everyone has such a hard time seeing past the façade Rachel shows them so they can see the sweet girl she truly is. She guesses that people truly see what they want as opposed to what really is in front of them, something to ponder in the future, after midterms. Hopefully when January rolls around, things should settle down some.

TBC
Chapter 2

It has been nearly four years since Andrea Sachs, Andy to most, made the decision to decline Stanford Law School and move to New York City with her then boyfriend Nate and childhood friends Lily and Doug to pursue her dream of becoming a journalist. To this day, her parents are still disappointed with her choice, even though she is at a point in life where she no longer has to scramble to make ends meet and is living comfortably, albeit by herself in a two bedroom apartment in a townhouse in Greenwich Village. She is an investigative reporter for *The New York Mirror* and a freelance writer for other magazines and periodicals that grow by the number, as her writing becomes known by more publishers and editors. Looking back, Andy can’t help but shake her head at how naïve she was when she first set foot in that tiny apartment when they first moved to the city. Back then, she thought she had all the answers, only to have the world as she knew it then, come crashing down and be doused with a heavy dose of reality. All because of the first ever job she had taken in the hopes to kick-start non-existent writing career back then.

It is during her short tenure at *Runway* magazine as second assistant to none other than the Dragon Lady of the publishing world herself, Miranda Priestly, that Andy learns a few big lessons. Life is about the choices a person makes, and being able to live with their consequences. She learns that she gets to celebrate the good ones and learn from the bad ones. She learns that no matter the choices, good and bad, she has to own up to them. She re-disCOVERs something that should be as second nature as breathing is. Change is a fact of life, there are those who accept these inevitable changes and grow with them; and there are those who refuse to see this particular truth and get stuck in a never ending loop of ‘poor me, life hates me’ cycle. She is glad she is the former and not the latter. Unfortunately, those particular lessons did not come without a steep price. She has since broken up with Nate (well, more like he dumped her, but that’s beside the point), and is barely on speaking terms with Lily and Doug. Her parents still can’t understand her choices. To this day, they still wonder why after being initially scared witless, she has gone from cursing the woman’s very existence to defending her former boss. At least her professional life is taking off after a bumpy start. In the end, Andy can’t help but think that everything will work out eventually. She just needs to be
Andy can’t help but wonder how fast time can actually pass. It only seems like it was yesterday she was e-mailing and talking to Rachel back and forth, as they set up plans about the young girl’s future. Now, they’re pretty much on a holding pattern, waiting to see what happens when Rachel auditions and writes her admissions exam. She can’t help but smile at the shock she can still hear on Leroy’s voice when she told him in no uncertain terms that she would be more than happy to be Rachel’s legal guardian and how it wasn’t just Rachel’s “harebrained idea”, but something they both came up with. Andy remembers how bad her own high school years were and if she can do something to give her favourite cousin a new start, then she will do so without any regrets. She thinks those are the words that clinched the deal for Rachel.

Andy is still very surprised at the way her uncle Hiram has been reacting to the entire situation. If anything, growing up gay and Jewish, she knows that he was teased and bullied mercilessly in school. He knows what it’s like to be constantly bullied by others. She is even more surprised at the way he is choosing to talk Rachel out of moving to New York with her. Most people would emphasise how much Rachel would be missed, or how she’s still so young that moving away from home and away from her parents might not be the wisest of ideas and other similar sentiments. Instead, her uncle had chosen the same path her mom had when Andy first decided to decline Law school and concentrate on working towards becoming a real journalist. Andy wonders if anger and pain can blind a person so much that he or she would strike out and hurt the one responsible the way her uncle Hiram is doing with Rachel and the way her mom did and is still doing with her. Maybe her family on her mother’s side is emotionally constipated.

Andy understands the desire Rachel has to connect with her birth mother. She wonders how she would react in a similar situation. After some serious thinking and soul searching, she concludes that like Rachel; she would search out the truth. She also knows that if she was the mother, she is almost certain that she would allow her daughter and/or son to seek out her/his biological father. At least she hopes she would. At the moment though, it’s a moot point, since she is still very single and still not seeing anyone of interest.

In the course of the weeks since finalising everything with Leroy and Rachel, Andy has moved her home office out of the second bedroom and moved the desk into the master bedroom. It’s a bit crowded, but she knows it’s only a matter of time before she gets used to her room’s new set up. She feels a bit bad that her uncle Leroy will have to sleep in the pull out sofa bed while Rachel gets stuck with the futon in the second bedroom. She has been tempted to just go and buy a bed and mattress, but she wants to give that option to Rachel if... not if, when Rachel moves in with her the following summer. The apartment is spotless, she can’t wait for the weekend to arrive and see her uncle and her cousin in what feels like years even though it was just a few weeks ago. It’s funny that of all her extended family, Rachel is the one that she gets along with the best, even with a ten year age difference. She can’t wait to do the tourist thing with them because no matter how many times Rachel has visited her; the girl still gets excited over New York landmarks that all New Yorkers take for granted. She wonders if that will change once Rachel has been living there permanently. She is even more grateful with the timing because it means having the perfect reason not to go to Cincinnati to spend Christmas with her parents. She is getting a bit fed up with the criticism veiled in praise over
her choices, and she is not looking forward to yet another argument with her family while trying to defend her life and her choices.

Pulling herself out of the deep reflection, Andy forces her attention back to the article she needs to submit for approval and eventual publication for tomorrow’s edition of the Mirror. After all, she is at work. Adding some finishing touches, she sends the article to her editor and a huge smile crosses her face when she sees the e-mail from Rachel. Not wanting to wait until she is home, she clicks the message open.

Hey Sunshine,

It took some interesting persuading, but I managed to get some of my midterms moved up so Daddy and I will be able to leave right after. Will give you more details once we get there. We should be arriving to LaGuardia Dec. 10, Delta 1548 at 8 pm.

I can’t wait to see you. Thanks again for everything.

Love,

Rachel.

Andy quickly enters the flight info into her Blackberry and composes a quick reply. If she could, she would move time forward just to see her family faster.

Hey my little Hummingbird,

Thanks for the flight info. I can’t wait for you guys to get here. I guess Uncle Hiram is still miffed about the whole thing? Don’t worry kid; things will work out in the end. I can’t wait for you guys to get here.

Talk to you soon, and I love you tons.

Andy.

“Sachs, you got yourself a hot date tonight?” George Adams, one of the other reporters in her shift asks her after he spots the huge grin on Andy’s face.
‘Typical newshound. Always nosy and wanting to know everything that goes around.’ Andy thinks. “Not that it’s any of your business, but nope, no date tonight. I just got some good news.” Andy replies without giving out too much information. For some reason, she is reluctant to share too much of her personal life with her co-workers, even though they have been working together for over three years now.

Andy quickly closes her e-mail client and logs off her machine. She shouts a quick “see you guys tomorrow,” and with a wave, she is off for the evening.

* * *

Eventually, the guilt of lying to Quinn becomes too much to bear and Rachel ends up making the decision of telling her best friend about her plans. She paces nervously in her room while she waits for Quinn to arrive and runs through a myriad of ways to tell her. In the end, she decides to wing it and hope for the best. She is suddenly brought out of her reverie by a knock on her door.

“Come in.” Rachel softly calls out.

“Hey Rach, did you get laryngitis again and...” Quinn starts to joke, but the rest of whatever she was going to say dies in her mouth when she sees the look of distress on her best friend. “Hey, whatever it is, count on me to help and we’ll go through it together.” Quinn says quickly walking over and pulling Rachel into a quick hug.

Rachel leans into the hug and quickly wraps her arms around Quinn and when they finally pull themselves apart, Quinn notices that Rachel’s eyes are filled with tears.

“Rach, you’re really scaring me. Please tell me what’s wrong. I hate how sad you have been lately, no matter how hard you try to hide it; I can see something has been bothering you for a while now.” Quinn says sitting down on Rachel’s bed and patting the spot beside her.

Hearing the obvious concern and affection in Quinn’s voice, Rachel feels even guiltier for keeping such a big secret so she takes a few deep breaths and sits beside the girl that in the span of a little over a month has become one of her closest friends. “I need to tell you something, but I first need you to promise me that no matter what, you will let me finish and then I will answer whatever questions you might have. I just hope that by the time I finish you won’t hate me or be too angry with me.” Rachel says while taking one of Quinn’s hands in both of hers.
“I… I promise.” Quinn says finally, the last part really confusing her. She wants to say something reassuring, but the way Rachel has delivered those lines makes her pause so, as she has been doing since she got the pregnancy scare, she hopes for the best, but prepares for the worst. She wants to tell Rachel that no matter what, she’ll always be her friend. Only, she knows better than to make such a promise because if she has learned one thing in the last couple of months is that no matter how close a friendship is, human emotions are funny and people react in unpredictable ways. So instead of risking breaking her word, she goes with the flow. Eventually, she intertwines her fingers with Rachel’s, hoping to give the brunette some comfort and receiving some in return.

Rachel takes another deep breath in the hopes of calming down and getting some control over her feelings. Once again, she knows that her usual flair for melodrama will only hinder this talk, so as with the talk with her fathers, she manages to school her features and aims for the same even tone of voice.

“This isn’t easy, so please bear with me. I know I’m not the easiest person to get along with. I know I am brash, abrasive, and overly ambitious. I know that I demand to be the centre of the universe. I know I was selfish when I told Finn about Noah and you, yet you still managed to forgive me and accept my offer of friendship. Thank you for that. It is because of our friendship that I must do this. Once again, I forgot that in order to make a friendship work, there has to be trust and selflessness on all parties involved. This time though, it wasn’t out of selfishness that I have chosen my course of actions. If anything, my actions were spurred on by fear and self preservation, along with a desire to protect you. Yes, I’m not making any sense. I’m getting there though.” Rachel says when she notices the confused look on Quinn’s face.

“Over the past few months, taking into consideration everything that has been going on in my life while living in this town; I went ahead and took measures to make one of my dreams come true. I have applied to The Dalton School in New York City and I have sent in a DVD audition for Juilliard’s pre-college division. The reason I have been studying more than usual is because I have until the end of January to write Dalton’s admissions exam. I’ll be leaving for our Christmas break a week early to take care of those things before they close up for their Christmas break.” Rachel says. She only stops when she sees the shocked and sad expression in Quinn’s face. Silently she urges Quinn to speak with a nod of her head and a gentle squeeze of the hand that is still entwined with hers.

“Why? Why didn’t you say something sooner? I thought we were friends. I thought you trusted me, and now you’re leaving me.” Quinn says trying to take her hand back as she stands up. She is surprised to feel the hold around her hand and fingers tightening.

“Please let me finish.” Rachel pleads, tears on the verge of spilling. She’s now standing beside the blonde, silently tugging her hand closer to her.

Quinn relents and nods her head in response. Her hand is still entwined in Rachel’s and for now, she
has stopped struggling, but she also won’t sit back down on the bed. She did after all, promise to listen first and then react. This is the best she can do though, remain standing up and doing her best to not run out and never look back. After all, running away from real confrontations that may result in heartbreak is the Fabray way, something she has been working very hard to change about herself.

“It has nothing to do with you. I started everything long before we became friends. I knew within the first day of classes things weren’t going to change. I waited until the end of the first week as a way to make sure I wasn’t jumping the gun, but in the end, nothing changed. Everything was decided before we got close. I didn’t say anything after because I was afraid. In fact, I’m still afraid. My intention was never to hurt you. If it’s any consolation, you are the only one who would be able to talk me out of moving. One word from you and I would stay. One word from you, and I’d cancel the appointments I’ve set up with both schools in New York. Truth is though, I need to do this. I have reached my limit and I am close to breaking. No matter what I do things will never improve at school. I’m tired of it all and I need to get out or go insane. Personally, I don’t like the idea of having a nervous breakdown at my age. As of now, you are the only one that makes Glee and school bearable. You’re the only one keeping me sane and grounding me to reality. My original plan was to say something only if I got accepted, but it feels like I’ve been betraying you by keeping quiet. That and the guilt of having to lie to you and the idea that the longer I kept quiet the more I’d hurt you made me toss some of my fears aside. I’m not leaving you behind because no matter where we are and how far apart we are, I plan on doing my best to show you how much you mean to me. I’m planning on finishing my school year here and I fully intend on hounding you through e-mails, Skype, and phone calls. You won’t get rid of me so easily. But, all of this is a moot point, because it all depends on whether or not I get accepted.” Rachel finishes with another squeeze of their joint hands, but makes no attempt to get Quinn to come closer.

Quinn takes a few calming breaths and slowly digests all that Rachel has said to her. She finally turns around so she’s facing the brunette. She is a bit angry, but mostly she is hurt because Rachel felt she had to hide this from her. She also admits that had Rachel told her sooner, she wouldn’t have hesitated in talking her out of it. Not because Rachel doesn’t deserve to leave this miserable town or that she’s belittling her friend’s feelings. But because she is afraid of being left behind and that her best friend will move on and forget her. As it is, it takes everything in her to not ask Rachel to stay so they can graduate high school together. After what feels like hours, she turns and faces Rachel. “I am not angry, not much anyway. I am however hurt because you thought you had to keep things from me.” Quinn starts, but she is quickly interrupted by a contrite Rachel.

“Quinn, I’m sorry. I never wanted to hurt you. I know I should have said something sooner, but…” Rachel says, but she is silenced by soft fingers on her lips.

“I know Rach; just let me say this ok?” Quinn asks. She gets a nod from Rachel so she removes her fingers from Rachel’s lips.

“I understand why you did though. I know I have been one of the many who have treated you poorly and for that I am so very sorry. I also know how hard it is for you to be able to trust anyone and the fact that you trust me after all that I’ve done to you, is something that I will always be
grateful for. And yeah, I admit that it was very likely I would have tried to talk you out of it. Hell, even now I feel like doing so but I won’t. I know you don’t do things lightly. At least not things that will affect your life. Instead, why don’t you just tell me the details of this plan of yours and we can take it from there?” Quinn says with a sad smile.

Rachel smiles gratefully and perches herself against the headboard of her bed and then pats the spot beside her for Quinn to join her. “I have known about Juilliard’s pre-college division for years. I have been dreaming of attending since I was a little girl, but living here kind of made it impossible. I always secretly dreamed and wished that one of my dads would find a great job in New York and we’d have to move there, so I could apply there. The sessions are held every Saturday from September to May. My dads always said that if I wanted, I could go to private school, but they always encouraged me to attend public school because they said it would give me a taste of the real world and it would prepare me socially so I figured I’d listen to them on that end. Things as you know have been really awful for me for years. I honestly thought that joining Glee and qualifying for Nationals would somehow make things a bit better for me. I expect things to stay bad with the popular crowd, but I thought that at least our teammates’ attitudes towards me would change for the better. As you can clearly see, things are worse than ever. You’d think that since most of them know what it feels like to be bullied, that they’d give me a break. But I guess I’m not that lucky. If anything, it seems that picking on me makes them feel better. So much for empathy, huh?

“I am so tired of always having to prove myself and always having to look out for myself and defend myself. They kept saying over and over how I have no sense of what teamwork is and I’ve made a conscious effort to learn. I thought that since I have been more willing to be a team player that my relationship with them would improve. That of course hasn’t been the case. It seems that short of giving up every solo, I doubt that Mercedes and Kurt will let up. The rest just tolerate me because they know I’m good. The jocks and most Cheerios are worse than ever. I thought that once we proved New Directions isn’t a joke and that we’re not just taking some of the Cheerios’ budget and squandering it away that at least we’d be left alone. Instead, it seems they blame me for taking away some of that budget. I am tired of it all. I can’t take this anymore and I don’t want to wake up one day and go postal on everyone.” Rachel admits brokenly.

Quinn closes her eyes in order to fight the tears she feels burning her eyes from spilling. This is partially her fault. She might be Rachel’s best friend and people know this, but she hasn’t done anything to stop the bullying either. Granted, it’s mostly because Rachel has been telling her retaliating with violence only makes things worse and it’d be an endless circle of revenge. At least she has proven that even openly being friends has done nothing to her reputation as Head Bitch in Charge. Now she sees maybe if she exerted her power as the queen of the sheep, then maybe things wouldn’t be so bad and maybe her best friend wouldn’t be so close to having a nervous breakdown. She opens her eyes and nods for Rachel to continue once she realises the young singer has stopped talking and has been silently playing with her fingers.

“Now, this is something that not even my dads know the full extent of. They only know I want be on Broadway. I never let them see how much the current situation has been affecting me. Not until recently. I have a cousin in New York. Her name is Andy and she is one of the only family members I truly love and get along with aside from my dads. Since my freshman year, I have been talking with
Andy about the possibility of moving there just so I could attend Juilliard’s pre-college program. At first it wasn’t to get away from the bullies. At first it was for me to take advantage of their training. Unlike some of Juilliard’s other pre-college programs, the vocal one has an age pre-requisite. You have to at least fourteen to apply. I’m finally old enough. We have toyed with the idea of moving there, and have her be my legal guardian. As things here kept getting worse, she suggested I apply to the college, and when the subject of high schools came up, she suggested The Dalton School because it’s one of the bests schools in the city. Andy said having me finish high school there is only fast-forwarding my plans a bit because I’ve always intended on moving to New York. She said Juilliard’s pre-college program would only increase my chances of getting into a good performing arts school. So after I saw that everything here has stayed the same, I ended up applying online for both places and I sent a DVD audition to Juilliard as a bonus.

“A couple of weeks before our Thanksgiving break, I received a reply for an interview and an in person audition for Juilliard at my earliest convenience. They normally don’t have auditions until mid to end of May for the new batch of students for September consideration, so I know they liked my DVD. That has to mean something. Then I received a notification from Dalton stating that if I wanted to be considered for a spot this coming September I would have to write their admissions exam before the end of January. I told Andy during Thanksgiving and after getting another confirmation from her that she would help me out, I told my dads about it. I waited until she was back in New York though because I wanted to be sure and I didn’t want to say something in front of my other family members though. Once I did though, all hell broke loose.” Rachel says in one breath, sounding both excited and sad.

“What happened?” Quinn asks while grabbing Rachel’s hand again.

“Dad accused me of wanting to move because Shelby is planning on returning to New York sometime in the summer. He said I’m running away from nothing. He pretty much told me that I might be good here but I’d be just one of the bunch in New York if I even make it there. He seems to think I won’t be good enough.” Rachel says, unable to stem the flow of tears.

Quinn just squeezes her hand and with the other wipes Rachel’s tears. “What about Leroy? How did he react?” She asks, surprised that Dr. Berry (he was always the more formal of Rachel’s dads) would hurt Rachel like that. She also wonders if Shelby has any bearing on Rachel’s plans, but keeps quiet for now.

“Daddy was a bit shocked, but in the end, he saw how sad I have been and asked me to share my plans with them. After I told him most everything, we ended up in a conference call where Andy confirmed her willingness to help. I caused my parents to have a major fight, but I am still going through with my plan, and I’m leaving if I get accepted. I really can’t take this anymore. Other than our friendship, the thought of being able to start fresh is what has been keeping me going lately.” Rachel says seriously.
“That’s why you have been cramming like a mad woman on the brink of flunking out.” Quinn says with a smile, hoping to bring a bit of humour and lightness in the conversation.

“Yup, that’s why I have been even more nerdy and geeky than ever.” Rachel says, thankful for Quinn’s support.

“Does the fact that your birth mother is moving back to New York have anything to do with the accelerated execution of your escape from the black hole?” Quinn asks.

“Not really. I admit that it’s nice to know she will be there, but she has no idea of what I am planning. As of today, only my dads, Andy, and you know about this. I don’t want anyone to know in case I don’t get accepted. I don’t want to give those unfeeling brutes at school more ammunition to use against me. They can throw a parade if I get accepted and they finally get rid of the freak.” Rachel says with a hint of anger in her voice.

“I am going to miss you so much Rach.” Quinn says pulling Rachel into a hug.

“I haven’t even gone to New York for the interview, audition, and exam, let alone get accepted in both places Quinn.” Rachel says seriously.

“A mere formality, you know? You said that the auditions at Juilliard aren’t usually until mid May, but they invited you early. And you said it yourself, that has to mean they really like your voice. To me, it means they see even through a DVD how amazing and special you are. So as far as I’m concerned, you’re in. The Dalton exam, you will pass with flying colours. You are the top sophomore this year, and that was before you lived with your nose buried in your books and notes. You will knock them dead with your talent. Just don’t forget us little people once you accept your first Tony, because if anyone of us can make it, it’s you. I believe in you.” Quinn says with certainty.

“Thanks Quinn. That means a lot to me.” Rachel replies, with a smile that reaches her eyes fully for the first time in months. Quinn can’t smile back, in spite of her broken heart at the prospect of losing her best friend.

TBC...
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Life has been hectic... here’s the next chapter. Hopefully it won’t be long until everything is caught up on this site and I have a new chapter to go with it :)

As usual, self-edited, so all mistakes are mine and mine alone.

Chapter 3

The flight to LaGuardia is uneventful, save for a few moments of turbulence. The only thing that keeps Rachel still on her seat after the plane lands is the hand Leroy puts on her shoulders. He can’t help but chuckle at his daughter’s delight and he knows deep in his heart that this is the right thing to do. Unlike Hiram, he is convinced that Rachel will have no problem getting accepted in both places. Even if she doesn’t, there are better ways to prepare her for the real world. Then again, with everything his daughter has been through, one can argue she’s more than ready. As much as they tried to shelter their daughter and as much as they justified their lack of action by saying bullying happens, it doesn’t negate the fact they didn’t do a lot to stop it or really talk about the subject either. He doesn’t tell her yet because he doesn’t want to add undue pressure to his baby girl. It has been so long since he has seen Rachel this excited and this happy. He knows he will do anything to make sure it’s not temporary.

When the plane finally taxies into the gate and the ‘fasten your seatbelt’ sign finally switches off, Rachel all but jumps out of her seat to grab her carry on and sprints out of the plane to meet Andy. Leroy follows at a more sedate pace, chuckling to himself. It’s very amusing to see everyone nearly dive out of the way in order to let his pint-sized hurricane deplane first.

“Sunshine!!” Rachel exclaims when she spots Andy and nearly tackles her to the ground with the force of her hug. The only thing keeping them upright is the height advantage Andy has over Rachel’s 5’2”.

“Whoa. Hey there my little Hummingbird. Where is Uncle Leroy?” Andy asks as she wraps her arms around Rachel’s shoulders and fights to keep their balance.

Rachel pulls her head from Andy’s chest and looks around. “I, err, thought he was right behind me. He must have been blocked by the slow people, thought I don’t know how, seeing as he’s taller than me and I had no problem getting out of the plane.” Rachel finally says after scanning the crowd around them.
Andy just shakes her head in amusement, laughs and hugs her cousin tighter. “I’m so happy you’re finally here.” She says as she joins Rachel look for Leroy. She waves him over once she spots the handsome African-American man coming out the gate. “Over here Uncle Leroy.” Andy says with an arm still wrapped around Rachel’s shoulders.

“Hi Andy. I see you found my little girl.” Leroy says with a smile, giving Andy an awkward hug with his daughter still wrapped happily around her cousin’s waist. If there was ever any doubt of who Rachel’s biological father is, they are all erased when he sees the two girls together. The resemblance between them is uncanny.

“Come on; let’s go get the rest of your stuff because I know Rachel and she probably has packed enough for a month. Are you guys hungry?” Andy says as she pulls Rachel along with her. Leroy following on Rachel’s other side. “And no, I’m not planning on subjecting you to my cooking. I was thinking we can stop for a quick bite to eat if you want.” She adds at the face both Rachel and Leroy are making.

“You never know when you might need something so it’s just practical I come prepared for most eventualities.” Rachel says defending her need to over-pack. “And not really. We had a small snack on the plane. I don’t think I can eat much even if I wanted to. I’m so nervous my stomach is doing summersaults as we speak.” She adds, looking a bit queasy at the thought of food.

“I’m fine. Thanks for asking Andy. How have you been? How is work?” Leroy asks. He knows she is a rising star in the world of journalism because Rachel won’t ever let them forget any published story she has written. The thought of the photo album Rachel has with all the newspaper clippings and the magazine covers and articles with Andy’s name brings a smile to his face.

“Rach, no need to be nervous. You will be fantastic.” Andy says squeezing the girl still attached to her. She gets a grateful smile in return. Andy then turns her attention to Leroy. “I’m doing well. Busy all the time. Greg, my editor is giving me more responsibilities at the paper and I just got contacted by Time magazine for a feature about the effects and consequences of our fight against terrorism on the relatives of our soldiers who are serving overseas.” Andy says with pride as they make their way to hail a cab and back to Andy’s apartment.

“That’s great Andy. Congratulations on the Time piece.” Leroy says, happy for his niece.

“Oh my God, that is great Andy. Congrats” Rachel says; pride evident in her voice.
“Well, it’s not final yet, so don’t get your hopes up. I’m only one of the writers they’re considering for this. I will have to write something and then submit it and hope it meets their approval.” Andy says sobering up a bit.

“You will do great because you will find something that will make your article stick out from the rest. You always do.” Rachel says with confidence.

The short cab ride is spent mostly in silence, with Rachel staring at the night time skyline of New York City. Leroy and Andy just sit back enjoying the smile on Rachel’s face. It’s the first real smile Leroy has seen in her daughter, and he whispers as much to Andy. Both adults are convinced that the move will be a good one for the young brunette. Eventually Leroy and Andy break the silence and talk about the plans Andy has made for them once Rachel is done with her obligations and Andy gets some time off work. Of course a couple of Broadway plays are fit in.

Once they get to Andy’s apartment, Leroy quickly settles the tab, arguing that she only went to the airport because of their visit.

“I’m on the fifth floor and there are no elevators. Sorry guys.” Andy says as they grab the suitcases and start their trek inside the refurbished townhouse.

“Oh well, so we’ll get some extra exercise.” Rachel says.

“Let’s hear you say that once it’s time for you to move all your stuff here this coming summer, or when the temperature is so high the staircase feels more like an oven set on broil or a steamer.” Andy says with a small chuckle.

“At least it’s not on the 25th floor.” Leroy says with a chuckle of his own.

“Besides, this has to be better than your old place. No Nate cooties at all and it’s bigger.” Rachel says happily. She has been waiting to see Andy’s new place since she moved a few months ago.

Andy and Leroy shake their heads and smile at how protective Rachel is when it comes to those she loves.

Five flights of stairs later, they’re all inside the small living room/foyer to Andy’s apartment. She only moved in a month ago, and it already feels like home. Not just a place to crash in between work
days. “Welcome to my new home. This is of course the living room area; the kitchen is over there as you can see. Bedrooms are just down the hall over there, on either side of the bathroom. I was thinking of either having Rachel sharing the room with me and have you Uncle Leroy on the futon in the spare bedroom, or Rachel can have the futon and you can use the pull out sofa.” Andy says as she locks the front door.

“If you don’t mind, I’d love to share the room with you. It would be like having a sleepover and it would make catching up a lot easier. Besides, I usually shared your room when you were at your old place. We could always change if you get sick of me.” Rachel says barely able to contain her excitement.

“Well, I guess it’s settled then.” Leroy says as he starts to take Rachel’s suitcase to the master bedroom. “Why don’t we call it a night and save the catch up for tomorrow?” He adds after he sees Rachel stifling a huge yawn. His daughter has been running on fumes the last few weeks.

“Sounds like a plan.” Andy says after she follows Leroy’s gaze towards the young brunette fighting to stay awake. “Come, my little Hummingbird. Let me show you where everything is and you can shower and stuff.” Andy says pulling Rachel towards her bedroom. “I emptied the bottom drawer on my dresser, so it’s yours until you guys leave. There should also be enough room in my closet to hang your stuff if you want. There is a small chest in the bathroom where all the extra towels are. Feel free to use whatever you want. I can’t wait until you are here permanently.” Andy says as she steps back outside to see if Leroy needs help with anything.

Andy walks back out to see that Leroy has disappeared with his things in the spare bedroom so she heads over to the small kitchen to start boiling some water, to brew herself a nice cup of mint tea. Once that’s taken care, she takes the steaming cup of tea and pulls a chair to sit in front of the sliding doors that lead to the small balcony. If she can’t enjoy a little bit of fresh air because of the season, at least she can enjoy the small view of the city’s skyline.

“Do you mind some company while Rachel hogs the bathroom?” Leroy says as a way to announce his presence.

“Of course not Uncle Leroy. Do you want some tea? The water in the kettle should still be hot enough and I have a pretty big selection of teas to choose from.” Andy replies with a small smile.

“I’m fine. Thanks for the offer though. Andy, I want to say thank you for all that you have been doing, are doing, and will be doing for Rachel. Words alone cannot express the gratitude I feel. Before the trip, I noticed how my little girl was slowly drowning. It seemed as if she would never get the chance to fly. When she first told us she wanted to finish high school here, Hiram’s words nearly killed her spirit off completely, finishing what the bullies have been trying for years. I thought that having found a new, close friend in Quinn would fix things. Even though it helped, it wasn’t
enough. But listening to her tell me about her future plans and how you play into them, I saw her come back to life. After I gave her my approval, the smile on her face could have solved the whole world’s energy crisis. I finally got to see that spark in her eyes return.” Leroy says, tears filling his eyes. Once again, he thanks God for Andy’s presence in Rachel’s life. “Thank you for always being there for her. None of this would be possible without you.” He adds.

“There is no need to, but you’re very welcome. My high school experience, while not as colourful as Rachel’s, wasn’t pretty either. The three of us know what it’s like to be different and be picked on because of that difference. I didn’t have any alternatives to get out until college. I’m just happy that I can provide Rachel a chance for a new start sooner rather than later. Besides, it takes a lot of strength and love to let go the way you are with Rachel. You’re doing what’s best for her. Not what is best for you.” Andy says with a wistful smile.

“Believe me when I tell you it wasn’t an easy decision to make. My knee jerk reaction was to say no, and to keep her with us until college. Then I saw what Hiram’s words did to her already shattered spirit and for the first time in my life, I wanted to hit him, and not as a figure of speech either. I honestly wanted to punch him out. The only reason I didn’t was because Rachel was there. The day the nurses placed Rachel in my arms I swore I would protect her from anything and anybody. Sadly, I haven’t done a good job at it. I also never thought that one of those ‘anybodies’ would turn out to be her one of her parents.” Leroy says sadly.

“How are things between you and Uncle Hiram?” Andy asks hesitantly.

“He is barely speaking to either of us. Unfortunately, he sees this as a betrayal. Knowing him, I’d say you just joined the ‘being ignored’ club.” Leroy says with a sad chuckle, trying to lighten up the mood some.

“I have always wondered about the Berry genes and temper, you know? I sure as hell am not immune to it, as my less than stellar parting with Runway would indicate. But, if he is anything like the rest of us with Berry blood flowing through our veins, now that he will be by himself for a while, he should cool off enough to at least try and see things through a new perspective. Only thing is, there’s no saying how long that will take.” Andy says. She doesn’t add that things with her mother are still on the touchy side. They’re just not as confrontational as they were when she first decided to pass on Law school.

“I know he will. I’m just afraid that some of the things he has said to Rachel have done such damage that their relationship will never be the same, especially if he takes his sweet time to realise what a jackass he is.” Leroy says near tears once again. He would hate it if things between Hiram and Rachel turn out to be like the relationship between Andy and her mother.

“Well, let’s see what happens over time and hopefully he’ll pull his head out of his ass fast enough
that everything will work out for the best. Maybe Uncle Hiram will learn from the drama between my mom and me.” Andy says as Rachel makes her way out towards them.

“Hey Pumpkin.” Leroy says as he opens his arms for his daughter to join him. “Why don’t you go and get ready for bed Andy? I’d like to spend some quality time with my baby girl. She’s growing up so fast she’ll leave me in the dust before I know it.” Leroy says as Rachel settles on his lap and buries her head on his chest, wrapping her arms tightly around him.

Andy nods and quietly walks away; leaving them to have some much needed father/daughter time without the added pressure of her Uncle Hiram glaring at them.

“How much did you hear?” Leroy asks softly.

“Enough.” Rachel says sadly. She had hoped her suspicions would have turned out to be nothing more than her penchant to see the worst case scenario. That her dad was just distracted by work.

“I really wish things with your dad could be different. I am sorry I allowed things to get this far.” Leroy says sincerely.

“It’s not your fault Daddy.” Rachel mumbles into his chest. She is grateful that things with her daddy haven’t changed in a negative way. She is sure that no matter how old she is, she will never get tired of having his strong arms hold her. She is sure that no matter what, she will always feel safe in his arms. At times like these, she wishes that Leroy were her biological father instead. Then again, it just goes to show that being related by blood doesn’t determine how close people can get.

“Looking back, there are so many things I would have handled differently. First of all, I should have answered all your questions about Shelby the moment you were old enough to understand. I know I reacted poorly, but it was out of fear. I was afraid of losing you, and I ended up hurting you instead. If you decide to pursue this friendship with Shelby, please know that I will support you. Having one more person on your corner is never a bad thing. I will say this though. She hurts you in any way, shape or form, especially if she hurts you on purpose, I will make her sorry. Secondly, I shouldn’t have dismissed what you’ve been going through in Lima. I didn’t realise things have gotten so out of hand. While it’s always a good thing to learn to deal with adversity, your dad and I should have stepped in and done something once we realised how bad it has gotten. I guess my hope that people are better has been nothing but dreams. I’m sorry I let my ideals and dreams hurt you so much.” Leroy says softly.

“I love you Daddy, and I forgive. Thank you for being so wonderful. It means so much that I have your support for everything. It’s not your fault people in Lima are so narrow-minded. Maybe they’ll
get better. I just don’t think I have the energy to be one of the more enlightened ones that will show them what a bunch of hateful people they are.” Rachel mumbles into his chest, trying to stifle another yawn.

“I might not always understand right away why you do certain things, but I will always have your back, Baby Girl. It’s not up to you to change the world. You can be an example, but change has to come from within.” Leroy says lovingly as he pulls her closer to him. “Ok, young lady. Off to bed you go, before you collapse. We’ll talk some more tomorrow.” Leroy gets up and starts to guide Rachel towards Andy’s bedroom.

“Good night Daddy. I love you.” Rachel says as she sits on the bed.

“Good night Baby Girl. I love you too, to the moon and back.” Leroy says with a smile. He brushes some hair away and then he bends down to give her a kiss on her forehead.

“To the moon and back.” Rachel replies, kissing his cheek and smiling at their old bedtime routine.

With one last smile, Leroy walks out of the room, and into the spare bedroom to gather his things, exchanging a quick “good night and sleep well” with Andy as she makes her way into her room.

“You didn’t have to wait up for me Rach.” Andy says as she settles beside her cousin.

“I know. I’m so exhausted I nearly fell asleep on Daddy. But I’m also so hyper and keyed up that I couldn’t stop myself from thinking about what could happen in the next few days. I sort of worked up myself up to the point where I’m having a hard time lying still, let alone fall asleep.” Rachel says sheepishly.

Andy giggles at that because that is how she feels when one of her stories makes the front page. “How are you really? I know it has been a rough few months for you.” Andy asks as she ruffles Rachel’s hair.

“As well as can be, considering all that has happened. I ended up telling Quinn about our plans. I felt so bad having to lie to her all the time.” Rachel says softly.

“How did she take it?” Andy asks leaning against the headboard and pulling Rachel to sit beside her. Things have been so hectic with all of them that in their phone conversations all they discussed were
Rachel’s imminent move to New York.

“You were right. She was a bit angry, but mostly hurt. She did say she understood why I kept quiet though, and I have her full support. If I make it, I am going to miss her so much.” Rachel says as she leans her head on Andy’s shoulder.

“That’s what e-mails, text messages, phone calls, and Skype are for, Hummingbird.” Andy says with a smile. “Besides, in two years time you would have been going through the same thing. And no ‘ifs’, you are going to make it. You and I both know that you’re getting an audition five months ahead of schedule, and Dalton would be stupid not to take you. Your grades are top notch, and your extracurricular activities show a well rounded, albeit a bit neurotic individual.” Andy says with a smirk.

“Thanks… Hey!!! Just because I am a perfectionist and I have a lot of different interests doesn’t mean I’m neurotic.” Rachel says lifting her head from Andy’s shoulder and lightly smacking her there.

“I know Sweetie. I just love teasing you.” Andy says with a warm smile. “Which reminds me, I have been meaning to bring something up with you. You trust me, and you know that no matter what I love you and will always love you, right?” Andy asks seriously.

“Yes, of course I do. What is it?” Rachel asks a bit worried.

“I know that in the end what is important is what makes a person who he or she is, but unfortunately we live in a world where we are first judged by how we look. When I first came to New York, I came thinking that the package doesn’t count and the whole not judging a book by its covers and all those clichés. In the end, I learned that the packaging does matter. Unfortunately, most people won’t even consider getting to know you if they don’t like what they see initially. First impressions are critical. Sadly, most of them are made by what we see superficially. You know that you could walk around in a potato sack with your head shaved and I would still think you are wonderful because I know who you are. Regrettably, most people here won’t. In fact, most people in general won’t. Regardless of where you are in the world. All that just so I can say that I was hoping you would consider re-evaluating your wardrobe situation.” Andy says carefully.

Rachel sighs and nods. “I know you’re right. I’ve been judged by most everyone by how I look and what little they know about me because of rumours. To them, that’s enough. They don’t bother to look further. I know that things would be different if I at least looked different. I’m nervous though. You remember what happened the last time I tried to let someone help me with a makeover. I’ve been afraid that everyone will have ulterior motives or do it as a way to pull a practical joke on me.” She says sadly, remembering the disaster of a makeover Kurt was trying to help her with.
“Oh Sweetie, I know, but your classmate was being an insensitive Neanderthal and if I remember correctly, he had ulterior motives because he was interested in the same boy you were. Not to mention he has always been a rival for solos. The two of you were never friends. What I have in mind is nothing too drastic. I was thinking of a more timeless look for you. I promise you that you will be comfortable with it.” Andy says wrapping an arm around Rachel, squeezing her shoulder and placing a small kiss on the top of her head.

“When I first started at Runway I didn’t take the job seriously. My original job description was that of a second assistant, but in reality, I was nothing more than a gopher. It was just a way for me to pay the rent. I made fun of all the way everyone at the office dressed. I was always saying they were slaves to the current fashions and wouldn’t know how to have an original thought. My friends and I at the time called them a lot of different names, but the one that stuck was clackers because of the sound their high heels made on the marble floors. It hurt that they all made fun of the way I dressed, even though I thought I looked all right and I didn’t see the hypocrisy of the situation at the time. In my head, I was more than justified when I made fun of them with my friends. I mean, after all, I was being serious and being an assistant was just a stepping stone for bigger and better things. It took nearly getting eviscerated verbally by my former boss for me to kind of open my eyes. With the help of someone who became a dear friend, I finally realised that looking professional was part of the job. As much as I thought I looked the part, I definitely did not. I stuck out like a sore thumb and people couldn’t see past how frumpy I looked. In their eyes if I couldn’t take my job seriously, then why should they take me seriously. I have since seen what a good first impression can do to affect the outcome of most situations.

“You will be starting fresh here. When you go to Juilliard for that audition, I want them to focus on your voice and talent alone, and not even give your appearance a second thought. I want the same when you go to Dalton to write your exam. I want them to see a young lady who is serious about her academics and her future. I don’t want their attention straying when they see how you are dressed. I want them to see the confident, talented, and very intelligent young lady that you are. Once you move here, I don’t want your new classmates to even consider teasing you because of the way you look. I want them to focus on what makes Rachel Barbra Berry such a wonderful person. I don’t want them to focus on what you’re wearing or how you look, other than to think ‘she looks great’.” Andy says, hoping that she has not hurt Rachel’s feelings in any way.

Rachel takes a moment to digest the words Andy just uttered, and considers them. She knows Andy is right. When she had admitted people judged her by her appearance, she knew she was admitting to having questionable tastes in her choice of clothing. She admits that in a nutshell, the way she dresses is usually another reason the rest of the population of not only McKinley High, but also the rest Lima make fun of her. “I trust you completely. I know you’re right. I just am unsure how to proceed. I can always count on you to be honest with me and to always try to help me without the need to crush me. Maybe I can ask Quinn to help me once I get back to Lima and you can maybe help me pick something nice for my audition.” Rachel admits quietly.

Andy lets out a deep breath of relief when she realises that Rachel didn’t take it the wrong way. She wonders how it is that most people who come across her cannot see what a wonderful girl she is.
“Well, you, my dear cousin are one lucky girl. I just happen to know the perfect person to help us out. I’ll give him a call tomorrow and we can then go shopping. I can guarantee that when you go back to Lima, Quinn will more than give you her seal of approval. The people in that town won’t be able to look away from you, but only because they won’t be able to stop admiring how beautiful you really are.” Andy says with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

“I’m just glad that Daddy already planned on some major shopping to be done.” Rachel says with another yawn.

“Think you can get some sleep now?” Andy asks softly.

“Yeah I can try, thanks Sunshine. Sleep well and sweet dreams.” Rachel replies as she reaches up to give Andy a soft kiss on her cheek.

“Sweet dreams my little Hummingbird.” Andy replies giving Rachel another soft kiss on the top of her head.

Both girls lie down under the covers. Andy is happy that she gets to be a part of what will be a new start for Rachel. Rachel for her part is ecstatic that she gets to take a step closer to her dreams becoming reality. Both girls slowly give in to the hypnotic sway of Morpheus arms and promptly fall asleep.

TBC
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

I started this story midway through the first season, so Rachel wasn't officially vegan on the show... once they did, I got too lazy to change it, so in this story, Rachel eats meat. Just not a lot of it.

Chapter 4

Even with the hectic turn in Rachel’s life, her internal clock is so in tune that comes six a.m. she is up and ready to face the world. She makes a mental note to talk to Andy about a safe running route or two. Hopefully by the time she returns to Lima, she’ll know Andy’s new neighbourhood better. She slowly gets out of bed, careful to not disturb Andy, and makes her way to the kitchen to see what’s available for breakfast. After scrounging through the fridge, she settles for eggs Florentine, whole grain toast, and orange juice. She starts by brewing coffee, because neither Andy nor her Daddy can function properly in the morning without it.

The sound of running water alerts Rachel that Andy is up. Rachel puts the finishes touches to their breakfast, just as Andy and her daddy walk out to join her. Perfect timing, she thinks.

“Good morning, my little Hummingbird. Did you sleep well? Andy asks, making a beeline for the table. “Mmmm, smells delicious. You know you didn’t have to do this, right?” Andy says as she grabs a steaming mug of coffee and sits down to enjoy her first home cooked breakfast in ages.

“Morning, Sunshine. I slept great, you? And yes, I did. I wanted to eat something other than cereal and milk for breakfast.” Rachel replies as she sets the food on the table. “Morning Daddy.” She adds when she sees Leroy making his way to them. Andy just laughs at the truth in that statement.

“I slept like a baby. Good Morning Uncle Leroy.” Andy says after she swallows. “Rach, have you decided your song selection for your audition?” She asks before she continues to eat.

“I’ll sing ‘think of me’ from The Phantom of the Opera as my English language song. There are enough nuances in pitch that will showcase my control very well. The foreign language song I’m still
trying to choose between ‘jueves’ from La Oreja De Van Gogh and ‘lullaby of nemunoki’ a song Empress Michiko of Japan wrote when she was a teenager.” Rachel answers.

“That explains a lot.” Leroy says with a chuckle after his first sip of coffee.

“What do you mean?” Andy asks confused.

“Rachel has been rehearsing a lot of non-English songs at home these last few months. Now I know why.” He answers with a sad smile. “Are you familiar with those two songs Andy?” Leroy adds, pushing his sadness away. This is for his baby girl, he reminds himself.

“Only the first. ‘jueves’ is a very sad song. It tells the story of a girl who falls in love with someone and the day they talk for the first time and share their love for one another, was Thursday, March 11, 2004, the day of the Madrid train bombings. One of them dies and the other survives. To this day, no one knows if it’s fictional recount, or if it’s based on a real story. The composers of the song won’t say. The song was released as a single and it was the debut of the group’s new vocalist. All proceeds of that song were donated to the surviving families. I’m surprised by the choice though. The second one, I’m not familiar with. How about explaining your choices to us mere mortals?” Andy asks Rachel.

“I wanted something different. The lyrics for ‘lullaby of nemunoki’ actually inspired a prize in Japan given to women who excel in the care of disabled children or with other special needs. The songs sound simple, but they are both deceptively complicated.” Rachel says with a smile. “I only plan on piano as accompaniment. This way the faculty won’t get distracted by the background music and will be able to focus on what is important here, my voice, my range, and my control.” Rachel answers.

Both adults smile at this, knowing that Rachel wouldn’t just pick a song without a good reason behind it.

“Will you save some of your rehearsal until I make it home from work?” Andy asks, dying to hear Rachel sing.

“I, uh, wasn’t going to practice anymore.” Rachel says softly, causing both adults to look at her in surprise. “I don’t want to get you in trouble with your neighbours with all my singing. You live in an apartment and I doubt the walls are thick enough to drown out my voice. I mean, even back in Lima we had to soundproof part of the house so I wouldn’t disturb our neighbours there, and we live in a house. Imagine what would happen if I were to practice here the way I normally do back there.” She says, remembering the lawsuit back in Ohio that thankfully got dismissed once her parents
soundproofed a room in the basement.

“That’s very sweet of you, but we will have to figure something out for you to practice when you move here.” Andy says with a smile. “For now though, I’m sure my neighbours wouldn’t mind it too much if you say, do it in no later than the afternoon? Everyone in this townhouse works regular office hours, so you wouldn’t be disturbing anyone if you were to practice during the day. I’d suggest the roof, but I know the cold will kill your vocal chords. Besides, once you’re warmed up, everyone will fall in love with your voice.” Andy adds. “Ok, I’m off to work. I should be back in a few. Remember, tomorrow we’re going shopping. Thanks for breakfast, Sweetie. Nate would have been jealous of your cooking talent.” She says as she puts her dirty dishes in the sink and reaches to give a quick hug and kiss to Rachel and her father.

“Yeah, well, he is an idiot.” Rachel mumbles unhappily at the mention of Andy’s ex.

“What’s this about shopping?” Leroy asks quickly trying to defuse the rant he knows Rachel always has whenever Nate is mentioned.

“I talked Rachel into letting me give her a slight makeover. I’m going to call a friend for his expert opinion, so be ready to shop ‘til you drop tomorrow, Uncle Leroy.” She answers with a sweet smile.

“What would a trip to New York City be without loads of shopping, huh?” He answers resigned, but happy that Rachel is all right with it. He remembers only too well the disaster that was her first makeover. And as much as he hates to admit it, Rachel would definitely benefit from one.

“I’m glad you feel that way, because knowing Nigel, we might go a bit overboard. Ok, I’m off; otherwise, I’ll be late. Here is a set of spare keys. The yellowish one opens the main door at the bottom entrance and the silver one opens the front door to the apartment. My network is at your disposal, you know where the password is. I love you both.” Andy says as she heads out the door.

“Have a good day.” Rachel says as the door closes and catches a hurried “thanks, you too” from Andy.

“Thank you, Daddy. I know this is really hard for you.” Rachel says out of the blue.

“I just want you to be happy. I haven’t seen you this relaxed in a very long time. It will be very hard not having you at home, but moving here is the right decision.” Leroy says as he starts cleaning up.
“I haven’t gotten in yet Daddy. I still have to audition and write those exams. Anything can happen.” Rachel says softly.

“Unless the faculty of Juilliard is tone deaf you won’t have a problem there. As for your exams, you are one smart young lady. Just relax and believe in yourself. I know you can do it, and so do Andy and Quinn.” He adds, as he looks Rachel in the eyes.

“Thanks Daddy.” She says getting up and throwing her arms around him.

They spend the day exploring the neighbourhood, talking and reconnecting. Eventually, Leroy calls Hiram to check on him, which results in another small fight. At least Hiram has enough common sense left in him and hasn’t blown Rachel’s cover for her absence. He’s sure that had Hiram done so, Quinn would have called to warn Rachel.

The talk Rachel has with Quinn goes a lot smoother, but at the same time, sadness fills both girls, because it gives them a taste of what things might be like between them should Rachel move to New York in the summer. The young diva confirms her song choice for the audition while Quinn tells her how everything is the same at McKinley. When Rachel mentions that she will at least sing them one more time for Andy to hear, she ends up promising Quinn a phone call so the blonde can also hear her sing.

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The easy going pace of the early morning is shot to hell the second Andy arrives at the Mirror offices. Andy’s editor calls her in for a meeting to inform her that her series on child labour outside of the U.S. has landed her another nomination for the Nelly Bly Cub Reporter Award and a nod for the Livingston Award. It seems like only yesterday she started this job to write small articles that more often than not were edited to death for their length, or were shelved altogether. Her big break had come in the form of a general interest article she wrote about first impressions. Her take had been so different. She wrote about the conundrum between learning not to judge by appearances alone and the reality where a person’s first impression determines whether or not others would ever give said individual a chance to prove his or her worth. Her own experience during her tenure at Runway the perfect example. That article garnered her the first nomination a year ago.

Andy’s day is spent juggling congratulations from her co-workers, telling an ecstatic Rachel, and working on last minute edits of her current articles before she sends them to her editor for approval. It is a wonder she managed to find the time to call Nigel and arrange a lunch meeting with him. It feels odd that through the years she has kept in touch with him, due to some sort of unspoken agreement, they hardly mention Miranda. To this day Nigel doesn’t know the full reason Andy left Runway so suddenly. She will only tell him that it was personal and that she won’t go into more details until she
can explain to Miranda Priestly herself why she left the way she did. After three years, Nigel isn’t holding his breath on that one.

“Hey Nige, sorry I’m late.” Andy rushes in to their restaurant of choice right on time.

“Six! No worries, you’re right on time.” Nigel greets her with a soft kiss on her cheek. “How are you doing Andy? You look great and happier than I have seen you in a long while.” Nigel asks as they both sit down.

“Things are great. My editor just told me I received a nomination for the Nelly Bly Cub Reporter Award and for the Livingston Award, and my cousin is visiting.” She says with a huge smile on her face.

“Congratulations Six. You’re really going places now. This is your second nod for the Nelly, correct?” Nigel replies.

“Yes, it is. I probably won’t win, but to be recognised two years in a row is such a stroke on my ego. And to be recognised by another organisation is just icing on the cake.” Andy says with excitement and pride.

“You should be proud. You know I have been following your career since you joined the *Mirror* and your writing just keeps getting better. This should do wonders for your freelancing.” Nigel says with pride.

“Thanks Nige.” She replies squeezing his hand quickly.

“I take it though that as wonderful as the news has been, it wasn’t the reason you called. Come on, spill girl. I’m not getting any younger sitting here waiting.” Nigel says playfully.

“You are right. I only found out about the nods this morning. I need a huge favour from you. My visiting cousin is in dire need for some guidance in the clothing department.” Andy starts to say.

“So you need me to help you with a makeover for your cousin. Of course I’ll do it.” Nigel finishes for her.
“Yes, I do. But there is more. She has gone through a lot of teasing at school. In fact, she has gone through more bullying than anyone should at any age, and I would really appreciate it if you try your best to spare her self-esteem a little bit. I know that living here has made us sort of immune to barbs and such but Rachel is very sensitive and she is still so young and…” Andy continues only to be cut off by Nigel once again.

“Say no more, Six. I know the drill. I can see this is really important to you. So, what’s the big occasion for the makeover?” Nigel asks.

“Rachel has an audition in a few days. I want to make sure that whoever is there will only focus on Rachel’s performance and not her appearance beyond what is considered normal.” Andy says.

“An audition? Is she an actress?” Nigel asks, truly intrigued now.

“No, although I’m sure that is in the realm of future possibilities for her. She is auditioning for a spot in Juilliard’s pre-college division for singing. After that, she will write the admission exams for Dalton and of course meet the faculty for her first interview.” Andy says. “Don’t give me that look, Nigel. You know that Dalton is one of the best schools in the country. It has nothing to do with her.” Andy adds when she sees Nigel’s face, neither one of them needing to say who the ‘her’ in question is.

By the end of their lunch, it’s decided that Nigel will be joining them for dinner. Andy wants him to listen to Rachel sing, her words would never do Rachel’s talent justice. She also wants their first meeting in an environment where Rachel is more comfortable, and maybe this way Nigel can get some ideas on what might work best for the girl.

“Hey my little Hummingbird. I’m calling to give you a heads up that Nigel will be joining us for dinner tonight.” Andy says into her phone on her way back to work.

“Ok, but you do now that you have almost no food in the fridge, right?” Rachel asks.

“I’m leaving work early, so we can hit the store or something when I get back. I’ll even help you cook.” Andy says sweetly.

“Uh, no thanks. I would like to be able to eat sometime this century.” Rachel replies, cringing slightly at the memory of Andy’s culinary skills.
“Hey! I’m not that bad.” Andy replies trying to sound affronted, but failing miserably because of her giggling.

“Oh, yes, you are. When you cook, the kitchen looks like a hurricane has gone through it. You use every single pot and pan available, and every single container as well.” Rachel says laughing now.

“Fine, I’ll give you that. This time though I’ll actually listen to instructions if you accept my help. Anyway, I need to get back to work if I hope to leave when I want. I’ll see you in a few, Rach.” Andy says once she gets back to the office.

“See you later, Sunshine.” Rachel answers smiling into the phone.

Rachel can’t help but imagine what life would be like in New York. She doesn’t delude herself into thinking that she will be popular all of a sudden though. She will gladly settle for just being able to blend into the background and be able to sing. She will gladly take anonymity over slushies, insults, and be on the receiving end of practical jokes any day. She can have her fame once she becomes a stage legend.

When Andy makes it back to the apartment, they all agree on a light dinner and quickly leave to get groceries. Once again, Leroy insists on paying for everything. Andy just gives up and offers genuine thanks.

“You sure you’ll be ok singing in front of Nigel?” Andy asks again.

“Yes, as long as you don’t mind being on speaker phone because I promised Quinn I’d call her once I’m ready to do my run through of the songs so she can give me her opinion and maybe between all of you I can actually come to a decision on which song to use.” Rachel replies as she puts the finishing touches to their dinner just as the buzzer sounds signalling Nigel’s arrival.

“Hey Nige, come on in.” Andy says as she opens the door.

“Hey Six. Here, I brought some wine.” Nigel says stepping in and handing over two bottles of wine, one red, and one white. “I didn’t know what we were having, so I brought ones of each.” Nigel explains.

“Let me take your coat, and introduce you to my family.” Andy says smiling.
“Nigel, these are Rachel and Leroy Berry. My cousin and my uncle. Guys, this is Nigel Kipling, Art Director for Runway and a dear friend.” She says to the group of people around her.

“Nice to meet you.” Leroy says offering his hand to Nigel.

“Pleasure is all mine.” Nigel replies as they shake hands. “It’s a pleasure to meet you as well, Rachel.” Nigel says turning to Rachel.

“Same here. Thanks for, uh, helping me out.” Rachel says shyly.

“Don’t mention it. I love dressing people.” Nigel replies, taking in Rachel’s look with a critical eye. He knows there is quite a bit to be done, but for now refrains from saying anything. There is no need to scare the girl, especially after Andy’s story of her first make over attempt.

Rachel smiles wider and lets out an involuntary sigh of relief when that is all Nigel says. She knows she’s not being fair, but years of people making fun of the way she dresses always has her expecting some form of barb.

While the adults talk, Rachel goes through a series of warm up exercises, which of course take Nigel by surprise. He knew Rachel would be rehearsing, but still, the vocal exercises are a bit unexpected. He actually thought that she would just break out in song.

“I, uh, need to prepare my vocal chords or I risk damaging them.” She offers as an explanation when she notices the odd looks she is receiving from their guest.

Soon, Rachel fishes out her phone and hits speed dial. Quinn answers on the second ring, and quick introductions are made. Quinn is surprised that Rachel will be singing in front of a stranger because she has kept everything so secret. She herself has only heard Rachel’s choices a couple of times when she was hanging out with the diva.

By the time she is done with both songs, there is a proud and beaming father, along with two speechless people and a gushing best friend on the phone. Eventually it’s Quinn who breaks the silence.
“That was amazing, Rach. I say go with ‘jueves’ because it’s longer and it is a bit more technical so it will show your range and control better. Regardless though, they would have to be complete morons to turn you down.” Quinn says over the connection, a mixture of pride, sadness, and happiness in her voice.

“I’m no expert, but I actually agree with Quinn. You were amazing. Keep it up and you should have no problems with the audition.” Andy says proudly.

When they end the phone call, Quinn is a lot more relaxed. She can easily hear the happiness in Rachel’s voice, as well as Andy’s affection and pride. She knows her best friend will be in good hands.

“Will we be able to be present?” Leroy asks.

“No. There will be two or three faculty members only, so they will film my performance for the rest of the faculty to see and hear.” Rachel answers. “I’m kind of unsure what happens next because normally these auditions are held in mid to end of May and prospective candidates are notified in the summer. Since they are requesting an audition this early on, I am hoping to find out sooner because it will kill me to wait until summer to know, but I won’t know until Wednesday when I see them.”

Rachel adds.

As the evening progresses, to Rachel’s relief, the neighbours never complained about her singing, not even during her warm up exercises. The rest of the evening is spent celebrating Andy’s nominations and finalising what their game plan will be for their shopping expedition. Nigel keeps his promise to Andy and no matter how hideous he thinks some of Rachel’s outfits are, the only comment he makes is that a bad fashion sense must be genetic for them. By now, Rachel is comfortable enough in Nigel’s presence that all she does is stick her tongue out at him while he receives a slap on the shoulder from Andy. The adults are relieved that there are no hints of the insecurity and hurt that usually appears in the young girl’s face whenever someone makes even the slightest negative comment on her wardrobe. They agree to meet for breakfast and then hit the stores when Nigel bids them good night.

The past few weeks finally catch up though and Rachel can barely keep her eyes open. A quick good night to Leroy and a quick trip to the bathroom and Rachel is back in Andy’s room. She is fast asleep the moment her head hits the pillow. Andy quietly walks out of her room after wishing her cousin a good night and starts the kettle to make some tea.

“You are fantastic with her.” Leroy says as he joins Andy in the kitchen.
“She is an amazing young woman. I’m glad I can be there for her and that she lets me. Would you like some tea, Uncle Leroy?” She asks as the kettle whistles and she reaches over for a mug.

“Sure, what do you have?” Leroy asks.

“A bit of everything. I like variety.” Andy says, pointing to the cupboard holding her wide selection of teas.

“How are things with your parents?” Leroy asks once he makes his selection. He hopes that since Thanksgiving, Andy’s relationship with her parents, but especially her mother, has improved.

“They’re going, unfortunately, not in the direction I am.” Andy admits a bit deflated.

“The usual?” He asks with understanding.

“Yeah, they’re both still a bit sore I bypassed law school to pursue a career in journalism. Things aren’t as adversarial, but they’re far from what they used to be. I don’t know if we’ll ever be able to have that easy going relationship we had before I started to stray in my way of thinking. I know they don’t approve of how I have changed over the years. They keep blaming Runway and especially Miranda. They thought everything would revert back to their version of normal once I quit. I know they were very disappointed I ended things with Nate permanently. I know that they don’t like that I refused to get back together with him even after he came back to mend things. They keep saying that I should swallow my pride and accept that Nate had good reasons to dump me the way he did. It doesn’t help that I barely see Lily and Doug anymore. They’re convinced New York changed me to the point where I’m not recognisable anymore.” Andy shares with Leroy.

“Are you happy?” He asks bluntly.

“For the most part I am.” She answers honestly.

“What’s missing?” He asks.

“My parents’ approval, someone to share my life with, a bit more time to myself. The understanding of my childhood friends. You know, the usual.” Andy replies wistfully. “Sometimes I wonder if professional fulfillment and self-acceptance are worth the shambles that my personal life has become.” She adds sadly.
“I wish I could honestly say to you that things with your parents will improve, but I’m still working on mine.” Leroy says sadly. “But I can tell you that even support from loved ones doesn’t really count unless they truly mean it.” He adds.

“I know Uncle Leroy. Things will work out in the end. I have to believe that, or I would go crazy.” Andy replies, reaching out for his hand.

“Andy, you are the closest thing to a mother figure Rachel has ever had. You have taken care of her pretty much every summer from the time she was five, but are you ready to do this full time?” Leroy asks softly.

“I am. You can trust me, Uncle Leroy. I will take care of Rachel to the best of my abilities.” Andy answers without hesitation.

“I know you will. I am just afraid that the shift in your role as her cousin, confidante, and friend to parental figure might put a strain in your relationship and I really don’t want that to happen.” Leroy shares his biggest fear.

“Rachel and I have talked about this. She knows that should she move here and be under my care I will still be her friend, but I will also be the disciplinarian when the time calls for it. We both know that there will moments where she will act like the teenager she is and defy me and times where my decisions won’t be popular but we will deal with those moments the same way we have in the summers we have shared. I’ve had to be the bad guy even then.” Andy replies, hoping to ease some of Leroy’s fears.

“She knows that for this to work, she will have to hang her diva attitude outside the front door. This won’t just be a visit of a couple of months. She will be living under my care until she turns eighteen. We both know what is at stake here and we won’t do anything stupid to jeopardise the wonderful relationship we have.” Andy adds as an afterthought. Both girls have discussed this at length, and both are drawing on their shared summers together where things have gone smoothly and near perfect between them.

“I’m still adjusting to the fact that you two have discussed this at length before she even approached us with this. I can’t help but feel like I have failed her as a parent because she couldn’t find it in herself to confide in me. I knew the bullying was getting to her, but I had no idea she has been skirting with a full blown nervous breakdown.” Leroy continues.
“It has nothing to do with your ability as a father. You know how Rachel can be, always wanting to solve everything herself. You have enough on your plate, and Rachel didn’t want to add more.” Andy says hoping that will be enough to ease some of his guilt.

“Don’t try to justify my actions Andy. We know full well I should have stepped up and done something about the bullying, but I let my ideals and wishful thinking cloud my judgement.” Leroy says.

“I’m not. I understand where you and Uncle Hiram were going. Rachel dealing with adversity and the fact that not everyone will love her is something that will prepare her for life on her own. God knows overprotection from parents can do even more damage in the long run. The balance is hard to find. The situation is far from simple, because those in charge of McKinley don’t do a thing to stop the bullying from happening in the first place. Add to that Rachel’s penchant for wanting to solve everything by herself, and we find ourselves in the situation we’re in.” Andy replies.

“Thank you for trying, but we both know Hiram and I should have been more proactive.” Leroy says. “Then of course, the whole thing with Rachel wanting to know her birth mother happened, and that did not help matters.” He adds, without giving Andy a chance of rebuttal.

“You know that Shelby has nothing to do with Rachel’s decision to come here, right?” Andy asks.

“Yes, I do. She has made it very clear that it’s her desire to attend school here and to catch a break from her life in Lima that is spurring her to speed up her plans.” Leroy says. “I’m her father. She shouldn’t have to worry about my feelings. She should always feel at ease to come and talk to me about her problems.” He replies.

“How would you have reacted to Rachel’s plans last year?” Andy asks, hoping to prove a point without having to hurt him further.

“I probably would have laughed at them, thinking she was joking. I would have probably said something about overreacting and over dramatizing everything. Then I would have told her no in no uncertain terms once I realised she was being serious. Sort of like what Hiram did.” Leroy admits.

“What changed your mind?” Andy asks.

“I paid attention. I have seen Rachel go from a happy adolescent to a mere shadow of herself. Lately, her smiles have always been fake. She has been so sad. I never realised how much everything has
affected her. Now that I have a better idea of what she has gone through so far, I just want her to be happy. I’ve said this before, but Hiram’s words nearly killed her spirit completely. I knew then that it’s either a fresh start or a deep depression for my daughter. At this moment in her life, her happiness is here. Her dream has always been Broadway.” Leroy answers honestly as realisation hits him. “I see your point. Had Rachel approached me earlier, I would have quashed her dreams, and probably added to her stress levels.” Leroy adds.

“That’s why Rachel kept so much to herself. She knew you and Uncle Hiram would have never agreed to it. She took a huge chance by doing this behind your backs. She wanted to tell you only if she got accepted in both schools. She only said something sooner because I insisted it was time you guys knew. I know it feels like she is running away, but she isn’t. She’s saving her sanity. As a plus, she’ll get the best education at Dalton, and it will improve her chances of getting into her college of choice. I’m really glad you have Rachel’s best interests at heart and looked past your own hurt and fought the instinct to keep her home by any means necessary.” Andy continues.

“I know. In the end, Rachel’s happiness, wellbeing, and future sealed the deal for me. I just wish I didn’t have to feel like I am choosing between my husband and my daughter.” Leroy finishes sadly.

“So things with Uncle Hiram are still at a stalemate then? They haven’t improved one bit? Not even with both of you here?” Andy asks, knowing the answer already.

“Pretty much spot on. He is convinced Rachel is overreacting. He is sure that facing her bullies will build her character up. He is convinced that she is following Shelby here and even though he won’t admit it, he is petrified Rachel will develop a rapport with Shelby and that she will choose her birth mother over us. I admit that I let the same fears affect how I reacted and dealt with Rachel’s quest for knowledge and her quest for her own identity.

“Hiram has chosen such a poor way to deal with Rachel’s transition from little girl to young woman. We always knew what her dreams were. We knew that it was only a matter of time before we had to let go and trust that we did a good job with her. I love him a lot, but I’m not sure what will happen if his attitude doesn’t change. I never thought the day would come where I have to protect my daughter from her father. I’ve also been branded a traitor for facilitating what he deems to be nothing more than Rachel’s eccentricities.” Leroy says softly.

“You have done a magnificent job with Rachel. She is a responsible young woman, with clear goals and plans on how to reach those goals. You have nothing to worry about on that end. I wish I could impart you with some hidden gems of knowledge, but he is very much like my mom, and they are both very stubborn and set in their ways. I know he is your husband and you love him, but no one hurts my little Hummingbird. I don’t care who it is. I just hope that with time he will come to realise how much his words have hurt Rachel and he tries to make up for his attitude.” Andy shares her thoughts on the matter.
“I know. That is why I have no problems with Rachel moving in with you. No matter what, you always have Rachel’s best interests at heart, and you will always protect her from anything and anyone.” Leroy says gratefully. “Don’t worry about Hiram and me too much. We’ll work things out. We have always managed in the past. Like you, I hope he sees the error of his way soon. I also hope it won’t be too late. I don’t want the rift between him and Rachel to get any bigger.” Leroy adds, hoping to reassure himself and Andy at the same time.

“So that’s where Rachel gets her optimism.” Andy says with a smile.

“Yeah, someone in the family has to be the optimist, you know.” He says with his own smile. “Thanks for the friendly ear, Andy. I really needed to unload.” Leroy says through a yawn once he finishes the last of his tea.

“Anytime, Uncle Leroy. I’m glad I was here for you. But, it’s getting late, and we have a full day ahead of us tomorrow. I even promised Rachel I’d go for a run with her.” Andy says looking at her watch.

“Have a great night Andy. Thanks again for the shoulder to lean on.” Leroy says as he gets up and gives her a hug and soft kiss on the top of her head.

“Good night Uncle Leroy. Sweet dreams.” Andy says returning the hug and kissing him on the cheek.

“You go on and get ready. I’ll take care of stuff here while I wait.” Leroy says with a smile.

“Thanks, Uncle Leroy.” Andy says as she walks to the bathroom to start her night time routine.

When Andy makes it to her room, she can’t help the smile on her face when she sees Rachel curled up on the bed, out like a light, not a single sign of distress. How she wishes to be able to always give her this sense of peace. She settles on the bed, and pushes aside a lock of dark hair and places a quick kiss on the forehead. Silently, she sends a prayer to whatever deity that will listen to give this young woman a small break.

TBC…
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

My apologies for the delay. My intention was to post a new chapter every couple of days until I was caught up with other sites where I have this story posted.

Self-edited, so all mistakes are mine and mine alone.

Chapter 5

The makeover and shopping expedition go just as Andy expected, minus the usual snarky comments from Nigel when it comes to Rachel’s taste in clothes, which earns her the nickname ‘Dr. Doolittle’ that eventually gets shortened to D from Nigel because of her love of sweaters with animals on them and the girl’s self-proclaimed love for all animals. He does, however, once again crack a joke about a genetic predisposition in Andy’s family for hideous sweaters. By the end of the day, Nigel has once again performed miracles in the clothing department. Rachel ends up with a whole new wardrobe that is stylish without making her stick out like sore thumb. Nigel chooses clothing that flatters Rachel’s short stature and long legs. He also makes sure the colours compliment the young singer’s natural tan. It is a good thing that Leroy has been prepared by Andy on what to expect because they end up needing to buy a new set of luggage so they can take everything back to Ohio once their vacation is over.

With a few instructions and a new subscription to Runway (courtesy of Nigel so the girl can keep up with the latest fashion trends), Rachel no longer dresses like a five year old grandmother. To make sure Rachel isn’t tempted to go back to old habits, Nigel takes the items he considers not acceptable (which happens to be just about everything Rachel brought over) to donate to the local Salvation Army. He exacts a promise from Rachel and Leroy that they will do the same once they return to Lima. The reluctant way Rachel agrees to it leads him to believe the young girl isn’t one to lightly break her promises, so he knows he has nothing to worry about.

“Is your audition this week or next, D?” Nigel asks once he has all of Rachel’s old clothes bagged.

“It’s on Wednesday.” Rachel replies rolling her eyes at the new nickname.

“Perfect. Meet me at the lobby of Elias-Clarke at noon on Monday.” Nigel says.

“Why? I thought we were done with the shopping at least for the foreseeable future.” Rachel says a
bit confused. And if memory serves her correctly, there are no stores in the area, just office buildings. Wouldn’t it make more sense to meet along one of the many stores they have already plowed through along 5th Avenue? Silently, she hopes her father’s credit cards will survive another shopping expedition.

“The shopping is done for now, but of course we are not done. We shall be moving to the second phase of our makeover. I’m taking you to Runway’s ‘Beauty Department’ so they, along with my flawless directions, can work on your hair, give you a new regime of skin care, and update your makeup as well.” Nigel says as if it is the most obvious thing in the universe.

“Are you sure that’s a good idea, Nige? I don’t want you to get in trouble.” Andy asks uncertain.

“If you are worried about a certain Dragon Lady, don’t. She has a lunch meeting with the new designer for Calvin Klein, and then she is meeting with Lagerfeld. She won’t be back to the office until at least four in the afternoon, by which point we will be done.” Nigel says in an almost bored tone.

“I have a full day of interviews Monday, so I won’t be able to go, not that I am looking forward to going inside Elias-Clarke any time soon.” Andy says.

“I don’t want to keep imposing on you, Nigel.” Rachel says shyly. It still feels funny calling him by his first name. She had started calling him Mr. Kipling and the man nearly had a fit claiming it made him sound ancient. She’s not really sure how to feel about going to Andy’s former place of employment.

“It’s no imposition, and unlike Six here, with you, it should take no more than a couple of hours. You might share the same genetic predisposition for an underdeveloped fashion sense, but at least you know the basics of good skin and hair care. I just want to make sure we highlight your best features without going overboard with makeup and teach you how to do so on your own. I’ve noticed you don’t wear anything except lip gloss. I also want them to give you a new hairstyle.” Nigel says simply.

Resistance ends up being a complete waste of time and eventually they give in, with Leroy agreeing to accompany Rachel to meet Nigel. He cannot help but think that Nigel is like the Borg as he thinks about the small fortune he has spent on Rachel’s new wardrobe, and he has to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing at the mental image of Nigel as a Borg drone and Miranda Priestly as the Borg Queen.

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Rachel’s visit to the Runway offices is uneventful. With Miranda away at meetings, there is no reason for Emily or the current second assistant to venture out of the editorial offices, and Andy’s fear that the physical resemblance she shares with her cousin might get Nigel in trouble becomes a moot point. True to his word, it takes only a couple of hours to give Rachel a few pointers and to convince her to stop straightening her hair and to wear it with her natural curls intact, giving Rachel a more sophisticated and mature look, the addition of well placed bangs and subtle make up finish the look. They part company with the promise of an update on Rachel’s audition and plans to meet for dinner and maybe a play.

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Rachel is a nervous wreck the day before her audition. She has to admit that the time spent with Nigel served as a much needed distraction and she makes a mental note to get the man a nice Christmas/thank you gift once she is done with the audition and the exam for Dalton.

“You keep pacing like that, Baby Girl, and you will wear a hole through the floor and fall on the folks in the apartment below.” Leroy says, hoping to get his daughter to relax.

“I can’t help it Daddy. What if I mess up and blow my audition. What if I lose my voice right in the middle of my songs? What if they hate my voice? I am so nervous I’m afraid I might forget the lyrics in the middle of my singing. What if I stumble on the piano? Or worse yet, what if the piano playing distracts me enough that it compromises my singing? What if they think I’m showing off because I’m playing my own music instead of having someone else do that? It’s too late for me to ask for a pianist to play my accompaniment. I might compromise the quality of my singing if I suddenly decide to do an a capella rendition. I should have come up with those arrangements as backups, but now it’s too late.” Rachel fires in one single breath.

“Come sit with me, Rachel. Please? You’re making me dizzy.” Leroy says from the couch. “Look at me, Baby Girl.” He adds cupping his daughter’s face in his hands once she joins him on the couch.

“Now, take a deep breath and listen to what I have to say. You will nail this audition, and you will be one step closer to making your Broadway dreams a reality. I believe in you. Just go in there and give it your best effort. Don’t think about anything and just enjoy the songs. I have seen you tune everything out and just sing with your soul. Don’t think about why you’re singing. Just enjoy the lyrics and let your fingers fly over the piano. Let the melody and the lyrics carry you. You are truly gifted and you will do just fine. By the end of your audition, Juilliard will realise just how lucky they are to have you as their student.” Leroy says in a gentle, calming voice as he releases her face and draws her in a comforting hug.
“Thank you Daddy. You have no idea how much those words mean to me.” Rachel says as she buries her face in Leroy’s chest and wraps her arms around his torso.

“Good. Now, go to bed and get a good night’s sleep. I love you, and I want you to know that no matter what I am very proud of you.” Leroy says as he picks up his daughter and carries her to Andy’s bedroom.

“I love you too Daddy. I am so lucky to have you in my life.” Rachel says as she holds on to Leroy and enjoys yet another one of her childhood bedtime routine. The last time her daddy carried her to bed, Rachel was ten years old. It feels just as wonderful now as it did then.

“Good night, Baby Girl. Sweet dreams.” Leroy says as he lowers her on the bed. “Good night Andy. I have calmed her down as much as I can, so hopefully she won’t toss and turn too much.” Leroy says with a chuckle at his daughter’s indignant squeak at those words.

“Thanks, and good night, Uncle Leroy.” Andy says as she lifts her head up and away from her laptop.

“Good night Daddy. I love you.” Rachel says with a dazzling smile.

“I love you too, Baby Girl. To the moon and back.” He says after placing a kiss on her forehead.

“To the moon and back.” Rachel replies with a fond smile. She will miss him. That’s for sure.

Andy saves the document she has been working on and shuts down her laptop and soon, she joins Rachel on the bed and pulls Rachel into a one armed hug, so Rachel ends up with her head on Andy’s shoulder.

“I heard what Uncle Leroy said to you, and he is correct. You have nothing to be nervous about. I have heard you sing from the moment you learned how to speak. I have heard you slap together whatever words you knew into your own unique songs to the heart stopping renditions of whatever song you choose to cover. You have only improved over the years. You truly are amazing and I am very proud of you. Don’t feel intimidated, because all the faculty has on you is age and experience. Their job is to guide you into an even more remarkable singer. Your ability to sing is spellbinding.” Andy says, glad to see and feel Rachel relax some more. “I’m sorry I won’t be able to go with you tomorrow, things are really crazy at work.” She adds.
“It’s ok, Sunshine. You would end up spending the time standing outside the auditorium so I’m actually glad you’re stuck at work. At least you’ll be doing something productive as opposed to stand there, twiddling your thumbs while you wait for me to be done. You and Daddy would drive each other crazy.” Rachel says with a smile, touched by Andy’s concern.

“Well, when you put it that way, I guess I should be happy I have to work then.” Andy says with a small chuckle.

“He won’t admit it, but Daddy will be a nervous wreck while he waits” Rachel says through a yawn.

“Get some sleep, my little Hummingbird. I need you to be well rested for tomorrow.” Andy says as she leans down and places a kiss on Rachel’s head.

“G’nite Sunshine. Sweet dreams.” Rachel mumbles after she gives Andy a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“Sweet dreams, Hummingbird.” Andy replies as she turns off the light.

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Rachel’s phone chirps on route to Juilliard, and her face breaks into a grin when she sees the new text from Quinn. She quickly opens it and her smile gets bigger and brighter as she reads the contents.

Break a leg and wow them. XOXO

Rachel quickly types her response before she sets her phone on ‘silent’ mode.

Thanks. Putting phone on silent ‘til this is done. Will call you tonite. XOXO.

They arrive just as Rachel is putting her phone back in her purse. Taking a deep breath, she steps out of the cab and joins Leroy at the front entrance of Juilliard. Her heart rate picks up when she sees the big sign with the name of the college. She feels her daddy’s hand squeeze hers and she forces her breathing to slow down and her heart to slow down some.
Once inside, it is a blur of people and instructions, and next thing they know, Leroy is shown to a waiting lounge and Rachel is ushered to the theatre for her audition, where she is given fifteen minutes to warm up before two members of the faculty introduce themselves as Professor Warren Lee and Professor Veronica Armstrong. They explain the audition process as they set up the camera that will film everything for the other members of the judging panel to see and hear.

Rachel explains her song choices and sits in front of the grand piano. She closes her eyes, lets her muscle memory guide her fingers on the keys, and soon enough, she begins to weave her magic as the sound of her voice reverberates in the theatre’s amazing acoustics. When she is done, she opens her eyes and stands up and away from the piano and takes a short bow, she then steps down the stage to the front row and stands in front of a table where the two professors are set up.

“Please take a seat, Miss Berry.” Professor Armstrong says kindly.

Rachel quickly sits, ready for the interview part of the audition process. It takes everything she has to not sit on her hands, and eventually she laces her fingers together and rests them on top of her lap.

“Miss Berry, a few questions, if we may.” Professor Lee says.

“Of course, sir.” Rachel replies.

“I understand that you were considering a different song for your foreign language number. What was the other song you were thinking of, and why did you choose this particular song?” He asks, to the point. After hearing the girl sing in that DVD it was almost a foregone conclusion to accept her. Hearing Rachel sing in person, confirmed it. Instead, they want to see how Rachel handles herself when she is faced with something unexpected.

Rachel is thrown for a loop by the question, because she was expecting something totally different. She thought for sure they would ask her about music theory and such. “I had considered singing ‘lullaby of nemunoki’ at one point, but in the end, I chose ‘jueves’ because it reflects how so many of us take life for granted.” She says after quickly recovering.

“Could you elaborate on that, please?” Professor Armstrong asks.

Rachel looks a bit confused, because the questions have nothing to do with her singing abilities or why she chose to apply for Juilliard. “There is a particular line in the song that always gets to me. ‘I
suppose you think I’m such a silly girl, and I want to die.’ Rachel translates. So many of us utter something similar when we say or do something embarrassing, yet none of us actually expect it or want those words to come true. We utter so many things in our lives, never expecting those utterances to be our last. The lyrics make me think about life. Things can happen in the blink of an eye. In this song, the girl thinks she is the luckiest person and that particular March 11 is a special day because the guy she is in love with actually returns her feelings. Then the most horrible thing happens and there is an explosion just as the train is approaching the station and in the darkness of the fallen tunnel, she kisses him for the first time and just as he confesses his love for her, she dies saying ‘And I give you the last beat of my heart.’” Rachel pauses to look at the professors in front of her. She feels silly and a bit embarrassed at revealing such thoughts. She continues when she sees two nods of encouragement.

“The first time I heard that song I was in tears, thinking how unfair life can be, and how sad that the girl dies right after they find the courage to approach each other, especially after the time wasted because they were so afraid. Then I started thinking. At least she didn’t die without knowing her love was returned, and even if it was just the one kiss, she got to have it, and she died hearing his confession of love. Life can be good, or bad. It can be sad or happy. It truly depends on how we see the events that surround us, and in the end, even though we cannot control certain events, we can certainly control our perspective of how we see those events. That is why I chose this song. At first glance, it’s a very sad song, but if one really thinks about the events from beginning to end, that girl got to live a lifetime of happiness in the span of maybe hours. It is all about perspective.” Rachel finishes, blushing a little. Then it hits her like a tonne of bricks. As crappy as her life has been, she has chosen to see only the bad, ignoring the good. She makes a mental note to speak with Andy, Quinn and her Daddy the first chance she gets.

Both professors mull over the words and confer with each other in hushed whispers. They excuse themselves saying they have a few things to further discuss, and leave the theatre, asking Rachel to stay put. It just makes Rachel nervous that once again, she has said too much and that maybe she really needs to figure out a way to filter some of the things that enter her mind and find their way out through her mouth. When she is sure that her pacing has worn a path on the carpeting, she is surprised to see not only the two professors who listened to her audition return, but they are followed by what appears to be the rest of the faculty members in charge of auditions.

“Please have a seat.” One of the other professors says to her. Rachel immediately sits on the chair provided.

“Miss Berry, there is no doubt that you have talent. You, young lady have a voice that comes only once in every generation. That is one of the reasons I asked you the questions I did. Most of the students who seek a spot in our pre-college division choose an aria from a well known opera for their foreign language piece, and more often than not, they have no knowledge of the words that come out of their mouths, other than the given translations. They choose what is considered high difficulty songs in hopes of impressing us. You on the other hand, took a song from popular culture and made it sound like a true masterpiece. Your song choice wasn’t just a random occurrence, but something you put thought behind. You have shown insight beyond your age that we had to remind ourselves you are still in high school. It is our unanimous decision to welcome you come this September as one
of our newest students in our vocal division.” Professor Armstrong says.

Rachel is glad she is sitting because had she been standing, she is sure she would be a fallen heap on the floor right now. After what feels like a lifetime, she finally manages to get her brain working again. “I wish I could find the words that would express the joy I feel at this moment. I am truly honoured for the opportunity of attending this fine institution.” Rachel says, feeling overwhelmed. She has to fight the urge to pinch herself to make sure the events that just passed are not a dream or a figment of her fertile imagination.

“Do you have any questions?” Professor Lee asks.

“When is the deadline for the registration process? I still need to write my admissions exam for Dalton and I won’t hear from them until next January.” Rachel asks, flinching a little. She knows she just wants to accept and have her daddy pay for the tuition once she signs the last piece of document on her registration forms.

“You have until the end June to register and pay your tuition. We understand that you will be moving from Ohio, and you need to secure a place to finish your education. We look forward to seeing you in September. Do you have any other questions?” Professor Armstrong says in what she hopes is a reassuring voice.

“Yes. If for whatever reasons I am unable to attend this coming September, will I need to audition again for the following year?” Rachel asks.

“Unfortunately, yes. Demand for any spot here is very high. The best we can do is offer early auditions, such as what we have done for you. If for whatever reasons you find yourself unable to move to New York, just do what you did with your application this time around by sending us a video alongside it.” One of the other professors says.

“Is there anything else you need to ask?” Yet another faculty member asks.

“I know I should be asking you endless questions, and believe me, normally I would, but I admit I am completely overwhelmed by the situation. I’m still processing everything and my brain isn’t really functioning at full capacity.” Rachel says; she can’t help the image of seeing herself with both feet firmly shoved in her mouth. It takes a superhuman effort to not groan loudly.

“We can certainly understand that. We are sure you have a very busy schedule, so we won’t keep
you here any longer. Please stop by the registrar’s office and pick up all the documentation you will need to finalise your registration, should other endeavours pan out for you. If you have any further questions, there is an e-mail address where you can direct your queries. One of us will be more than happy to answer them. Have a good holiday, Miss Berry.” Professor Lee finishes in understanding. In all of his years as a faculty member, each and every time they offer someone an early audition and early acceptance, even for their pre-college division, the student in question ends up in a stupor of disbelief.

One by one, the remaining faculty members congratulate Rachel and bid her farewell. Some of them adding a wish for good luck for her pending test. Eventually she makes it out of the theatre and into the lounge area to find her daddy pacing back and forth. He nearly runs to her when he spots her.

“Rachel, Honey. What took so long? Is everything all right?” Leroy asks worried. “Andy has been texting me like crazy for updates, and I think the only reason she isn’t here herself is because her boss is keeping her very busy.” He adds when his phone chirps again with another incoming message.

“Oh my God, Daddy!! I can’t believe it. I’m in. I have been accepted in the pre-college division in their Vocal Studies program.” Rachel says excited, the news having finally sunken in and she is sure she isn’t dreaming.

“What do you mean you are in? I thought this was just an audition and they would be notifying you of the results in a later date.” Leroy says in confusion and disbelief.

“I thought so as well. It seems the two faculty members who were there really liked my audition and immediately showed it to the remaining members of the judging panel. That’s why it took so long. They asked me a series of questions and next thing I know they are telling me I have been accepted and all I have to do is finish the registration process, pay my tuition and I can start in September.” Rachel says happy, but stunned.

She tells Leroy everything as they make their way to the registrar’s office to pick up the documents she will need. As they leave Juilliard in search of a cab, Rachel pulls out her phone to turn it back to ‘normal’ profile; she sees the flashing icon indicating she has new text messages waiting for her. She quickly reads them and types a quick reply to Andy, Quinn, and Nigel, letting them know things went well, without telling them how well.

Leroy and Rachel have a quick, late lunch and once again, they stop by the market around the corner from Andy’s apartment to pick up some things they will need for dinner. They had made plans to have Nigel over for dinner to share and celebrate the good news. They decide to make dinner together, it’s a tight squeeze, but they manage to figure out a way where Leroy takes over the cooking duty with Rachel assisting him in the tight space.
“Have you thought about any contingency plans?” Leroy asks Rachel as he cuts some chicken for their stir fry.

“I have been thinking about it quite a bit, actually. I want this shot at Juilliard. I know it is very rare for them to actually accept someone right after the audition. I was thinking that regardless of what happens tomorrow at Dalton, I can always enrol in one of the local high schools in the district. I just need to do some serious research to see what I am up against.” Rachel says as she lifts her head from the assorted vegetables she has been chopping.

“I figured out as much. I admit I am surprised you didn’t just jump at the chance and have me fill all the paperwork and write the check for the tuition the moment you found out.” Leroy jokes as he seasons the chicken.

“Oh, the temptation is there, believe me. I just don’t want to rush things, and I need to make sure I can still get a good education. I am realistic enough to know that I will need something to fall back on in case my imminent stardom doesn’t happen. Dad thinks I don’t know better, but I know how competitive life as a performer is. I know about the thousands of people with broken dreams and lost hope because things didn’t go their way. I am already fighting the odds at McKinley, and there I am dealing with mediocrity at best. Here, I know I will be against some of the best up and coming singers, and who knows, maybe after a year or two of the endless competition I might get tired of it. The point is, I know what I am up against. I am not the top sophomore for nothing.” Rachel says as she gets some ginger out of the bag of groceries they just picked up.

“If I had any doubts about your move here, you just erased them.” Leroy says proudly, nudging his daughter with his hip. “I am so proud of you.” He adds with a bittersweet smile. He knows this level of maturity came from all the adversity his little girl has faced so far. He knows Rachel would never do something this big on impulse, but this conversation truly shows him just how much thought his daughter has put into this move. It brings back the conversation he had with Andy over the weekend and he has to agree with her. Rachel is one remarkable young woman, with her head firmly on her shoulders. It is no longer a question of whether or not Rachel can fly once she spreads her wings, but how high and far. He just hopes she won’t leave them behind playing catch up.

TBC…
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Self-edited, like all my works. I've tried to read over and catch as many mistakes as I can.

Chapter 6

The moment Andy steps through the door with Nigel in tow, Rachel fishes out her phone to call Quinn.

“I didn’t want to repeat myself, so I hope you guys don’t mind being on speaker again.” Rachel says.

“Well, hello to you too, D” Nigel says arching an eyebrow.

Andy just laughs, knowing that once Rachel is focused on something, she deems pleasantries like a normal greeting to be superfluous. It reminds her a bit of Miranda.

“Oh, right. Hi guys.” She says absently as she hits speed dial for Quinn’s phone.

“Rach! Finally. I have been waiting all day for your call. I can’t believe you got me to promise to wait for your call. You owe me for that. You have no idea how hard it was to not call you the second I knew you were done. How did it go?” Quinn says through the connection once the phone is answered.

“Hey Quinn. Sorry about that. I just didn’t want to distract you from your studying. You’re on speaker by the way.” Rachel says with a sheepish smile.

“Hi everyone.” Quinn says to the room in general.

“Hey Quinn. How are you doing? Are you finished with your midterms?” Leroy calls out from the kitchen area.
“Ok I guess. I have one more exam tomorrow and I’m done until January.” Quinn replies dutifully.

“Ok, I better get back to making dinner before Nigel and Andy kill me for not letting Rachel talk. If I don’t speak to you again, have a Merry Christmas.” Leroy says once he notices the murderous looks he is getting from the other two.

“Thanks and Merry Christmas.” Quinn replies, remembering that Leroy was raised a Methodist.

“Spill already. You’re making a snail seem like speed freak with how long you are taking.” Nigel says.

“The audition went really well. I was a bit nervous, but I somehow managed to calm down. When I was done singing, I was asked some really odd questions about my song choices by the two members of the judging panel who were present. They talked for a bit and then excused themselves. I had no clue how much time went by because, did I mention I was a bit nervous? Anyway, after a lifetime and a half, the professors returned with the entire faculty of their vocal program. I nearly passed out when I saw them. I don’t even know how I managed to hear their instructions for me to sit down. Then, just out of the blue, they say something about my voice and I’m in. I have been accepted to Juilliard’s pre-college Vocal program. I just need to fill in some forms and pay the tuition.” Rachel says excited, pride evident in her voice.

The stunned silence is broken by Quinn clearing her throat. “I knew it, Rach. Congratulations. I told you there was no need to doubt yourself.” Quinn says in a raspy voice that clearly conveys her happiness and her sadness at the same time. Rachel picks up on Quinn’s emotions and immediately kills the speaker feature as she pulls the phone to her ear.

“You’re off speaker Quinn.” Rachel says without a backwards glance at the others in the room as she grabs her coat and heads out the balcony.

“Is she always this intense?” Nigel asks Andy and Leroy.

“Yes.” Comes the twin reply from the other two people in the apartment.

“Rachel doesn’t have a lot of friends, and the ones she does have, she treasures and treats like priceless heirlooms.” Leroy says to Nigel as he looks up from their dinner preparation.
Nigel doesn’t know what to say. It’s clear from Leroy’s tone of voice that the girl’s lack of friends is more proof of the bullying Andy had told him about a few days ago during their lunch.

“Quinn is Rachel’s best friend. They have a spotty history at best, but both girls managed to put their past behind and they have been inseparable since. What makes their friendship even more amazing is that Quinn was one of those people who were less than nice to her. They’ve both made mistakes, but they managed to move past them and forge the kind of friendship most people hear about, but never experience. I had my doubts at first, but Quinn is one of the very few reasons Rachel has to smile.” Andy continues the story in order to give Nigel a little more background. “What you just saw was Rachel sensing her friend in distress so the rest of the world ceases to exist in order for her to make things better. Once Rachel considers you a friend, heaven help whoever tries to hurt you.” She finishes as she goes to the kitchen to help Leroy finish dinner.

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“I really am happy for you, but at the same time I feel like shit because my best friend is leaving.” Quinn says fighting tears. The unspoken ‘me’ hangs heavily in the air between them.

“Oh Quinn. Don’t be sad. I told you already that you won’t be able get rid of me that easily. You might be spared of seeing me on a daily basis, but that doesn’t mean that I won’t pester you electronically. I would never willingly leave you.” Rachel says fighting tears of her own.

“I know. Thank you, by the way.” Quinn says smiling a bit.

“You won’t be thanking me once you realise just how much I plan to be in touch with you.” Rachel says feeling a bit better.

“Not that, silly. Thank you for not insulting my intelligence and saying that you still haven’t decided or that you’re waiting for Dalton or something ridiculous like that. We both know that you will be in New York next summer to attend Juilliard, high school to be determined.” Quinn says serious.

“I wouldn’t dream of it. Because of you, I now feel guilty whenever I chuckle at a blonde joke, or even find one amusing, let alone bring myself to tell one.” Rachel says with affection evident in her voice.

“I’m trying to be serious here, Berry.” Quinn says trying to sound irritated, but failing miserably.
“I know. I’m just trying very hard not to cry because you’re upset, and I’m here, and you’re there and if I break down in tears I won’t have my soft-boiled egghead to cuddle to and to make me feel better. I’m not there to make you feel better either. And it’s all messed up because I should be ecstatic about Juilliard, but knowing it’s causing you to be sad is making me sad.” Rachel says, tears once again filling her eyes and threatening to spill.

“How many times do I have to tell you? I am not a soft boiled egghead.” Quinn says in mock irritation, hoping to stem the tears she knows are in the brunette’s eyes, and therefore stop her own crying.

“Let me explain everything to you one more time. You, my dear Quinn are like a soft boiled egg, hard on the outside, but soft and mushy on the inside. Seeing as you’re the smartest blonde I know, and the only one giving me competition for the top sophomore title, that automatically makes you an egghead. It fits. It makes perfect sense. Just accept it and move on.” Rachel says feeling a bit better now. She can do banter and save the heavy conversations for when she gets back to Lima.

“It works both ways, you know. I don’t have my midget bear to hug either.” Quinn says through a bittersweet smile, knowing that this is in a way a preparation for what is to come. Once Rachel moves, all she will have will be phone calls, Skype, e-mails and text. Which a cynical voice inside of her is already saying that those electronic ways of getting in touch will slowly fade away to nothing once Rachel gets her bearings and makes new friends from her fresh start. After all, isn’t there some dumb saying that goes along the lines of ‘out of sight, out of mind’? It’s only the diva’s voice on the phone that snaps her from such horrible thoughts.

“I should feel insulted. I call you an intellectual and you return the favour by calling me a miniature hairy beast.” Rachel says trying to sound irritated, but instead, she sounds miserable because right about now, she would be pouncing on her friend to start a tickle war until they are both breathless with laughter. The thought making the first tear roll down her cheek.

“That’s because you are so huggable and cute.” Quinn says, voice thick with tears. “You have only been gone a few days and you will return in time for school to start in January and I already miss you like crazy. I can’t imagine how shitty things are going to be like once you move away permanently.” Quinn says, tears now streaming down her face.

“I miss you too. Once the audition was over and the meaning of the news sunk in, you were the first person I thought about sharing the news with, but you were still in school and I didn’t want to get you in trouble, because you know, that so deserved more than just a silly text. I’m sorry I did the whole speaker phone bit. I just didn’t want to tell the same story a third time. But you know that it’s only a matter of time before you can join me here. Just because I’m a bit ahead of schedule doesn’t mean you can’t stick to the plans we made.” Rachel says once she gets a bit of control back.
“There is no guarantee for that, Rach.” Quinn replies sadly.

“Maybe not in writing, but the same talent I have for singing, you have for photography. I know that once NYU, Columbia and the rest of New York colleges see your portfolio they are going to be blown away by it. Combine that with your grades, and you are a shoe in for any school you choose. They would probably fight to have you as a student. Any school would be lucky to have you. The world of photo journalism won’t know what hit it once you graduate with top honours.” Rachel says into the phone.

“My dad still thinks it’s a waste of time to pursue photography. He is still pressuring me to go into something serious like medicine or engineering. We got into another argument yesterday, after he saw me looking online for black and white film. This time, he went as far as to tell me he might not even help me with tuition if I choose to waste my time in college with some useless major and throw my life away as a result. Even if I pursue something practical, I don’t think I’ll ever be good enough for him.” Quinn tells Rachel sadly.

“There are always scholarships and grants. With your grades, Cheerios and Glee you should be more than ok for college even if your dad acts like a poopy head control freak by dictating what you can or cannot study as a career.” Rachel says softly.

“Thanks for your vote of confidence, Rach. It means a lot to me. But the truth is, most if not all scholarships are given to prospective students whose parents aren’t in the tax bracket mine belong to. Enough about me though. I’m supposed to be fussing and congratulating you endlessly and then move on to encourage you and tell you not to freak out about tomorrow’s admissions exam. Then you tell me that I’m supposed to be studying for my midterm tomorrow and how I’ll ace it. By my account, we’re way behind schedule.” Quinn teases lightly.

“You goof. You are my best friend. I will gladly fall behind schedule if it means I get to make you feel better. Once that’s accomplished, we can resume to you fawning over me. I’m repeating myself, but you’re worth the praise. You are a very talented photographer and your work speaks for itself. I will do whatever I can to help you. Who knows, maybe by the time we’re both in our senior year and ready to apply for colleges, science will be advanced enough that we can give your dad a personality transplant. Or someone will invent an empathy pill and he’ll know to treat you better.” Rachel says in the hopes of lifting Quinn’s spirits.

“You know, I should feel insulted because I am related to the man, but I couldn’t agree with you more. Thanks Rach. If you were physically here, I’d give you a giant hug.” Quinn replies softly.

“I’ll take an I.O.U. with interest for now and collect when I return for school.” Rachel says smiling now and feeling better herself. She makes a mental note to research scholarships and grants when she gets a chance. There has to be a way for children from privileged families to get scholarships. She
knows some families believe in self-reliance and refuse to foot the bill for them to go to school. Those same kids were able to go to school without drowning in student loans. There has to be a way.

“You got it. I’ll give you as many hugs as you can take. I’d keep you in my arms forever if I could.” Quinn says blushing crimson, unsure what possessed her to say that last bit out loud. “How do you feel about tomorrow?” She quickly asks changing the subject.

“I’d stay in your arms forever if I could.” Rachel whispers, her heart rate picking up. “And I’m not sure anymore. I’m nervous because I really want to attend Dalton. Their arts programs are amazing, but I’ll ok if I don’t get in. I’ll look into the public schools here and see which one is the best suited for me and see what kind of paperwork I need if the school is out of my district. The temptation is there to study, but I admit that I will probably go nuts if I look at my notes one more time. After Daddy agreed to let me move here, I don’t think I could stay in Lima even if I had bombed my audition.” Rachel replies, wishing for the millionth time that Quinn were physically there with her.

“You’ll do fine. Just like you did on your audition. Your grades speak for themselves and your extracurricular activities tell of a well rounded person. I don’t blame you for never wanting to return here. This town sucks.” Quinn reassures the diva.

“I know, but who knows what they think of McKinley’s quality of education. Because it’s all relative, you know. That’s why they have the admission exam. To see just how much I know and whether or not I can handle their course work.” Rachel says. “The town really is awful, but as long as you’re still there, I’ll always have a reason to visit. Soon, you’ll be joining me in New York, Quinn.” She adds softly.

“Thanks, Rach. We might live in the middle of nowhere, but we rank pretty high in the state of Ohio for the quality of our education. Trust me, Rach, you’ll ace that exam, and they’ll be lucky to have you. And just so you know, it might have taken me a while to realise this, but you make this miserable hell hole better. I’m going to miss you so much when you’re gone for good.” Quinn says honestly.

“Thanks Quinn. You’re the best.” Rachel replies but is unable to continue when Andy gently calls her in for dinner.

“I have to go Quinn. Dinner is ready. I’ll call you again tomorrow night. Have fun at Cheerios practice. Give the slackers hell so they know who their captain is. And good luck on your final midterm.” Rachel says.

“I heard. I’ll talk to you tomorrow then. Thanks, and not that you need it, but good luck to you as
well.” Quinn says as she disconnects.

Rachel sighs and heads inside again, taking her coat off and rubbing her hands together to warm them.

“Are you ok? How is Quinn?” Andy asks gently pulling Rachel into a hug once she sees the look on Rachel’s face.

“Yeah, we’re both ok I guess. I am so happy I got accepted and just so you know, regardless of what happens tomorrow, I’m moving here. I’m going to miss her so much though. I hate that she is so sad about this. I know it’s silly, but it feels as if I’m abandoning her.” Rachel says as she wraps her arms around Andy’s waist and leans into her cousin’s warmth.

“You’re not. Everything will work out just fine. You’ll see.” Andy says kindly as they make their way to the small dining area.

Dinner proceeds with conversation about a bit of everything, but Leroy and Andy notice that the normally talkative Rachel is mostly listening and only speaking when she is asked a question directly. Both figure that things aren’t as great with Quinn as she has told them. Nigel, ever the observant man, excuses himself early, citing work the next day, which taking into consideration where he works and who his immediate boss is, it’s not that farfetched of an excuse. He bids everyone good night, and wishes Rachel good luck on her exam the next day. He can’t resist giving her some last minute pointers on her wardrobe, which at least draws a small smile to her face and a reply that it shouldn’t matter what she wears to write a test. Still, she promises to follow his advice.

“Is everything ok, Baby Girl?” Leroy asks Rachel once they’re alone.

“Yes, Daddy. I’m just tired and a bit on edge about tomorrow.” Rachel answers distractedly.

“Well, in that case then I’m going to call it a night and turn in early after I call Hiram and give him the good news.” Leroy says with a sad smile. Rachel used to confide him and tell him everything about her life. He knows that as one gets older one finds other people to confide in, but his baby’s reluctance to share has gotten worse since the Shelby debacle. Another reason he regrets the way he behaved. “Good night girls. Sleep well and sweet dreams. I love you both.” He adds as he gives each girl a hug and a kiss.

“Good night Daddy.” Rachel says as she returns the kiss and hug.
“G’nite Uncle Leroy. Sleep well and good luck with Uncle Hiram.” Andy says returning the kiss and hug, throwing an apologetic look his way, feeling bad because she knows he can sense the turmoil within Rachel without being able to do much to ease it. She also knows the conversation with Hiram won’t be an easy one. She has had her fair share of awkward talks with her mom and unfortunately, those two share the same stubborn streak.

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Leroy quickly gets his things and heads to the bathroom and then back to the room, all the while wishing more than anything in the world for his daughter to confide in him, but sadly knows that the more he pushes, the more she will pull away. He pulls out his phone and calls his partner of twenty years, and hopes that the last few days have given him a chance to think about the situation between them and his role in it. He sighs deeply as he waits for Hiram to pick up the phone.

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Rachel quietly takes care of the dirty dishes, happy for something to do.

“Here, let me give you a hand.” Andy says as she squeezes around Rachel to stand beside her in the small kitchen.

“It’s ok, Andy. Why don’t you go get ready for bed or do some work? It’s kinda crowded anyway.” Rachel says with a smile.

“Ok, but don’t think you’re off the hook missy. I know something is bugging you.” Andy says as she gives Rachel a quick hug.

“I know, and I appreciate the concern. Meet you back in your room in a few.” Rachel says softly.

Andy quickly takes care of her nightly routine and joins Rachel in the kitchen again.

“How about you go get ready for bed now and I’ll finish off here?” Andy asks gently.

“Ok. Thanks Sunshine.” Rachel replies with a sad smile.
Andy quickly dries the dishes and puts them away to make it back the bedroom by the time Rachel is done.

“Come here little Hummingbird and talk to me. What happened?” Andy says as she pats the spot beside her and then opens her arms.

Rachel gratefully climbs on the bed and into the waiting arms of the person who has been her anchor for as long as she can remember. “Thanks for always being there for me, Sunshine.” Rachel says into Andy’s chest, holding on to her waist tightly.

“Anytime, Sweetheart. Now, spill, what’s bothering your pretty little head?” Andy says as she cradles Rachel to her and kisses the top of her head.

“Quinn’s dad is being a control freak poopy head again.” Rachel answers softly as she settles into Andy’s embrace. “Quinn was looking online to get some black and white film and her dad saw her search and it started another argument between them. Long story short, he wants her to go to college for something serious and even threatened to take away any financial help should Quinn follow her heart and her talent and majors in something photography related.” Rachel says getting angry just at the thought and at her inability to do anything to help.

“I told her that with her grades and extracurricular activities she should be a shoe in for scholarships. But we both know neither Columbia nor NYU offer cheerleading scholarships and since she isn’t really going to pursue a career in music, a scholarship in that field is also out of the question. So in reality, all she has to fall back on are her grades. It’s so not fair because her parents are fairly well off and the odds of her getting a scholarship are so low that in order for her to go to school and pursue her passion she’ll have to do so through student loans and be in debt forever. And just because her dad is a poopy head.” Rachel finishes her rant.

Andy sighs and holds Rachel just that much tighter. Having experienced something similar when she gave up her shot at Law School, she can only understand too well what Quinn must be feeling. “Oh Rach, all I can say is that things will eventually work out. Does your school have a newspaper?” Andy prods, already coming up with some ideas.

“Yes, but it’s not very popular, because everyone thinks that papers are old fashioned. No offence.” Rachel says smiling sheepishly at Andy.

“None taken. Even though we are a newspaper, The Mirror does have its own website where we publish breaking stories. I was going to suggest having her join as the paper’s photographer. Whether it’s print or virtual, there is always the need for photographs to grasp readers’ attention. Have her take
as many photography related courses that your school might offer. It would also help for her to take photography courses at the local college and of course have Quinn start thinking and working on her portfolio even now. For an art undergrad in both NYU and Columbia, her portfolio is just as important as her grades and SAT scores. She nails her SATs and has a kick ass portfolio, both schools will be fighting over her the same way Juilliard is making exceptions for you. There are academic scholarships intended for students in similar positions to the one Quinn finds herself in. She just really needs to keep her grades in the stratosphere in order to be competitive, but they do exist. It’s not the end of the world. We’ll research things more in depth together and we’ll find a way to help her. We have over two years for that.” Andy says reassuringly.

“Thanks Sunshine. You’re the best. I feel like such a lousy friend because none of what you just told me really entered my mind as possibilities. I guess I have been so spoiled and lucky with Daddy and Dad providing for everything that the thought of scholarships were always just superficial at best. It’s only now that I am finding what creeps Quinn’s parents are that I truly can see how lucky I am to have you all in my life.” Rachel snuggles closer to Andy.

She might have been a bit cautious of Rachel’s initial friendship with the Head Cheerio because of their not so stellar past, but if Rachel is capable to put their past behind her and welcome the girl with open arms and heart, then at the very least she will trust Rachel’s judgement. Knowing that the girl is going through something similar to what she went through while choosing her college major endears her a bit more to Andy’s heart. The fact that Quinn is one of the few people who gives Rachel a sense of normalcy and openly defends her cousin in school has made sure that Andy will also do what she can to help the blonde.

“So you’re no longer mad at Uncle Hiram?” Andy asks softly.

“I was never really angry with Dad. It’s more the other way around. He’s the one who refuses to talk to me, though I admit I’m not making that big of an effort to talk to him either. He just hurt me so much with his words. I never expected him to say them. I am used to the miscreants from school treating me like that. From them, I expect the worst. When they deliver it hurts, but it’s not devastating because I know is coming. I know they don’t like me. When Dad said what he did, it felt like someone was ripping a piece of my heart out.

“Dad thinks I’m running away. He thinks I must confront my bullies, but I’m so tired of always having to stand up for myself against the whole school, with the exception of a very small group. While Daddy and I were talking to you about our trip here and making plans, he would tell me I’m just being weak. He is sure that if I go to school with me ready to fight back that they will all miraculously stop. He said I’m taking advantage of you and Daddy with my diva tendencies and that he should have never let Daddy spoil me the way he has.” Rachel says sadly.

“He doesn’t get it though. I went from wanting to be popular to just wanting to be left alone. I no longer care if they ignore me. In fact, I would love it they did because it means no more slushie
facials and being on the receiving end of most of their jokes and all of their nasty comments. I just want it to stop. Since it’s not stopping any time soon, I just decided to start working towards my career early and at the same time save my sanity. I never stopped to consider how things might affect Dad and Daddy’s relationship, or Quinn. Knowing that I’m the cause for my parents’ fight and knowing that my best friend will be stuck in that godforsaken hell hole for another two years makes me feel like the most selfish, most spoiled brat under the sun. I never stopped to think how my actions would affect others. I was just thinking about how to make things better for me. Maybe Dad is right and I’m nothing more than a spoiled brat that is constantly taking advantage of those around me.” Rachel finally unloads what has been weighing her down since she shared their plans with her fathers.

Andy stiffens at the words and it’s only the crumpled girl cradled in her arms crying softly that keeps her in place. Her first instinct is to get on a plane to Ohio and give Hiram a piece of her mind for uttering those words at Rachel. She takes a couple of deep, cleansing breaths in order to dissipate her anger since the last thing Rachel needs is the sight of Andy wanting nothing more than to kick her dad’s ass.

“Does Uncle Leroy know this?” Andy asks, already suspecting the answer.

“No. I can’t bring myself to tell him. My move to New York has given them more than enough reasons to argue constantly and now they barely talk to each other. I know Daddy will say something and that will just cause a bigger argument. I’m sorry I unloaded all this on you. And now you’re caught in the middle. I really am selfish.” Rachel whispers as more tears fall from her and soak Andy’s tee shirt.

Andy ever so slowly and lovingly pulls Rachel up to a sitting position so she can cup her face. With her thumbs, she painstakingly wipes Rachel’s tears and making sure the girl is looking at her, she takes another deep breath to put her thoughts in order once again.

“Rachel, my little Hummingbird, you are not selfish. Not any more than the rest of the world. We are allowed to act in ways that will make life easier and better for us, even at the occasional expanse of others. Yes, you are not perfect, but no one is. All we can hope is to reach our own pinnacle of perfection. We all make mistakes, but it is what we do after said mistakes that separate us from the less desirable people of this world. You have never intended to hurt others with your actions. If anything, you take on so much on your own just to spare the rest of us from pain. I’m glad you trust me enough to tell me things. I’m so glad that I get to give you a break from all the crap you have to deal with in Lima. I need you to know that I’m agreeing to have you here because I want you here. I’m glad I get to offer you an out and a way for you to keep your sanity. Even if you weren’t having such a hard time in Lima, I’d still offer you a place here. No matter where I live, my home will always be yours too.

“Uncle Hiram is being a poopy head all of his own. He is the one unable to handle change. He’s the
one lashing out because things aren’t going his way. His actions are his sole responsibility, not yours. You’re not a spoiled brat. Sure, you have had things fairly easy because your parents have the financial means to give you a slight edge, but it is your talent alone that has gotten you this far. You are in the top five where grades are concerned because of your hard work. You were invited to audition for Juilliard before the rest. They broke protocol for you and accepted you on the same day because of your talent and hard work. They recognised that something that makes you special. I have no clue what has gotten into Uncle Hiram, but he is wrong. I repeat, you are not spoiled. You are so intense and driven that a lot of people mistake that as you being self centred, and that’s their loss. None of your accomplishments were handed to you because of your fathers’ financial edge. It is your drive for perfection that has gotten you where you are academically and artistically.” Andy says as she once again pulls Rachel to her for another hug.

“Thanks Andy. I love you. You always know just what to say. You are such a great person to know and have around.” Rachel says as she snuggles close feeling lighter and a bit better. “I’ll give Quinn your suggestions when I call her after my exam tomorrow. She’ll be ecstatic to know that she can get merit-based academic scholarships regardless of how wealthy her parents are.” Rachel adds.

“I love you too my little Hummingbird. Feeling good enough to get some sleep?” Andy asks gently.

“Yes. I do. Thanks Sunshine.” Rachel says as she reaches and kisses Andy softly on the cheek.

“Sweet dreams Rachel.” Andy replies as she places a loving kiss on her forehead.

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Rachel is up by six a.m. and gets dressed for a quick run. She misses her elliptical, and the choice of working out in the warmth of an indoor setting, but she will gladly run in the middle of a blizzard if it means living in New York. She jots down a quick note and then grabs her phone and iPod and out she goes to repeat the same route she ran with Andy over the weekend. Forty five minutes of mindless exercise later, Rachel is back and feeling energised and ready for the world once again. She starts the coffee maker and then heads back to Andy’s room to grab a change of clothing. She takes a quick shower and is quite surprised to see Leroy cooking them all breakfast.

“Good morning Baby Girl. Did you have a good run?” Leroy asks as he flips a pancake up in the air.

“Yes, I did Daddy. Did you sleep ok? How is Dad?” Rachel asks softly.

“I slept just fine and your dad is fine. He isn’t talking very much. He is still quite angry with us.” Leroy replies sadly.
“Don’t worry Daddy, things will work out eventually.” Rachel says as she gives him a hug from behind.

“Mmmm you guys are spoiling me. I’m going to hate the usual stuff I eat once you guys return to Lima.” Andy whines as she serves herself a cup of coffee.

Breakfast is eaten in relative silence, with Rachel bouncing with extra energy. The adults sitting in front of her cannot imagine what it would be like had Rachel not gone out for that run earlier in the day.

“Gotta run guys. Good luck on your exam. I’ll see you later this evening.” Andy says as she gives them each a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“See you later Andy. Have a good day.” Rachel calls out as Andy rushes out the door.

“Thanks my little Hummingbird.” Andy calls back just before the front door closes.

Leroy calls for a taxi to meet them downstairs so they can make it to Dalton with plenty of time. He doesn’t want to risk a taking the wrong subway train and getting lost. He wants to make a good impression for Rachel’s sake.

They arrive at Dalton with half an hour to spare, so they have more than enough time to navigate the halls in search of the main office, which they find without problems. After introductions are made, Rachel is escorted to an empty classroom where she begins her exam.

Rachel finds the admissions exam to be neither difficult nor easy. On more than one occasion, she wants to pinch herself to make sure she isn’t dreaming. Given Dalton’s fourteen percent admissions rate for new students, shouldn’t the exam be more difficult? She is done well ahead of the allotted time, so she forces herself to double check her answers. When she has gone over the paper twice, she gets up and hands the completed answer booklet to the teacher overseeing the testing. She is then handed another booklet and is told to write a short essay on the topic of her choosing. Rachel quickly sits back down and decides to write about the history behind Broadway, a subject that she is extremely familiar with. If anything, she has a hard time keeping it short, but she manages and once again, with time to spare, she goes over her essay. When she is satisfied that there are no spelling mistakes and no grammatical errors, she hands in the essay.
After a quick tour of the premises, she is told that they will contact her between January and February to inform her of the status of her admissions. She is told that when they contact her with information has no bearing on whether or not she is accepted. After a few pleasantries, they bid the principal goodbye and exchange wishes for a happy holiday. This time they catch the subway back to Andy’s apartment because they have time to explore and Rachel says that this way she can gauge the best way to and from should she get accepted there.

After an uneventful but fairly long subway ride back, Leroy and Rachel explore the neighbourhood some more, since it is almost a sure thing that Rachel will be moving there sometime in the summer. The date of course depends on when Rachel wants to leave Lima. She tells her father that she will think about it and know more as the time draws closer because it also depends on Andy and when it is best for her.

Rachel is the one who is constantly looking at her watch this time. She knows Quinn has Cheerios practice so she needs to wait until that is done. Barring any eventualities, it means that Quinn won’t be available until around seven p.m. Rachel waits until eight to call to give the blonde time to eat her dinner. Quinn picks up on the first ring.

“Hey Rach. Well, how did it go?” Quinn asks directly to the point.

“Hey Quinn. It was surprisingly anticlimactic. I expected this tough exam, and it seemed like they just took chunks similar to our midterms and put them together so they covered all major subjects. Then I had to write an essay in which I picked the topic. I finished both with time to spare. They will notify me sometime between mid January to mid February, so until then I won’t know a thing. Andy and Daddy will also be looking at public schools just in case.” Rachel says still unsure how to feel about the whole process. “How was your day? How was practice?” Rachel asks.

“The usual. Wrote my last midterm so I actually have tomorrow off. Coach Sylvester was a nightmare, but the rare thing would be for her to be nice to us. Some of the seniors are still bitter I was named Head Cheerio so they tried to give me attitude. After today they won’t be a problem anymore.” Quinn says clearly satisfied. She might have had a slight fall from grace once the rumour she was pregnant hit McKinley High’s hallways, but soon enough she put everyone who dared challenge her back in their place, and as a bonus, she made a new friend in the form of Rachel Berry.

Rachel relays Andy’s suggestions to increase her chances of being admitted and she also mentions scholarships that she can apply for. The talks of scholarships fall to the wayside because Quinn has to repress her desire to go ‘head bitch in charge’ on Hiram.

“Everyone in Glee has been asking why you went on break early. I told them it wasn’t any of their business. Finn is acting as if someone kicked his puppy and Puck is a bit pissy because you took off early without informing him. Be prepared for some sulky boys when you get back. By the way,
“We’re spending Christmas with Andy, and we fly back to Ohio on the twenty-seventh. I want to spend New Year’s with you.” Rachel answers with a smile, even though Quinn can’t see it.

“You’re not staying in New York to ring in the New Year?” Quinn asks surprised.

“Nope. I miss you and I want to spend it with you, if that’s ok.” Rachel replies a bit insecure now.

“Of course it is, my midget bear. I miss you too. I’m just surprised because I thought you’d stay there for as long as you could. God knows there is nothing to do here.” Quinn replies once she hears the slight quiver in Rachel’s voice.

They talk for a bit more and make plans to spend New Year’s in Rachel’s place because Quinn doesn’t feel like socialising with her relatives and her parents’ acquaintances and have a miserable time. She actually wants to have a good time this year.

“What do you want to do now that you are done with your audition, interviews, and exam?” Andy asks after Rachel is off the phone.

“I want to go shopping.” Rachel says with a smirk.

“More? I’m going to kill Nigel. Uncle Leroy is going to have a conniption because you’ll need a second set of luggage.” Andy whines, not really liking the idea of braving the masses now that Christmas is just around the corner.

“Not that kind of shopping, silly.” Rachel laughs at Andy’s reaction. “I did some research and I want to hit some vintage camera stores. I’m looking for a camera lens and some black and white film for Quinn.” Rachel explains.

“Ah. I see. Did you have any stores in mind?” Andy answers with a smile.

“A few, but they are scattered throughout the city. You don’t have to brave the streets with me though. I know you are busy, so I can just use my iPhone and google my way around.” Rachel
replies.

“Don’t be silly, Hummingbird. If you don’t mind waiting a little, why don’t you come and meet me at The Mirror around noon tomorrow and we can grab lunch. Then we can go explore the city for those stores.” Andy proposes.

“What about work?” Rachel asks.

“Things have been pretty quiet at the paper. I just need to do some last minute edits and I can start my Christmas break early.” Andy answers with a smile.

“Great. Daddy already begged off, saying he has to catch up on his work, so it’s just the two of us.” Rachel answers happily.

Rachel is pleasantly surprised when Andy joins her the next day for her Tai Chi and yoga routine at six a.m. Andy just shrugs and smiles, saying she was planning on heading to work early to make sure she is done by noon.

“Only make enough coffee for Uncle Leroy, Rach. If you don’t mind, I want to try that crazy Chai latte you make every morning. It smells heavenly.” Andy says over her shoulders as she enters the bathroom.

“Sure. Want anything specific for breakfast? Rachel asks sticking her head in the bathroom.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll just have a bagel and some cream cheese.” Andy calls from the shower.

Andy is out the door before Leroy is up. She leaves after giving detailed instructions for Rachel and of course only after a promise from the girl that she will be careful on her way to the paper.

Their shopping expedition is a success with Rachel buying a set of lenses and a few boxes of black and white film. The remaining of their time in New York is spent ice skating in Rockefeller Centre, visiting the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, catching a few shows with Rachel daydreaming that one day it will be her on the stage, and some more shopping with Nigel to Andy’s and Leroy’s chagrin.
The twenty-seventh arrives faster than anyone anticipated and as expected, it is a tear filled farewell with promises to keep in touch. The flight is a lot smoother this time, and it seems faster than the one to New York. Rachel cannot wait to see Quinn and the expression on her friend’s face once she opens the box containing her gifts.

TBC…
Unlike their arrival to New York, once the plane lands in Toledo and taxies to the terminal, Rachel is in no hurry to deplane. She actually waits for those around her to get their things and exit first. Instead, she uses the time to turn her brand new iPhone on and sends Andy a text.

Rachel Berry:

Landed ok. Everything is ok, & the stupid overhead bins are still designed to torture people like me. Will call later tonight. Love you.

She receives a reply almost immediately.

Andy Sachs:

Good to hear. Maybe you should travel with a stepping stool when you fly next? Just kidding. Will be home late, so it’s ok if you don’t call ‘til tomorrow. Love you too.

Rachel smiles fondly at the message. Andy is one of the few people who can tease her about her height without making Rachel feel horrible.

When the plane is nearly empty, she finally unbuckles her seat belt and slowly pulls her carry on from under her seat.

Leroy can’t help but feel the same heaviness that seems to be permeating Rachel’s heart. All the exuberance she had displayed in their trip to and while in New York seems to have been left behind the moment the plane taxied out of the terminal in LaGuardia. He is truly amazed at Rachel because their original plan was to stay in New York until the last possible second. Instead, they make an early return because his daughter wants to cheer up her best friend.

“You could have just let me put your bag on the overhead compartment.” Leroy says with a chuckle as he pulls his carry on down.

“I see the point of having to make those things so high because you’re so tall and even at this level
you still have to be careful not to bump your head. I’m just unhappy that I end up paying the price because I can never reach those stupid things.” Rachel says slightly put off.

“Come on Baby Girl, we have a long car ride until we’re home.” Leroy says guiding Rachel out of the plane.

“Is Dad meeting us here, or are we still on our own?” Rachel asks in a small voice, still feeling guilty for having caused such a long fight between her dads.

“Sorry Sweetie. He is still a bit on the angry side. Look at it on the bright side though. At least we won’t be spending the next hour long car ride back to Lima constantly arguing over silly things or sitting in an uncomfortable silence just as long.” Leroy says pulling his daughter for a hug.

“I’m sorry Daddy. I…” Rachel starts to apologise again, but is soon cut off by Leroy.

“Don’t, Baby Girl. Remember what you told me in New York? Things will eventually work out. I just want you to be happy. You and I both know that your happiness is not here. The current situation with your dad was never your fault. There are better ways to show displeasure and definitely better ways to show disagreement. I’m glad that you’re thinking about your future and your well being and despite everything, you’re not letting your guilt win. We could go on and on about how things could have been different had we taken different paths, but it is a moot point. We can’t change the past, so it makes no sense stressing about that. Just accept the consequences of our past actions, learn from them, and move on. I want you to concentrate on you, the way it’s supposed to be. Your dad and I will eventually work things out. It’s not your job to try and fix whatever issues we might have, especially if it’s at your expense. I love you, my Baby Girl. Don’t ever forget that.” Leroy says as they exit the gate and into the terminal.

* * *

Quinn is pacing back and forth in the arrivals section of the terminal, wondering where her best friend is. She is sure that everyone except the crew has deplaned when suddenly, movement towards the gate catches her eyes. She sees a stunning brunette who literally takes her breath away followed by her best friend’s father, but no sign of Rachel anywhere. She is about to say something to Leroy when Rachel’s unmistakable voice breaks her out of her thoughts.

“Quinn? What are you doing here? I thought we were going to meet in the morning.” Rachel says as she runs to Quinn and pulls a stunned blonde into her arms.
“Rachel? Is that you?” Quinn stammers as she wraps her arms around the other girl and breathes in her best friend’s familiar scent of jasmine and honeysuckle.

“No. It’s the queen of England. Of course it’s me, you goof. Don’t tell me your eyesight is going now? Come to think of it though, a pair of glasses would definitely complete the whole egghead look.” Rachel says with affection.

“You look amazing. Absolutely stunning.” Quinn says in awe. “Why didn’t you say anything to me about it?” Quinn adds as she smacks Rachel on the arm lightly.

“And ruin the surprise? No way. You should have seen the look in your face when you saw me and realised it was me.” Rachel says through a fit of giggles.

“That’s mean.” Quinn says still staring at Rachel. She has seen Rachel wearing casual clothing when they are lounging in each other’s houses, but never like this. Rachel has on a pair of dark grey dress pants with a fitted burgundy sweater that hugs her figure in all the right places. She has on a pair of boots with three inch heels. Minimal make up highlighting the best features in her face, and her hair flowing in gentle waves. She wonders if Rachel’s hair feels as soft as it looks.

“You still haven’t answered my question. What are you doing here?” Rachel asks again, bringing Quinn out of her thoughts.

“Oh, right. I called Leroy asking him for the flight info. I wanted to surprise you by picking you up. And of course, I end up being the one surprised.” Quinn says when all of a sudden it dawns on her she hasn’t said a single word to Leroy, who is just standing there, smirking at the two girls.

“Oh my god! Hi Leroy. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to be so rude. It’s just that I wasn’t expecting Rachel to look so hot and…” Quinn says and immediately clamps her hand over her mouth. “Oh god. I can’t believe I just said that out loud.” She mumbles as she turns the shade of a ripe tomato.

Leroy pulls Quinn for a hug and chuckles at the blonde’s reaction. “Hi Quinn. Thanks for meeting us and offering to drive us back to Lima. And don’t worry about a thing. Seeing your reaction to Rachel’s new look was worth being ignored for a few minutes.” He says laughing now.

“Daddy! You knew Quinn was coming and you didn’t say anything? All this time you let me think we were going to be taking a taxi home.” Rachel says with a mock glare at Leroy. She then turns to Quinn. “You want mean? That was mean of Daddy and you for not letting me know.” She says with
a pout. It’s only the sight of her blushing friend that their exchange registers in Rachel’s mind.

“I wanted to surprise you both.” He says still chuckling.

“Thanks Daddy. It was definitely a nice surprise.” Rachel says as she pulls him down so she can kiss his cheek. “So you think I look hot?” Rachel asks shyly, turning her attention back to the blushing blonde.

“I uh… yes I do. I can’t believe I just blurted it out like that.” Quinn says, still blushing, to the tips of her toes.

“Thanks. I don’t think anyone has ever called me hot before,” Rachel says blushing herself. “Come on; let’s go get the rest of my stuff.” Rachel says changing the subject, before she embarrasses them further.

“Now I see why you insisted I drop off my car at your place and drive yours, Leroy.” Quinn says once she sees all the luggage that belongs to Rachel. “Did you leave anything behind for others in New York to shop, or did you buy everything?” Quinn asks Rachel as they push the two carts full of suitcases towards the parking garage.

“It was all for selfish reasons. I didn’t want to ride back to Lima strapped to the roof of your car in order to fit everything.” Leroy jokes as they approach his BMW X5.

“What? It’s not my fault you told Nigel to go for it. Just be thankful the major shopping got done in one day.” Rachel says sticking out her tongue at Leroy.

“Yes, I did say that. I thought Andy was exaggerating when she said Nigel loves to dress people. I should have just told you to put everything on your credit card while I went to a museum or something.” Leroy says shuddering at the memory of all the shopping he was volunteered to attend.

“Admit it; you came along because you wanted to make sure there would be no repeat of what happened with Kurt. Thanks Daddy.” Rachel says hugging Leroy.

“Anything for you, Baby Girl. Now, Quinn, why don’t you give me the car keys and you and Rachel get settled in the back. I’ll play chauffeur while you girls catch up.” Leroy says as he starts to load as much as he can in the cargo space/trunk of his SUV. The smaller pieces are put in the
passenger seat, and the rest are secured tightly on the roof rack.

“Will you be all right driving back after the flight?” Quinn asks.

“I was sitting around doing nothing but doze on and off. I’ll be fine. You two are dying to catch up so I’d rather you not split your attention between talking with my baby and driving.” Leroy says with a warm smile.

“Thank you Leroy.” Quinn says as she pulls him in for a hug.

“Don’t mention it. Now, in you go girls.” Leroy says returning Quinn’s hug.

The drive back is spent joking about Rachel’s closet love for shopping and some of the crazier things Nigel wanted Rachel to wear. Rachel describes in detail her visit to Runway. Through all of it, Quinn can sense an undercurrent of sadness from her friend that she files under the pile of things they will discuss later, when they are alone. Quinn fills Rachel on the week of school that she missed, which basically amounted to nothing but gossip and speculation on everyone’s part whenever the subject of Rachel’s early vacation came up.

“You’re staying over, right?” Rachel asks Quinn as they pull inside the garage.

“Only if you want me to.” Quinn replies shyly.

“That’s a dumb thing to say. Of course I want you to. I have so much to tell you. Do you need to call your parents or anything? Does uh, anyone else know I’m back?” Rachel asks.

“No I told them that more than likely I was going to be staying here. As far as everyone else is concerned, you won’t be back until the weekend before school starts again in January.” Quinn answers with a soft smile.

“Good. Thanks Quinn. I know Noah probably made a pest of himself trying to find out things from you. I’m surprised he didn’t call Dad asking where I was and why I left early.” Rachel ponders scrunching her brow.
“I think Puck believed the three of you left Lima. He had no reason to think anything is going
between you and Dr. Berry, so it never occurred to him to actually come here and check. I guess the
fact I didn’t say a thing or came here except for earlier today to exchange cars, confirmed that the
house was empty. Though I’m surprised Santana didn’t push for details since Dr. López works in the
hospital too. Maybe they had different shifts.” Quinn says softly, looking between Rachel and Leroy.

“I doubt Santana cares enough to mention anything at home to her family about me. At least this time
it worked to my advantage.” Rachel says sadly.

“It’s ok, Quinn. I would never expect you to come and check on Hiram. Your loyalty is where it
should be, with Rachel. Don’t worry about it. We will sort things out eventually. You just
concentrate on your friendship and your future.” Leroy says with a kind smile as he starts to unload
their luggage. He doesn’t know what to say to Rachel, but the defeated tone of her voice only
reaffirms his decision to fight for Rachel and her move to New York.

It takes them a total of two trips to bring everything inside and upstairs to Rachel’s room, even with
three people. Hiram conspicuously has made himself scarce by taking a shift at the hospital. Rachel
isn’t really that surprised when she finds out, but still feels sad that the situation has deteriorated the
way it has. Quinn gives Rachel a look full of understanding and support.

“Why don’t you girls hang out while Rachel unpacks? I’m probably heading to the store for some
groceries in a few. It looks like Hiram didn’t bother to cook while we were away. Any requests?”
Leroy says as he takes inventory of the refrigerator’s content while he pours them each a glass of
water.

“No thanks.” Both girls answer at the same time. They turn to face each other and break out in a fit
of giggles.

“Thanks for driving my car to the airport to meet us Quinn.” Leroy says as he looks at the giggling
girls.

“My pleasure. I had ulterior motives, so really it wasn’t that big of a deal.” Quinn says looking at
Rachel.

“See you girls in a few. Go bond. I’ll call you when dinner is ready.” Leroy says smiling kindly.

“Thanks Daddy.” Rachel says hugging him as she pulls Quinn with her to go back to her bedroom.
“Ok, now spill. Why the makeover? I know you no longer are interested in Finn or any other boy in school, so there has to be another reason.” Quinn says as they settle on Rachel’s bed.

Rachel quickly settles herself with her head resting comfortably on the Head Cheerio’s lap. As if on instinct, Quinn’s right hand tangles itself in the brown locks, while her free hand is captured by both of Rachel’s. Quinn absently thinks she was right; Rachel’s hair is as soft as it looks.

Rachel tells Quinn all about her conversation with Andy that first night in her apartment while she plays with Quinn’s fingers. They talk about Andy’s suggestions for Quinn. They talk about Rachel’s sightseeing even though she has been to them countless times, and all the spots she wants to take Quinn when she visits and when she eventually joins the diva in New York. Not if, but when, and it warms Quinn’s heart to hear those words.

“Anyway, the reason I brought everything back is because I promised Nigel I was going to clean out my closet and donate most of my old stuff. Andy also made sure I did.” Rachel eventually says.

“You’re having second thoughts. Why? You shouldn’t, because you look amazing.” Quinn asks a bit confused.

“Daddy spent a lot of money getting me all this new clothing. Not to mention Nigel calling in some personal favours on my behalf. I would hate for any of it to be ruined by slushies. The cheaper stuff I own right now, I can soak or replace easily. God, I can already picture Nigel’s face if I were to e-mail him and tell him that some of the Chanel ready-to-wear samples he got me were slushied.” Rachel says chuckling at the mental image.

“We could go through everything you own and only get rid of the really hideous stuff and keep the more neutral items.” Quinn says. “Sorry, Rach, but some of the stuff you have really is nasty.” She adds after a look from Rachel.

“I... yeah. Even I have agree some of the clothes I own could be labeled questionable.” Rachel concedes.

“Anyway, we give the losers at school time to adjust, and if they even dare to slushy you, I end them. This time you won’t be able to talk me out of it.” Quinn suggest with a smile.

“That’s a great idea actually. Well, except the part where you will end the sheep. You know I don’t
like it when you retaliate. It’s bad enough you need to show them this bitchy façade. I don’t want you to risk your social standing further by defending me even more openly. I feel horrible when they tease you because we are friends.” Rachel says, as she fights the urge to kiss Quinn’s hand that is still held prisoner in hers.

“No, Rach. I should have done it sooner. I should have never let you talk me out of it. I shouldn’t have been afraid of my popularity taking a hit. You don’t have that much time left here, and I want to make sure you don’t leave with just bad memories.” Quinn replies easily. “I want to do this. If the rest are too stupid to see what a wonderful girl you are, then it’s their loss. I’m tired of watching those losers treat you like a doormat. I can’t change the way those idiots in Glee react to you and I can’t force them to appreciate true talent, but I can stop anyone from ever considering throwing a slushie your way. I can also stop anyone from saying anything mean to you.” Quinn adds when she sees Rachel is about to protest.

Rachel shifts a little so that she is lying on her back and looks directly into Quinn’s eyes. “Even if you don’t do a thing, but just hang out like we have been doing, I’ll be leaving with some of the most beautiful memories of my life. Every moment I have spent with you since we became friends have been a godsend. You really are the only who can talk me out of moving once the school year is over, and the fact you are encouraging me to go means the world to me.” Rachel says as a few errant tears trickle out of her eyes. She takes the hand that she is still holding prisoner and brings it to her lips where she places a soft kiss there, unable to resist the urge any longer. “Thank you for being so good to me. I’m glad we get to spend New Year’s together.” Rachel says with a sweet smile.

“You have it backwards, Rachie. I’m the one who is grateful that you are so good to me. I know I don’t deserve your friendship, but I’m holding on to it for all it’s worth. You were the only one who didn’t abandon me during my brief fall from grace. You just offered me a shoulder to lean on and an ear to listen, even though I didn’t deserve it. Not from you, at least. Yet, you did and you never asked for anything in return.” Quinn replies with tears falling down freely from her eyes.

Rachel sits up and gently wipes the tears from Quinn’s cheek. “Please don’t cry Quinn. You are far too special to be sad. You deserve nothing but happiness.” Rachel says as she pulls Quinn into a bone-crunching hug. They only separate when they hear Leroy calling up to let them know dinner is ready.

Dinner is a nice breather from all the charged up emotions in Rachel’s room. They talk about their visit to New York, and Leroy adds some tidbits Rachel had conveniently edited out of her sightseeing tales.

“Daddy! You are taking far too much pleasure in poking fun at your only daughter.” Rachel says with a pout.
That only makes the other two laugh harder.

“It’s not my fault they gave me defective ice skates. You would think that such a popular spot would offer better quality rentals, instead of risking countless lawsuits with subpar equipment.” Rachel huffed at the indignity of falling on her rear, not once, but at least four different times while ice skating in Rockefeller Plaza.

“You know, it is ok not to excel at everything you do.” Quinn says, finally able to calm down. “You are great and the best where it matters.” She adds with a warm smile once she sees Rachel’s pout.

They joke around a bit more over dessert before Leroy calls it a night. Rachel and Quinn quickly take care of all dirty dishes.

“Go on up to your room. I’ll meet you there in a bit. I just need to run to my car and get your Christmas present.” Quinn says pushing Rachel up the stairs.

“Ok, but make sure you grab my keys from the bowl. I don’t want you to accidentally lock yourself out.” Rachel says as she runs up the stairs and to her room to get Quinn’s present.

Rachel actually feels nervous about the exchange. She has never really had anyone outside of her family to buy presents for before. She hopes Quinn doesn’t see this as a bribery of sorts, but for the gesture it is meant to be. She is brought out of her musings by the sounds of approaching footsteps. She quickly takes a calming breath and hopes for the best.

Quinn walks back into Rachel’s bedroom with a huge box in her arms, looking slightly nervous. She takes a look at Rachel, and can’t help but smile when she sees the nervousness reflected back at her in those beautiful chocolate yes.

“You know, I’m still floored that you celebrate Christmas.” Quinn says stepping closer, still carrying that big box. It doesn’t seem heavy because the blonde has no problem with it, just bulky. Curiosity begins to overtake nervousness and Rachel tilts her head to the side, trying to guess the content. Eventually, Quinn sits on the other side of Rachel.

“Daddy said he wanted me to have a well rounded experience growing up. Dad wanted to raise me Jewish, but Daddy insisted I was exposed to his branch of Christianity as well so I could make an informed choice when it comes to religion. Besides, it means I get more presents than anyone else.” Rachel says with a mischievous smile.
“This is for you. I hope you’ll like it.” Quinn says handing over the large box. “Go ahead. I want you to open it first.” She adds when she sees curiosity etched on Rachel’s face.

Rachel grins and rips the wrapping paper. She lets out a gasp when she sees what it is. Inside a cardboard box is a beautiful carrying case with an acoustic guitar and two binders filled to the brim with chords of Rachel’s favourite songs.

“You always said you wanted to learn guitar, but never got around to it. There is also a voucher for lessons as well. There aren’t a lot, just an introductory package of about ten to get you started. I spoke to your old piano instructor and he recommended the instructor. Hope you like it. Merry Christmas, Happy Hanukkah, and Happy Birthday.” Quinn says blushing furiously.

Rachel gently places the guitar back into its case and places it behind her, in the middle of the bed. She turns around and pulls Quinn into another bone crushing hug. “Thank you so much. You have no idea how much it means to me.” Rachel says, and on impulse, she leans over and kisses Quinn’s cheek, lingering just a little bit longer than necessary. Both girls close their eyes at the sensations coursing through their bodies.

Rachel grabs the box still sitting beside her and hands it to Quinn. “Here.” Rachel says softly, blushing pink. Considering how much thought and money Quinn put behind the gift, Rachel feels less weird about hers.

Quinn takes the box, and feels the slight weight to it. Unlike Rachel, she takes her time unwrapping the package. All this time, she can see Rachel biting her bottom lip in anticipation. Whatever it is, she is sure she will love. She finally pulls out the wrapping paper to encounter a non-descript box. Quinn opens the box and lets out a strangled gasp when she sees the content. Slowly, she pulls out a total of three lenses, a flash attachment, a good supply of black and white film, and a carrying case for everything. Quinn’s mouth opens and closes a few times as she struggles to come up with something, anything to say.

Rachel gets up and kneels in front of Quinn. She pulls Quinn’s hands away from the top of the box and holds on to them. “You are my best friend Quinn. Think of it as a combination Hanukkah Christmas and late birthday present. Besides, I am looking at it as an investment in your future. I am convinced that you will be a Pulitzer Prize winning photographer. One day, these photos I have hanging on my wall will be worth a small fortune.” Rachel says pointing at a set of framed photographs of herself.

“These must have cost you a small fortune.” Quinn finally manages to say, barely holding back her tears.
“I have never had anyone to buy presents for aside from Andy and my dads. Unless you hate the present, just accept it and be happy.” Rachel says a bit unsure.

“Of course I love it. I’m just a bit overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of it. And here I thought the guitar, sheet music, and lessons might have been a bit much. You go and completely blow me away with this. Thank you so much. Aside from my grandparents, you’re the only one who truly supports my dreams.” Quinn says as happy tears fall freely down her cheeks.

“Come here Eggie. We support each other’s dreams. You believe in my talent, just as much as I believe in yours.” Rachel says as she pulls Quinn into another hug. “You still owe me lots of hugs, which I’m planning on collecting later. I’ll just keep adding on the interest.” Rachel says with a smirk, hoping to lighten the mood some.

“Don’t call me that.” Quinn mumbles, secretly loving the fact that Rachel cares enough about her to give her a nickname. “I’m hugging you back, so technically speaking you can’t keep adding on interest. Not like it matters though, because I would never get tired of hugging you.” Quinn adds as she wraps her own arms around the tiny brunette.

“Do you think your parents would let you spend the rest of the week here?” Rachel blurts out of the blue. “I know that your sister is here, and I don’t want to take you away from your family. It’s just that I’ve missed you a lot and I know you’d only be going back and forth between your place and here, and I figured we’re always more comfortable here since we don’t have to keep a lookout for your dad. I’ll also need help going through all my clothing and…” Rachel starts to ramble only to stop when she feels two slender fingers pressing against her lips.

“I would love to, and I don’t see why my parents would object. I already spent Christmas with them, and my sister will spend her remaining time with her friends. It gets me out of their hair while they get the house ready for their annual bash.” Quinn says softly, her fingers still pressed gently against Rachel’s lips. “I missed you too.” She adds after she reluctantly pulls her fingers away. Rachel gives Quinn one of her megawatt smiles at the admission.

“Oh crap. I told Andy I was going to call her. Do you mind if I put us on speaker? It’s only fit that my best friends in the whole world get to know each other better.” Rachel asks shyly.

“Oh I don’t mind, as long as I’m not intruding. I know how close the two of you are, and I know how much you miss her.” Quinn says with a smile, glad Rachel wants to include her in the
“She won’t mind silly. She is actually ecstatic I have found such a great friend in you.” Rachel says as she grabs her land line to place the call.

They talk for nearly two hours about a bit of everything, starting with Quinn’s surprise appearance at the airport and her reaction to Rachel’s new look. Quinn gets an attack of the giggles after Andy’s revelation that according to Nigel, bad fashion sense must be something genetic with the Berry clan. Eventually, they have to hang up because Andy’s cell phone is ringing in the background, which can only mean it’s something work related. They promise to do this again soon.

The rest of the night is spent making plans for the remainder of the week, and how to avoid letting others know she is back. They know odds of them running into the others are next to zero since they don’t really plan on going anywhere. The only thing they end up doing is parking Leroy’s SUV in the driveway and put Quinn’s car in the garage. There would be no way to explain why Quinn would have her car in the Berrys’ driveway when the girl is supposed to be away on vacation. Rachel is not in the mood for an inquisition and she is sure the others will inflict one on her the second they realise she is back. She has always made sure to miss classes as little as possible, so leaving early is very out of character for the small diva. Finally, exhaustion claims both girls, and they fall asleep with huge smiles on their faces.

The girls luck out because no one from school has found out Rachel is back. They manage to drive back to Quinn’s place and pick up enough clothing to last a week without running into anyone. They even manage to keep things a secret when every one of the gleeks text or call Quinn to invite her to Puck’s New Year’s bash. Quinn politely declines saying she has family obligations.

“Aren’t you afraid Noah or perhaps Santana and Brittany will show up at your place to drag you over to join the party? Won’t your parents or your sister tell them you’re spending the rest of the break with me?” Rachel asks after Quinn sends her regrets in the form of yet another text to let Santana know she won’t be able to make it to Puck’s place. They are both laying down in Rachel’s bed talking and making plans for their quiet New Year’s Eve together.

“Not really. My dad never bothers with my friends. My sister won’t be home because she’ll be too busy partying with her high school friends. So it will be my mom who will have to deal with them. That is, if they bother to show up. My dad has always been very vocal of his disapproval when it comes to my friends. No one really feels welcome at the Fabray residence. If anyone is brave enough to show up, which I doubt, she’ll just tell them I’m not available and keep it very vague. My mom might be a puppet when it comes to my dad, but she loves me in her own way, and she likes you a lot. She thinks you’re a good influence on me. She knows I would rather be here with you and I told her not to say anything so they won’t come here to pester us. She’ll cover for me. I think she’s secretly thrilled I’ll be here, instead of at Puck’s where there will be a bunch of unsupervised teens with access to a lot of alcohol. One pregnancy scare is more than enough to last us a lifetime.” Quinn
“I’m sorry things are messed up at your place.” Rachel says sadly, knowing full well what kind of control freak Russell Fabray is. And if the man has made anyone feel even one-tenth of the wrath that he normally reserves for herself or Quinn, she really can’t say she’s surprised even Quinn’s “normal” friends would avoid the Fabray residence.

“It’s not your apology to make, but I appreciate the sentiment behind it. In case I haven’t said it, thank you so much for coming back early from your vacation. It means the world to me.” Quinn says softly from Rachel’s stomach.

“No need to thank me. I missed you a lot, so really, there were ulterior motives. I’m really glad I get to spend this much time with just you.” Rachel admits softly as she plays with Quinn’s hair distractedly. “Mmm I love how soft your hair is.” Rachel adds in a near purr. Both girls smile and blush simultaneously, but content with the position they are in.

The remainder of the week is spent going through Rachel’s closet, and taking all the rejects to the local Salvation Army. Quinn breaks open the lenses and plays around with her camera using Rachel and Leroy as her subjects. The only reason Rachel hasn’t contacted her future guitar instructor is because the woman is away for the holidays. She won’t touch the guitar because she is afraid of damaging it.

Leroy and Hiram are slowly working out their differences, and so far, they have agreed to disagree. At least things are not as tense as before. Quinn still wants to go HBIC at Hiram whenever she sees the pain that Rachel tries to hide each and every time the man looks at her with disappointment clearly etched on his face.

New Year’s Eve ends up being an even quieter affair than they first expected and hoped for. The Berry men decide to head to Cincinnati to spend time with Hiram’s family, leaving the girls to fend for themselves in Lima. Quinn is convinced that Leroy readily agreed to this to give Rachel a break from the disapproving glances that Dr. Berry thinks no one else is noticing. Quinn assumes that perhaps Leroy thinks further time away from Rachel will put things into perspective. Quinn is intent in taking advantage of the situation to make it as special as she can for Rachel.

The time alone seems to do wonders. They spend more time chatting with Andy and Quinn can see why Rachel is so close to her cousin. In no time, they have to go back to school, and both girls are a little bummed out their little bubble is about to burst and the next day they will be facing reality again. Rachel chooses to wear something from her salvaged wardrobe as a precaution. Quinn rolls her eyes affectionately at her because she knows it’s a moot point to try and convince her otherwise. She will exert every bit of the influence she has as HBIC over the sheep that inhabit the halls of William McKinley High School and if anyone even dares think it’s all right to have a slushee within
a three-foot radius of Rachel and not be consuming it, they’re in for the surprise of their life.

Breakfast is a fairly subdued and quiet meal the morning of their first day back to school. It seems something happened while the Berry men were in Cincinnati, because since their return, both girls notice the tension has grown exponentially between them. Quinn squeezes Rachel’s hand from time to time in silent support because there’s nothing to be said. She does feel slightly bad that she is relieved hers isn’t the only dysfunctional family in town after hearing Rachel explain things about her family on Dr Berry’s side.

“Everyone is going flip once they see you.” Quinn says as cheerfully as possible while they finish breakfast. The silence is a bit too much like the Fabray household so she does her best to break it, and in the process, hopes to lift Rachel’s spirit a bit.

“Quinn is right. They’ll take one look at you and their mouths will hang open at the change. I still think you should wear some of your new things.” Leroy says in support, grateful that Quinn is there and always willing to help Rachel.

“I know Daddy. I just think it would be such a shame to have slushee stains to deal with on them. Can you imagine Nigel’s face if he found out someone dared hit my new things with one?” Rachel says with a quiet chuckle.

That actually seems to do the trick, because Leroy actually cringes and then laughs at the mental image. “I think he would fly here from New York and give those unsuspecting students an earful or two.” He says still chuckling lightly. “Maybe you should risk the stain just so we can see that happen.” Leroy adds with an evil smirk. “It would certainly teach those fools a thing or two, and I don’t just mean your classmates, but the faculty and administration as well. I still can’t believe they haven’t been able to make that type of physical assault stop. Maybe we should contact the ACLU.” He adds shaking his head.

The girls giggle at the thought. Quinn having heard a thorough description of Nigel and his snarky ways from Leroy, Rachel and Andy.

“I don’t know why you have to change who you are in order to please others. If they don’t like you without having to conform to their standards, then they are not worth your time. Just stand up to them without this silly need to be someone you are not.” Hiram says cutting through the laughter.

All three sober up immediately. It feels as if they were shoved in the middle of the Arctic Ocean in the dead of winter. Leroy shakes his head, silently pleading with his eyes when he notices Quinn bristle and ready to say something. All he has to do is look in Rachel’s direction. Quinn immediately
backs down as understanding floods her body. Instead, she picks Rachel’s hand in her own and squeezes, thereby causing the young diva to lock gazes with the Head Cheerio. It breaks her heart to see the pain reflected in those deep chocolate pools. She quickly entwines their fingers and offers Rachel a reassuring smile. It takes every ounce of strength and self control not to get up and slap the man Rachel calls ‘dad’, although Quinn wonders if that is an apt title, seeing how the man is behaving like a petulant child.

“You really do look wonderful, Rachie. I know that regardless of what you wear, you’re still the wonderful girl I’m proud to call my best friend.” Quinn says as she brings their joined hands and places a sweet kiss on Rachel’s knuckles. What she really wants to say is “don’t listen to Dr. Berry. He’s a mean spirited man who has been taking lessons on how to fuck things up with his daughter from my father” but knows she can’t. As it is, the man just tolerates her presence in their household.

“Quinn is right, Baby Girl. You look amazing. Now, you girls get going or you’ll be late. Have a great day.” Leroy says pointing to the general direction of the front door. He quickly hugs both girls as they make their retreat.

“You really need to stop babying and spoiling her. In the long run, you are just doing her a great disservice. She needs to realise that the world isn’t bowl of chocolate fluffiness, and always coming to her rescue is not the responsible thing to do. You’re going to take away her ability to deal with disappointment if you keep this up.” Hiram says the moment he hears the click of the door.

“I cannot believe you said what you did to her. Especially knowing how much she has gone through already. Feeling good about herself isn’t a hindrance at all. Letting my daughter know she is loved and that she is special will not harm her. Letting Rachel know she can count on me and that I’ll always be there to protect her is not a disservice to her. Supporting her dreams and letting her know I believe in her, no matter what, will only make her a stronger, better rounded individual. She has dealt with enough disappointment with grace and dignity to last her at least three lifetimes. She knows the world isn’t all smiles and dreams. Wake up Hiram. Your behaviour is only making this rift between the two of you bigger and deeper. You keep this up and you will eventually lose her for good. Rachel might be the most forgiving person we know, but even she has her limit. I fear that when she does forgive you for your behaviour, she’ll also have a hard time trusting you again.” Leroy says.

“But she’ll forgive the youngest Fabray for bullying her for years, but won’t truly forgive her own father? Do you see what your spoiling is doing to her?” Hiram fires back.

“The youngest Fabray is named Quinn. And she’s but a child. And yes, she has been one of Rachel’s tormenters, but she has shown true remorse of her actions. You’re her father. Out of all the people in this world, you’re one of the few who should know better than to act like a bully. Your words have more weight on her because you’re supposed to lover her unconditionally. You’re a hypocrite. You tell her she isn’t supposed to change or act a certain way, yet you can’t accept her unless she behaves a certain way around you.” Leroy says before he leaves as well, too angry to say
anything else, in the fears of saying something he might regret later.

It is at times like this that Leroy truly regrets Rachel isn’t biologically his. Not that it really matters, because he’s sure that won’t change one iota how much he loves his daughter. At least he has had fifteen years to see that Rachel seems to have inherited most of her personality traits from Shelby, and her paternal grandmother. At least his baby girl will not grow up to be like Hiram and his sister. He makes a mental note to contact Shelby to let her know he is all right with their blossoming friendship. He will, however wait for Rachel to tell her about her impending move to New York.

TBC...
Chapter 8

They get in Quinn’s car and before she drives off, Quinn pulls Rachel into a warm, comforting hug.

“What if Dad is right? I mean, I am giving in to outside pressure and adapting how I dress to please others. If anything, it shows just what a coward I am. I mean, I’m changing how I dress just to avoid being bullied.” Rachel whispers in a broken voice.

“Don’t listen to Dr. Berry. You have always stuck to your principles, no matter what. Andy is right, you know? First impressions do matter a hell of a lot. A lot places have dress codes for a reason. And it doesn’t hurt to always look your best. Those of us who know you, know that what you look and how you dress is only a very small part of who you are. Those of us who are lucky enough, get to see the whole package. You are one of the strongest and definitely the bravest person I know. Don’t you ever doubt that.” Quinn says as she looks into sad cinnamon eyes with tears threatening to spill.

“Don’t cry, Rachie. You tell me this whenever I’m sad, but it certainly applies to you also. You’re too beautiful and wonderful to cry tears of sadness. You’re only allowed tears of joy. Besides, it would ruin your make up.” Quinn adds with a silly smile, hoping to inject some levity in the situation.

“Thanks Eggie.” Rachel says as she places a soft kiss filled with gratitude on Quinn’s cheek.

Quinn can still feel her cheek tingle after Rachel pulls back and sits properly, buckling her seatbelt. She unconsciously brings her fingertips to her face and smiles.

“How come I get ‘Eggie’ and Andy gets ‘Sunshine’? Quinn asks as they pull out of the driveway. “And before you give me your standard ‘because you’re intelligent’ answer, think about your words carefully. I doubt Andy is dumb. Besides, I’m blonde and a cheerleader. It fits me better.” Quinn adds in a playful tone.
Rachel just bursts into a fit of giggles. “Because then it would be very stereotypical, and you my dear Eggie, defy all stereotypes. You’re blonde, but have hazel eyes instead of blue. You’re intelligent and smart, not dumb as a post. And we both know you avoid the idea of being stereotyped.” Rachel says smiling.

“It’s ok, Rachie. You can say it. Andy has always been there for you. She has been your ray of sun for as long as you can remember. I’ll forever be grateful you have forgiven me for my past behaviour.” Quinn says with a sad smile.

“It’s all in the past Quinn. You are my best friend. I love you.” Rachel says softly, reaching over to take Quinn’s hand. Her heart hammering against her chest as she words come out of her mouth. She hopes Quinn doesn’t take it how she truly meant those words. She isn’t sure she can handle losing the blonde’s friendship. And it’s not because Quinn is a homophobe; she’s sure her feelings aren’t reciprocated the way she wishes and it would make being around each other very awkward.

“I love you too, Rachel.” Quinn whispers back, tears glistening in her eyes. She wishes so much that the diva could love her like that.

The rest of the short ride is spent arguing over their music selection, stealing glances at each other and sharing shy smiles.

“It should be my choice because it’s my car.” Quinn says with a smirk.

“Maybe so, but you are offering me a ride, which in a sense makes me your guest, so the polite thing to do would be to let me pick what songs we hear.” Rachel fires back with a smirk of her own.

“Yeah, but if that is the case, then I should have been able to pick all the movies and music this past week since I was your guest. Instead, we ended up compromising.” Quinn replies, knowing she won by the way Rachel’s mouth opens and closes with nothing coming out of it for a few seconds before finally settling in the most adorable pout ever.

“You might have a point, but be that as it may, you brought up the point of compromising. Which I imagine would be the best way to resolve this situation. Besides, I’m not allowed to drive yet, so my situation gives you an unfair advantage.” Rachel says, knowing Quinn beat her with her last rebuttal. “See, that’s why I call you Eggie. You’re too smart for your own good.” She adds smiling sweetly.
They pull into the student parking lot still having not decided on a common piece of music.

“Maybe we can decide something to listen to on the way back to your place.” Quinn says as they exit the car. “See, I can compromise too. And it’s not my fault you’re not old enough to get your driver’s license yet.” She adds with an innocent smile.

“Fine. We’ll compromise. It’s eight fifteen now. We should be able to decide on a few songs by the time three o’clock rolls around. And it’s not my fault I’m intelligent enough to skip a year. Just for that accomplishment alone I should be rewarded by being the one to choose our music by default. But I’m gracious enough to stick to compromising. See how much I love you?” Rachel says hopeful as they walk into school.

“I love you too, you know?” Quinn says melting at those words. Even if it’s not how she wants Rachel to love her, she’ll never get tired of hearing those words. She also has no problems letting the diva choose their music, but half the fun is how they banter to agree on what to play. “Ready to face the masses?” She adds as she offers her hand to Rachel.

“As I’ll ever be.” Rachel replies, taking Quinn’s hand in her own.

The school day rolls by in a flash. Everyone is shocked by the change in Rachel’s appearance, and Quinn has made it perfectly clear that she will be on a murdering rampage should anyone mess with Rachel, or if a slushie comes within a three foot radius of the diva. Quinn absently wonders what their reaction would be if and when Rachel shows up in some of her fancier clothing. All she has today are a pair of black jeans, a black turtleneck, and boots.

By the end of the school day, the biggest news to the gossip rounds isn’t Rachel’s new appearance, but the fact that the Head Cheerio is now also a photographer for *The McKinley Star*, the school’s newspaper. Everyone wonders how Sue Sylvester will react to her Head Cheerio being part of yet another extra-curricular activity that is considered a loser magnet.

As expected, everyone in Glee asks Rachel where she was during the holidays and why she left early, to which she gives her the standard “I was attending to some personal matters” answer. They roll their eyes at her and accuse her of being a drama queen. They stop any further comments once they see the look Quinn is throwing their way. The spree of self-slushying Quinn has caused anyone who was stupid enough, and had dared to be in the near vicinity of Rachel with the frozen glop with ill intentions is still fresh on everyone’s mind.

Out of the remaining ten members of New Directions, the only one who is truly worried and interested is Puck. He actually looks a bit hurt that Rachel took off without a word. They have
bonded and formed a tentative friendship after Rachel’s unflinching support for Quinn. It did not hurt that Mr. Schuester paired them for an assignment either. Rachel absently thinks that Quinn nailed it when she said Finn has been acting as if someone (Rachel) had kicked his puppy. Other than demanding an explanation from Rachel about her sudden absence, he hasn’t made any efforts to talk to her. Any further questions or observations get interrupted by Mr. Schuester’s entrance.

“Sorry I’m late guys. I have great news. I found out why all competitions were moved up, and Nationals are being held in February. There is a new series of competitions organised by ‘FAME events’ called The National Show Choir Championship Series, with the grand finale to be held in Phoenix, Arizona May first. There are a series of qualifying competitions that will be held in key locations which we’ll have to pick one and travel to. The best thing is that not only does the winner of the championship gets to be named National Champions, but there are also monetary prizes. We win and we don’t have to be so heavily dependent on the school’s budget.” Mr. Schuester announces excited.

“Yes, I was aware of it. If you recall, Mr. Schuester I tried to tell you about it before the start of our Christmas break. Because we waited this long, the closest qualifying competitions are either at full capacity, or we’ve missed their deadlines.” Rachel says interrupting. Quinn picks up Rachel’s hand and squeezes it in support, having heard all about it and seen how hurt Rachel was when their faculty adviser just flat out ignored the diva.

“Yes, about that…” Mr. Schuester starts to say when he is interrupted by Mercedes this time.

“Does that mean we won’t be able to compete?” The girl asks shocked. “Why didn’t you say anything sooner Rachel? Figures you were too busy thinking about yourself and your early vacation instead of your team.” Mercedes says snidely.

“Shut it Jones. Rachel was trying to announce something to us weeks before she had to leave. We all chose to ignore her without giving her a chance to speak every time she tried to talk to us.” Puck says through gritted teeth, tired of the way the rest treat Rachel and following Quinn’s example to be a better friend to the diva.

Some of them actually manage to blush and look embarrassed at Puck’s words. They all know he is right. Rachel was trying to tell them something that had her all excited but they chose to ignore her, thinking she was going to suggest extra practice.

Mr. Schuester jumps in before Quinn can say anything. If the murderous glint in the blonde’s eyes is any indication, it will surely end in bloodshed if they keep this up. He also wants to stop it before someone points out how he, as their teacher, never gave Rachel the time of day when she had requested to make an announcement nearly a month ago.
“To answer your question, there are still two qualifying competitions with open spots. One in New York City, and the other one in Los Angeles. Realistically, the one in New York would be our best option since it’s closer. I’ve printed out permission slips for you to take home to your parents. The competition will be held in the Hammerstein Ballroom, located at the Manhattan Center, conveniently during our Spring Break, so you won’t be missing any classes. All the details are in the permission slips. Read them over and have your parents contact me if they have any questions.” Mr. Schuester says.

Quinn bristles when Mr. Schuester continues on, without so much as an apology to Rachel. The diva squeezes their joined hands and shrugs her shoulders, too used to their behaviour.

Rachel’s eyes light up at the mention of New York City. If things work out, she actually gets to spend some extra time with Andy and this time with Quinn.

“You get to meet Andy and Nigel.” Rachel whispers softly in Quinn’s ear, accidentally brushing her lips over the blonde’s ear, making both girls shiver at the contact.

“Who is paying for this? Not everyone is made of money, you know.” Finn asks after he sees how much each package will cost per person.

“That’s where the catch is. Mr. Figgins said that if we placed in the top three this February in Nationals, the school will pay for one fifth of the cost. We just need to make sure we place and come up with the rest of the money. If we don’t place in the top three, we’ll have to come up with the all the money on our own.” Mr. Schuester says with an encouraging smile.

“Great. How are we going to come up with the money? It’s the middle of winter, so we can’t do a carwash.” Santana says.

“Well, you can always do a bake sale. That’s how we came up with the money we needed for costumes and travel expenses when I was in Glee.” Mr. Schuester suggests.

“That’s positively ancient. You realise that a lot kids are too health conscious to fill their bodies with baked goods, right?” Kurt says, looking directly in the direction of the three Cheerios.

“Mr. Schuester, are we allowed to get part time employment in order to come up with funds along with the baked goods idea?” Rachel asks.
“Yes, as long as it is a legitimate job. I spoke with Mr. Figgins about all our options and frankly, part-time work might be the only way we can come up with the money.” Mr. Schuester answers quickly and truthfully.

“We could also bake healthier versions of cupcakes and cookies to appeal to the health conscious.” Quinn suggests.

“That’s a great idea, Quinn. Decide on which package you all prefer. Tell me your choices in a few days so I can register us. We then would have until February twenty-six to withdraw without penalty. The competition will be held on March twentieth.” Mr. Schuester says to the excited teens. “Now, we have to practice. The deal is off unless we place in the top three for Nationals.

Everyone is too excited to practice properly at first, but a few reminders from Rachel and Mr. Schuester brings everyone back into focus. After a couple of hours, they are finally allowed to head home.

“Mr. Schuester, may I ask you a few questions regarding the competition in New York?” Rachel asks once everyone but Quinn has left.

Mr. Schuester is about to give his usual half assed excuse and decline, when he catches the glare from Quinn and remembers Rachel’s earlier words about trying to tell them about this new championship series. He knows that had he listened to the diva, they might have made the closer qualifiers. He has the decency to blush as he nods his assent.

“Presuming we actually manage to earn enough capital to finance this trip, do we have to stay in the hotel? I have family in New York, and I would rather stay with them. I would happily forfeit my allotment of the funds to the rest of the club and come up with my own airfare. I would also make sure I help the others as much as possible, and of course make sure we were all in the same flight back to Ohio.” Rachel asks.

“I’m sorry Rachel; legally speaking I cannot allow that. If anything happened to you, the school board would be liable.” Mr. Schuester says.

“What if I speak with my parents and I give you and the school a signed waiver releasing you and the school board of any liabilities should something happen? I was already planning on visiting New York during Spring Break and it would be dumb for me to fly there, spend time with my cousin, and fly back only to leave with you and Glee for New York again.” Rachel says logically.
Mr. Schuester can’t argue with that logic because the girl is right. It would be a monumental waste of money and time. “Fine. I’ll speak with Principal Figgins. If your fathers allow it and sign, you can stay with your cousin and we will meet you in New York.” Mr. Schuester says with a tired sigh.

“Great. Have a great evening Mr. Schue.” Rachel says beaming as she pulls a sad looking Quinn out with her.

The girls walk silently to Quinn’s car. The blonde was actually looking forward to spending an entire week with Rachel in New York. This new development surely put a dent in their plans, because there is no way Quinn’s parents (her father) would sign a waiver releasing the school of any responsibility.

“Hey. I didn’t want to say anything to Mr. Schue, but all you need to do is convince your parents to let you come with me. You heard Andy on the phone last night. We’re both welcomed to spend Spring Break with her. The waiver would just be a technicality because your parents already gave you permission to come with me. Also, Andy would die first before she’d let anything happen to either one of us.” Rachel says softly once they are in Quinn’s car.

Quinn smiles and once again, takes hold of Rachel’s hand. “Thanks Rachie. I guess it’s just a matter of convincing my parents that signing a waiver releasing the school of any liability won’t be a stupid thing to do.” Quinn says with a half smile.

* * *

The rest of the week is spent agreeing on which package to choose and finally they settle on the one that includes four days and three nights in New York. They will be arriving early Thursday morning, and leaving Sunday evening. Since Rachel hasn’t brought up leaving early and staying with her cousin yet, Mr. Schuester assumes her dads had said no.

The girls, for their parts, talk to their respective parents about the competition and their plan of spending Spring Break in New York. Leroy agrees readily, although he isn’t too happy with the waiver he has to sign. Rachel quickly points out that had New Directions not decided to compete in that same week, he would have had no problem with Rachel going there on her own for the duration of her break, just like they’ve been doing since Andy had moved there. He admits she has a point, and he agrees only on the condition of making Andy her legal guardian sooner, rather than later. It takes a bit more convincing, with a few phone calls between Leroy, Andy and an adamant Judy Fabray on Quinn’s behalf to convince Russell, but eventually, everything is set for the girls to leave early. Leroy agrees to take care of all the paperwork, since he is an attorney. The icing on the cake comes from a letter notifying Rachel she passed her admission exam with flying colours, and
requesting an interview to finalise her transfer to the school. They set it up to take place on the Monday of their visit to the New York.

Mr. Schuester’s jaw drops when both Quinn and Rachel present him with the notarised waivers that are signed by both sets of parents. He smiles in shock and they make plans on when and where to meet once the rest of them join the girls later in the week. Rachel assures him that they will all be flying together on their return to Ohio.

With Dalton’s interview request, they all know it’s official. Rachel Berry is going to be finishing her high school education in New York. After a suggestion from Andy, Rachel visits a variety of furniture stores online and buys her bedroom furniture. It is arranged to be delivered the day after they arrive for Spring Break.

The situation with Hiram is still touch and go. He has been watching what he says and how he acts in front of Rachel, with an occasional slip here and there, but nothing outright as malicious as in the past. They are all wary, but they acknowledge that at the very least, he is making an effort.

All the gleeks are busy with bake sales and part time jobs. Unfortunately, the quickest and fastest way for them to earn funds, auctioning dates, is shot down by Mr. Schuester and Mr. Figgins. They are all dying to go to New York. Everyone is doing his or her part. Quinn manages to get a part time job at the local portrait studio at the mall as an assistant to the photographer, while Rachel bakes tasty treats for them to sell, on top of her job as an assistant ballet instructor at the local dance studio. Surprisingly enough, a few of the members of New Directions start to see Rachel in a different light after they see how committed the girl is with the fundraising campaign they have going. It doesn’t hurt that the girl makes the best cupcakes and cookies ever.

True to her word, Quinn has made the lives a living hell to anyone who has dared to be mean to Rachel. It still baffles many how the Head Cheerio and the school self proclaimed diva and drama queen can be best friends, but if it makes Quinn happy, and thus ensuring the safety of the masses, then who are they to say a thing about it. Rachel’s new look is gradual enough that most people don’t make too much of it. If anything, they are all pleasantly shocked. Once Rachel is convinced that she won’t have to deal with slushie stains, she slowly integrates the pieces Nigel has helped her with. When she shows up decked in Chanel from head to toe, more than a few heads turn to stare either in sheer admiration or jealousy. Who knew that under all the lumpy animals, argyle and plaid sweaters, Rachel Berry hid such an amazing figure. It’s all worth it though, when Kurt catches a glimpse of the James Holt messenger bag slung casually over Rachel’s shoulder. It is part of his new Spring 2010 collection, and currently unavailable anywhere outside of New York, Paris, London and Milan.

* * *
They squeak by in Nationals and take third place, thus meeting one of the conditions for their partial funding. Quinn is convinced they would have taken first place, had some of the idiots that pass for their teammates gotten over themselves and allowed Rachel to sing both solos in the competition. Instead, it had become another squabble and jealousy fest. Quinn was the one who pointed out that when Rachel sang all the solos, they placed first in both Sectionals and Regionals. Rachel had beamed at her, but in the end, she relented to the others, leaving all of them astonished because Rachel Berry does not give up solos. When asked why, she answers that if that is what the majority wants, then she will go with it. Only Rachel and Quinn know the real reason. Come next year, they wouldn’t have Rachel to bail them out at all, so they better get used to it now.

Instead, the girls focus all their efforts in making sure they make it to the competition. They all want to make it to the Championship in Phoenix because they know that by winning or at least placing in the top three guarantees them a small monetary prize. It also gives them more leverage for funding.

This time, they grudgingly agree that their best chances lie on Rachel’s voice, so six songs are picked that will suit Rachel’s vocal range the best. This is the first competition they will attend where they will have to sing in a preliminary competition and qualify for the final. They know they need to make the top three in order to get a shot at Phoenix.

All hell breaks loose when they find out Rachel and Quinn will be spending the first half of their break in New York and only join the rest when they make their way there later in the week.

“It’s not fair Mr. Schue. We worked very hard to come up with the money and they get an extra long vacation out of it. We want the same deal.” Mercedes says angry.

The usual suspects nod their agreements and before they vocalise their displeasure at the development, Puck lets out a loud whistle to get their attention. “Shut the hell up and let Mr. Schue finish talking.” He yells loud enough to catch their attention. Rachel and Quinn look at the rest with inscrutable looks on their faces.

“Actually, Mercedes, Rachel’s fathers are paying for their airfare. It is my understanding that they were planning on spending Spring Break in New York before we decided to compete there. They actually worked very hard to help the rest of us come up with the remainder of what was needed for us to make this trip.” Mr. Schuester tells the rest of the group.

Puck is the only one who isn’t surprised at the news and he just smirks at the others’ reactions to that bomb. Mercedes grudgingly apologises, while a few of them truly see Rachel in a different light. With the knowledge that Rachel’s fathers would be paying for their tickets, they know Rachel and Quinn did not have to help them at all, but they still busted their asses for the team.
“Thanks for all your help girls. It really shows teamwork.” Santana says surprising everyone in the room.

The remainder of the time is spent organising and coordinating everything for the trip. Because of the extra funds they have, they get a second chaperone to go with them. They nearly have an apoplectic fit when they discover the second chaperone is none other than the bane of their existence, Sue Sylvester, since she is still officially their second faculty adviser.

* * *

On the Monday before their break starts, Rachel and Quinn head to the auditorium for their lunch because that is where the grand piano is. They set up on the stage, talking and giggling about their upcoming trip. This is Quinn’s first visit to New York and Rachel plans on making it an experience of a lifetime for her best friend.

“Will you tell me more about the song you chose for your audition? I looked it up on Google and I’m curious. Why do you like it so much? It’s such a sad song.” Quinn asks after she strikes a few random keys on the piano.

“It appears that way, but if you think about it, what do you think is worse? Dying never knowing your feelings are returned? Or dying knowing that the person you’re in love with loves you back? If given the choice, I’d choose the latter. However bittersweet the circumstances, I’d like to experience that kind of love even if it is for a short moment. Besides, in that song, they didn’t know something bad would happen on the day they confessed their feelings.” Rachel says looking intently at Quinn. Both girls know there is more to those words, but for now, they let it drop.

“Will you sing it for me?” Quinn asks.

Rachel gets up from her spot on the blanket they have set up, and sits on the piano bench. Quinn quickly joins her, but scoots over enough to give Rachel enough space to move unrestricted. Soon enough, the sounds of a familiar melody along with Rachel’s clear voice fill the auditorium. A few errant tears fall from Quinn’s eyes by time Rachel sings the last word. As the last note of the piano reverberates through the rafters, Quinn pulls Rachel to her and kisses her softly on the lips. Rachel is shocked at first, but before Quinn can pull apart, Rachel is kissing back. Their kiss deepens and soon tongues are asking and giving permission. When they pull apart, they are both breathing hard.

“I decided to take a page out of that song. You’re right. I’d rather know total happiness, even if it’s for a short period of time than none at all. I love you Rachel Berry. You’re my best friend, and I have no clue when or how it happened, but I’m head over in heels in love with you. I choose my own
little sliver of heaven, however short lived it might be. But given the choice, it’d be for all eternity.” Quinn says softly.

“I like the idea of eternity with you. I’ve wanted to do this for so long. I love you too. I just... wasn’t sure and I didn’t want to weird you out so I held back.” Rachel says before she brings their lips together again, making up for lost time. “We’ll make it work. It’s only two years, and I’ll visit as much as I can. I’ll move heaven and earth so you can spend as much time in New York as possible. Our happiness will not be temporary. It might have long stretches of not so nice moments until you can join me, but you’ll see how fast two years can go by.” Rachel adds when she sees the tears still glistening in Quinn’s eyes.

Quinn smiles and pulls Rachel in for another kiss. There, holding Rachel flushed to her, and feeling the brunette’s hand snaking around her neck and shoulders, feeling those wonderfully smooth lips, she finally understands Rachel’s obsession with that song. The big difference though, they are both alive after their first kiss, with time and distance the only obstacles they have to overcome.

“We’ll take advantage of every second we have until the summer. We’ll make it work after you move. We have to.” Quinn says once they pull apart. “I know we’re both very young, but I have faith in us. We are forever.” Quinn adds. Knowing her feelings are reciprocated, only gives her incentive to go against her father, even if it means being in debt in order to pay for college.

They finish the day in a happy daze. If the other gleeks notice anything, they are too afraid of Quinn to ask. They are still a bit upset the girls are leaving right after school on Friday.

* * *

Once back at the Berrys’ house, the girls talk about the change in their relationship and decide to keep it under wraps. They agree that more than likely, Quinn’s parents would disown her. For the first time since making the decision to leave, Rachel is having second thoughts. If anyone finds out, Quinn would not only be disowned, but she would become the target of vicious attacks, if how they reacted to the blonde’s pregnancy scare and to Kurt’s sexuality are any indications. Especially since their main target would be gone by then. She shares as much with Quinn.

“Hey, Rachie, don’t look so sad. I know you are not abandoning me. I need you to go. You and I both know your life is no longer here. It never was. This backwater town was never meant for someone like you. In two years I’ll be joining you in New York and we’re both going to leave our mark in the world.” Quinn says pulling Rachel in a tight embrace and kissing the girl soundly.

“Thank you. I love you Eggie. I love you so much. I never thought it would happen so soon. I was
“I know the feeling. I debated with myself a lot. In the end, I just couldn’t let you go without letting you know how I feel.” Quinn replies.

“Hey Love, I’m not gone yet. I’m still here. We have a few months left still.” Rachel says with a bittersweet smile.

“I know. We’ll make every second count.” Quinn answers as she pulls Rachel towards her for another heart stopping kiss. For the first time in ages, Rachel wishes for time to stand still.

By the end of the night, only Leroy and Andy know of the change in the girls’ relationship. They all tell Quinn that the decision to come out is very personal, and she should only do it whenever she is ready for it, and not a second before. Leroy tells her in no uncertain terms that if she decides to come out to her parents while she’s still living in Lima and with them, and they disown her, that his house is always open to her, whether or not Rachel is living there. Quinn just hugs him with teary eyes whispering a heartfelt thank you.

* * *

The flight to LaGuardia is uneventful. Leroy is joining them for a few days so he can go over some legal documents with Andy to finalise the process of giving the young woman legal rights as Rachel’s guardian until she is eighteen. There is also a separate document that authorises Andy to act as Quinn’s legal guardian as well, at least for the duration of the trip. Sleeping arrangements are taken care of quickly, with Leroy taking the pull out sofa bed. The girls will share the futon until Rachel’s new bed is delivered the following day.

Like last time, the second the plane touches down, Rachel has the urge to spring from her seat. All that is keeping her there are Quinn’s hands on hers and Quinn’s amused smile. It helps that Quinn insisted in putting their carry-on in the overhead bins, which means Rachel has to depend on either her girlfriend or her father to assist her. Quinn has to hold back a sudden giggle attack when she sees Rachel’s pout. She knows she will be in for it if she laughs.

The only saving grace for Quinn is the fact that the second they are allowed to get up, Quinn is the first one up to retrieve their bags. Leroy shakes his head in amusement. Between Quinn’s reflexes as a Cheerio and Rachel’s determination, they are actually the first ones out of the plane.

Rachel once again tackles Andy into a gigantic hug. This time though, Andy is prepared and keeps her balance just fine as she wraps her arms around the shorter brunette’s shoulder.
“Hey Sunshine. I’ve missed you terribly.” Rachel mumbles into Andy’s chest.

“I’ve missed you too, Hummingbird.” Andy says into Rachel’s hair.

“It’s nice to finally meet you in person.” Andy says pulling a surprised Quinn into a warm hug once Rachel pulls apart.

“Nice meeting you as well.” Quinn says returning the hug.

“Are you planning on buying all of New York again? Because if that’s the case I won’t let Nigel near you.” Andy says once she sees the amount of suitcases Rachel has with her.

“No, silly. Since I’m moving here in the summer, I figured I would make things easier by bringing as much of my winter wardrobe as possible. Unless there is a new ice age happening that I’m unfamiliar with, I won’t need that stuff any time soon.” Rachel says giggling.

“Oh, that actually makes sense.” Andy replies blushing slightly.

“Was she really that bad?” Quinn asks amused.

“Yes!” is the twin reply she gets from Andy and Leroy.

“We shopped from the moment the stores were opened until closing time. I’m surprised my credit card didn’t melt or self-combust from that much use. I’m ever so grateful my back didn’t just give out on me. I was voluntold to be the pack mule because apparently my fashion sense, though not atrocious for a man, wasn’t good enough for Nigel’s vision.” Leroy says with a small shudder, memories of that day are still fresh in his mind.

“Nigel said to Uncle Leroy ‘Rachel is fifteen, darling, not sixty. You might have enough sense to dress yourself, but you’re not going to ruin this for D. Here make yourself useful’ before he shoved a few bags his way.” Andy says chuckling at the memory.
“D?” Quinn asks confused.

“Hummingbird, you didn’t tell her?” Andy asks laughing harder now.

“It might have slipped my mind.” Rachel says blushing a bit.

“Sure it did.” Andy says with a smirk and a raised eyebrow. “Nigel found Rachel’s obsession with animal themed sweaters a bit on the interesting side. He ended up calling her Doctor Doolittle, which eventually got shortened to Little D or just plain D.” Andy says turning towards Quinn. “Don’t give me that look, Hummingbird. You know it was only a matter of time before Quinn found out. At least it’s better than ‘Six’.” Andy adds at the pout now gracing Rachel’s face.

“Six?” Quinn asks even more confused.

“Yes, that’s what Nigel calls me. That used to be my dress size when I first started at Runway.” Andy says laughing.

Quinn looks at Leroy’s light chuckle to Andy’s full on laugh to Rachel’s crossed arms and bursts out into a fit of giggles. When she sees Rachel’s the oh so kissable pout, the laughter melts away to a sheepish grin.

“I’m sorry Rachie. The mental image of you surrounded by animals as you speak to them is too much.” Quinn says as she places a series of innocent and chaste pecks on Rachel’s lips. She doesn’t relent until she feels the diva kiss back. They only separate when they hear throats clearing around them.

“I would say sorry, but I’m not. How do you expect me to resist those wonderful, beautiful, and kissable lips? Especially when they are all pouty. Just be glad we kept it all PG.” Quinn says with a mischievous glint in her eyes, causing Rachel to flush a deep crimson.

All four break out in a fit of giggles at that.

* * *
The weekend is spent in a blur of errands.

On Saturday, Quinn agrees to stay behind and wait for Rachel’s bed while the other three head over to the bank to open a joint account that will take care of Rachel’s expenses while she lives under Andy’s care. Luckily, the bed arrives during the first half of the day. They, to Quinn’s amusement and Leroy’s chagrin, go shopping for linens and other assorted items Rachel will need. They eventually manage to put together Rachel’s bed with minimal cursing. All is set for the big move.

Sunday is spent bumming around the city, with a stop over the main Juilliard campus and the beauty that is the Lincoln Center of the Performing Arts. Quinn goes nuts snapping pictures.

First thing Monday morning, Leroy and Andy finalise all the paperwork, and Andy is now officially one of Rachel’s legal guardians. They return to the apartment to pick up the girls, and head to Dalton for Rachel’s interview. Rachel is asked the standard questions of why she has chosen Dalton. They talk about her exam results (she got all questions right, except for one). They talk about extracurricular activities. There is an in depth discussion about the arts programs available to Dalton students and Rachel gets to the point and asks if she will be allowed to use either the music room or the auditorium to practice. By the end of the interview, it becomes official. Rachel will start as a junior in September. The principal gives Rachel and everyone accompanying her, a tour of the school.

They are all talking excitedly during the tour, especially Rachel. She is in love with the fact that the school has two grand pianos. One in the music room and the other one in the auditorium. She is a bit bummed out that she doesn’t get to meet her future Glee club members. She heard them sing in Nationals and was very impressed when they took second place. It was a bit of a bummer that they placed higher, but that is life. She wonders if she will have another struggle in her hands to prove herself.

Quinn sees the look of self doubt cross Rachel’s face and pulls the hand she has entwined with hers to her mouth and kisses the knuckles softly, drawing Rachel’s attention. “Don’t let the idiots back home bring you down. Once they hear your voice, they’ll fall in love with you. And if they’re smart, they’ll know that with you leading them, there’s no way you guys can lose.” She whispers in Rachel’s ears once they’re done and they’re done with the principal.

“Thank you Eggie. You always know just what to say to make me feel better.” Rachel whispers back.

“If you two lovebirds are done, we need to get going.” Leroy says to the now blushing girls.
They walk out the front door, Rachel ecstatic with the opportunity to add theatre and dancing as art electives. Leroy is actually worried that Rachel will take on too much, but she promises to speak with a counsellor before she picks all her subjects for next year. Quinn smiles at her girlfriend’s enthusiasm, knowing she is on her way to making her dreams come true.

The group returns to Andy’s apartment for a late lunch.

“Thanks for everything Leroy. I wish there was something more I could say or do to show you just how much everything you have done means to me, especially when I don’t deserve it.” Quinn says to Leroy as she glances over to where Rachel and Andy are talking on the couch.

“I’m glad I’ve been able to make things easier for you. You make my baby girl happy. Everything else is in the past. We all make mistakes, but unlike a lot of people, you’re one of the few who also learns from said mistakes. Just keep making her happy. Remember, it is possible to have faith in God and still have a relationship with someone of the same gender. Don’t let the politics behind organised religion bring you down.” Leroy says as he continues to make their lunch.

Leroy regretfully has to leave right after their lunch to catch his plane back to Ohio. The remainder of the day is spent organising Rachel’s room and making it more ‘her’ space and not just a spare bedroom. Rachel is exhausted and fast asleep by the time nine p.m. rolls around.

Quinn places a loving kiss on Rachel’s nose and quietly extricates herself from Rachel’s arms and makes her way to the small balcony. She stares at the New York skyline as she twiddles her crucifix between her thumb and index finger, wondering about the new direction her life has taken. She is so deep in thought that she doesn’t notice Andy has decided to join her in the balcony.

“Hey Quinn.” Andy says as she places a hand on the blonde’s shoulder. She bites back a chuckle when the blonde nearly jumps a foot in the air.

“Oh, Hi. I thought you were asleep already.” Quinn says shyly.

“Nope. I was on my way to get some tea when I saw you out here. Everything ok?” Andy asks with an understanding smile. She is about to say something else when she hears the kettle whistle. “Do you want anything?” Andy asks as she makes her way back to the apartment.
“No thanks.” Quinn says distractedly as she continues to look at the lights of the skyscrapers.

“It’s a beautiful sight, isn’t it?” Andy asks as she joins Quinn once more in the balcony, this time with a light sweater on. She hands Quinn a light fleece throw. “In case you get chilly.” Andy adds at the confused look Quinn gives her.

“Thanks. Uhm, I was wondering if I might ask you a few questions.” Quinn says softly, eyes still fastened on the bright lights of the city around her. She silently wonders what the view would be like in a penthouse apartment of one of those skyscrapers in the distance. Perhaps sometime in the not so distant future, she will get to sit out in their balcony looking down and around the rest of the city with Rachel snuggled safely within her arms.

“You can ask me anything.” Andy replies just as soft, placing a comforting hand on Quinn’s shoulder.

Quinn continues to stare absently at the view before her, trying to gather her courage. “Thank you for the blanket.” Quinn says as she turns around to face Andy.

“You’re welcome, but that really isn’t a question, and it’s no problem at all. Rachel would kill me if you wake up with a sudden cold.” Andy says with a light chuckle, hoping to ease some of Quinn’s nerves. She wants to say more, but she is afraid of scaring the girl.

“How did you manage to forgive me so easily? I was one of Rachel’s main tormenters for years. I’m so ashamed of everything I ever put that girl through. I can’t seem to forgive myself, but I have found absolution so easily in Rachel, Leroy and now you. I don’t get it. You should hate me.” Quinn says with tears in her eyes. Deep within the recesses of her mind, she thinks she is getting as blunt as Rachel is. The thought warms her soul.

“I will admit that I was a bit apprehensive when Rachel first told me the two of you had started on what she called ‘a tentative path to a more understanding relationship that would hopefully result in friendship.’” Andy says with a smile as she remembers Rachel’s words.

“Yeah, that sounds like my Rachie.” Quinn interjects with a sweet smile at the thought of Rachel.

“I’ve known first hand from Rachel how much you mean to her and how happy she has been since the two of you resolved your differences. Any doubts I had were erased when I saw her at Christmas. Her eyes lit up when she talked about you or whenever your name was mentioned. I see
the way she looks at you and I can tell you without a doubt that if you were ask her, she would stay in Lima with you and for you. You know that, yet you’re the first to encourage her to follow her dreams. That alone shows me how much you care for my little Hummingbird. I see how protective you’ve been of her and the fact that you’re one of the very few who stands up for her publicly means more than words can describe, and I’m a writer.” Andy says softly, gently pulling Quinn to her, knowing how much a hug can say when mere words cannot.

“I should have done that sooner. I don’t deserve her at all, but I’m too selfish to give her up. I am so sorry for having hurt her in the past.” Quinn says, crying openly now. Andy just hugs her closer to her.

“It’s not for me to judge your past actions, especially when I had never met you and I wasn’t there, nor is it for me to offer forgiveness or absolution. Your wrongs were never against me. I’m just the overprotective older cousin who hopes more than anything that Rachel gets a break from all the bad things she grew up with. Since the start of this school year, you’ve been one of the few highs in her world of lows. We’re humans, and by default, it means we’re not perfect. Most of us will spend the rest of our lives trying to seek our pinnacle of perfection, but along the way, we’ll make our fair share of mistakes. I know you have learned from yours. It takes a strong person to admit having made them in the first place, and an even stronger person to learn from them and make the effort of not repeating them. And just so you know, you’re no more selfish than the rest of us are, Rachel included. I doubt she would let you go without a fight if you were to step out of her life thinking it’s what is best. Which, by the way, wouldn’t be. Even through our short interactions over the phone I can see you bring out the best in each other.” Andy says as she places a kiss on top of the blonde’s head.

Quinn holds on tighter and sends a quiet prayer of thanks that she has a new person in her corner. She can truly understand how and why Rachel loves Andy so much and thinks that Rachel is right. Andy is a ray of sunshine.

“Thank you. You really are the best. I’m sorry I cried all over you like a blubbering idiot.” Quinn says as she tries to pull apart, blushing when she realises what she has done.

“Hey, don’t be embarrassed. You earned a spot in my heart the moment you became the main reason my little Hummingbird smiles on a regular basis. If you ever need someone to talk to, I’ll always be a phone call away.” Andy says as she tightens her hold and softly rubs Quinn’s back.

“Thank you. I would really like that.” Quinn says shyly.

“Don’t be so hasty with your thanks. You just gained yourself your own overprotective older cousin.” Andy says with a light chuckle.
“I like how that sounds. I’m a disappointment to most of my family.” Quinn burrows herself further in the embrace. Part of her envious that Rachel will have this comfort every day and part of her ecstatic that Rachel has found someone who will be there for her the way her own sister hasn’t been for her.

“Do you think you can get some sleep now?” Andy asks softly. Internally, she seethes at Quinn’s family. What kind of people would make a sixteen-year-old feel like that?

“Yeah. How did you know I was having problems falling asleep?” Quinn replies.

“You had the faraway look of someone deep in thought, and I can see the guilt that you try so hard to hold on to. Let it go. We have. It’s in the past, and it won’t do you any good. Come on, it’s getting late, and if I know Rachel at all, she’ll have a full few days planned for the two of you. You will need as much sleep as you can squeeze in.” Andy says as she pulls Quinn to her feet and guides her back inside the apartment.

“Thank you Andy. Sweet dreams.” Quinn says softly as she places a kiss filled with gratitude on Andy’s cheek.

“Sweet dreams, Quinn, and it was my pleasure.” Andy says as she places another kiss on top of the Cheerio’s head.

Quinn silently walks back to her shared room with Rachel and after a few minutes of looking at the diva, she climbs back in bed and smiles as Rachel automatically burrows herself against her even in her sleep. Quinn falls asleep feeling lighter than she has in years.

TBC
Chapter 9

Ever the creature of habit, Rachel is up at six a.m. and carefully detangles herself from Quinn’s sleeping form. She changes quickly and places a barely there kiss on the blonde’s lips, being careful to not wake her. She then makes her way to the balcony where she starts her Tai Chi routine, followed by her yoga routine. With all the walking they will be doing, running probably isn’t the best idea.

An hour later and freshly showered, she heads to the small kitchen and starts coffee for Andy and Quinn. She then makes her usual Chai latte and then grabs all the ingredients for crêpes. Within thirty minutes, the other two occupants of the apartment join the diva for a breakfast of Rachel’s mixed berries and apple cinnamon crêpes and their caffeine source of choice.

“What do you girls have planned on doing today?” Andy asks in between bites of her breakfast.

“We’re going to play tourist. I have printed out a schedule of places we can visit to maximise the time we have.” Rachel says with a huge grin, loving the idea of ‘bumping’ around the city that will be her new home with her girlfriend.

“Be careful, and make sure your phones are fully charged. Don’t worry about coming home to cook. I’ll order us some kick ass Thai take out for a late dinner. Just make sure you jot down what you want from the menu, and that you’re back by nine, or I start eating without you.” Andy says, finding Rachel’s excitement absolutely adorable.

“Will do. I’ll text or call if we’re delayed by anything. Too bad you can’t join us for the sightseeing. I’m so proud of you though. You are going to be published in *Time*. You will have to tell me which issue so I can make sure to get a copy.” Rachel says with a beaming smile.

“I’ll probably end up sending you advanced copies.” Andy jokes.

“Congratulations on that. I can’t wait to read that article and see the photographs that will accompany it.” Quinn adds.

“Thanks Quinn, but let’s not get ahead of ourselves. It’s not final yet. There are other writers they are
considering.” Andy says. “Ok girls, I’m off to work. Have a great day playing tourist. If you need anything, I’m just a phone call away.” She adds getting up and placing a kiss on each girl’s forehead.

“Have a great day.” They both call out.

Quinn actually manages to talk Rachel out of the schedule she had printed, saying it would a lot more fun to just wing it. Whatever they can’t visit during this trip, they can save for Quinn’s next visit, or even save for when both girls are living here. Rachel reluctantly agrees, and the girls have the time of their lives.

The girls bypass the usual tourist places like The Empire State Building and The Statue of Liberty because they will be going there with the rest of Glee on Friday.

Tuesday is spent visiting Museum Mile along Fifth Avenue, from East 82nd to East 105th Streets. Because of their limited time, Rachel insists they spend their time inside The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and the National Academy Museum to start. They take a lunch break and stroll around Central Park, enjoying the fresh air and the sights around them. They walk hand in hand, with Quinn stopping every now and then to snap pictures of the scenery or of Rachel, and generally taking a break from all walking they have done. The second half of the day is spent inside the American Museum of Natural History and the Museum of Modern Art, where they spent extra time because Quinn is entranced by a photograph exhibit they have by shark photographer Chris Fallows.

They stop at a photo of a white shark jumping in the air as it tries to snatch a fur seal pup. Rachel has her arms wrapped around Quinn’s waist and her chin resting gently on her shoulder, while Quinn rests her arms on Rachel’s.

“One day, it will be your photos gracing the walls here and people will be lining up to see them.” Rachel whispers softly into Quinn’s ears. She smiles when she feels the slight shudder and sudden intake of breath from the blonde.

“Thanks Rachie. I hope so, only it will be photos of you, because I can’t think of a better subject to immortalise.” Quinn adds as she shifts her body slightly and pulls Rachel to her for a quick kiss. She loves that they don’t have to hide the way they do back in Lima.

Wednesday starts with a visit to Times Square, just people watching and with Quinn once again, taking photographs, alternating between the bustling chaos that surrounds the place and the diva, while Rachel watches Quinn with a smile on her face. Quinn declines the offer to go shopping, saying they don’t have the time for it and she really doesn’t need anything that can’t be found in
Ohio. Eventually, they make their way to the Brooklyn Bridge where Quinn spends time staring at the view and snapping photographs with Rachel once again content in studying the blonde in her element.

“Oh my God Rachel, the view here is fantastic.” Quinn says in awe as she makes Rachel pose for more pictures.

Eventually, after many stops, they make their way across the bridge into Manhattan and head toward Pier 17 and the South Street Seaport where they grab a quick bite to eat, bum around, do some quick window shopping, and visit some of the smaller museums in the area.

The last stop of the day, before they meet with Andy for a late dinner back at the apartment, is Battery Park.

“You know we’re probably going to have to return with the others here since this is where the ferries depart for Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty, right?” Rachel asks as they stroll hand in hand, completely lost in each other.

“I know, but the park is beautiful, and I also know that more than likely we’re going to return to Central Park as well. I don’t care. Both parks are beautiful and big enough that repeat visits are more than all right. Besides, with them around, I can’t just do this.” Quinn says with a smile as she grabs Rachel and lands a series of tame kisses on her mouth and jaw line before she settles to nuzzle her neck.

“Mmm. You won’t hear any complaints from me.” Rachel replies slightly breathless as she runs her fingers through golden locks.

They spent the first part of Thursday at the Queen’s Botanical Garden, strolling through the different gardens and plant life. Eventually, they make their way back to Manhattan and bum around Rockefeller Center.

“Too bad it’s spring time and we can’t skate here. The view of the rink and the giant Christmas tree are absolutely breathtaking and awe inspiring.” Rachel says as they walk around the giant complex with their hands entwined.

“You mean, you would risk falling on your rear just for me? That’s so sweet.” Quinn says as she kisses Rachel. No one nearby bats an eyelash. Both girls wish things could be just as simple back in
“I told you, their skates were defective.” Rachel says with a slight pout. “And I would gladly fall on my rear if it means I get to spend time with you and you get to have fun.” She adds with a smile.

They walk quietly, hand in hand, taking in the sights before them. Every once in a while, Quinn would take pictures of the something that catches her eye, and much to Rachel’s protests, she would make the diva pose for her.

“Where are we going? I thought we were supposed to meet Andy and Nigel back at the apartment and then the rest of Glee for dinner.” Quinn asks a bit confused as they walk up 48th Street.

“There has been a slight change of plans. I have a surprise for you.” Rachel says with a cryptic smile as she pulls out her iPhone and sends a quick text to Nigel.

“Rachie, you’re not going to do something crazy, are you?” Quinn asks looking at her girlfriend suspiciously.

“Depends on who you ask, and what your definition of crazy is.” Rachel replies as they continue their walk. “Okay, here we are.” Rachel adds once they reach their destination.

“Where are we?” Quinn asks looking around the Rockefeller complex of business skyscrapers. She quickly takes her digital SLR camera out of its case and starts to snap a few pictures.

“Welcome to Elias-Clarke, headquarters of Runway New York. Nigel should be joining us soon, where he will help us get ready before we meet the others for dinner and then we’re all off to go see the West Side Story revival.” Rachel says with a charming smile. Quinn manages to capture that smile on film before Rachel’s words register and she lowers her camera.

“We are what?” Quinn asks confused. “I thought we were going to see if Mr. Schue managed to get us tickets to watch Wicked with the rest tomorrow.” Quinn adds even more confused.

“We are, but I managed to convince Mr. Schuester that this would be a golden opportunity instead. The rest will be meeting us at the restaurant in about an hour and a half. I told Andy and Nigel I wanted to do something special for you and they called in some favours, well mostly Nigel, and got all of New Directions box seats for the show. I wanted it to be just the two of us, but the only
“Why did you include the others?” Quinn asks amazed at Rachel’s forgiving nature.

“Because I feel bad that we got to spend an extra five days here and they got stuck in Lima. I mean, even when we were running around getting things done, we were having fun, while the others were probably wishing they could have come early. I know they haven’t been the nicest group, but it’s an opportunity of a lifetime, and we’re a team. I figured it would be a nice compromise since we did ditch them for most of the day.” Rachel adds.

“How did you convince Mr. Schue and Coach to let us have this extra alone time?” Quinn asks curious.

“Mr. Schuester texted me to let me know that they were planning on visiting the same museums we went to yesterday. I informed him that it would be a waste of our time and money to visit them again.” Rachel answers, looking down at her feet.

Quinn places two fingers on Rachel’s chin and gently coaxes the girl’s head up until their gazes are locked. “You, Rachel Barbra Berry are the best. I certainly hope the others don’t go and do something stupid and make me want to strangle them. Thank you for the extra time together. If it were up to me, you and I would only meet up with the rest for the competition.” Quinn says, leaning in for a kiss. “How long have you been planning this?” Quinn asks.

“Ever since you told me West Side Story is your favourite musical out of all the ones we’ve watched that have film versions and how you wanted to one day see it on stage. I found out there is a revival and when we managed to get your parents to let you come here for Spring Break with me, I started the ball rolling.” Rachel admits shyly.

“Why didn’t you just get tickets for earlier during the week when it was just the two of us here?” Quinn asks the obvious. It’s not that she doesn’t want to spend time with the others or that she isn’t grateful. After all, her friends are among the other members of New Directions. Quinn just wishes to spend every possible moment she can with the diva alone. Time seems to speed up, and they only have until sometime in the summer before Rachel moves away.

“I tried. We got the final okay too late. By the time I checked online, all the performances for Spring Break were sold out. Well, the good seats anyway. It’s your first experience on Broadway so it’s not worth it to sit too far from the actual stage. I wasn’t going to let this opportunity slip by because there’s never any telling how long each show’s run might be.” Rachel replies with a shy smile.
“You didn’t have to do this at all. Just being able to spend this time alone with you has been special.” Quinn says before she pulls Rachel for another sweet, but thorough kiss. They separate at the sound of a throat clearing around them.

“Hey Nigel.” Rachel says happily, pulling apart from Quinn to envelop the balding man in a big hug. “Thank you so much for doing this.” She adds.

“Hey D.” Nigel says. “Is this lovely lady who I think it is?” He asks after he pulls apart and sees Quinn standing there snapping a few more photos, this time of the two of them.

“Nigel, this is my girlfriend Quinn Fabray. Quinn, this is Nigel Kipling, Art Director of Runway, New York.” Rachel says

“Very nice to meet you.” Quinn says extending her right hand to Nigel.

“The pleasure is all mine. I see Rachel wasn’t exaggerating. Your pictures do you absolutely no justice. You are a vision of loveliness indeed.” Nigel says taking Quinn’s hand and kissing the top of it, making the blonde blush.

“Now, ladies, if you will be so kind as to follow me. I will have you looking fit to grace the pages of Runway by the time we’re done.” Nigel says bowing slightly and pointing to the already opened front doors to the lobby.

“When did you have the time to bring our clothing here?” Quinn asks confused. Other than a few hours Saturday morning, they have spent every moment together since their arrival. And Quinn remembers Rachel left with nothing more than her purse.

“I took care of everything. Rachel e-mailed me all the relevant information with a couple of pictures of you, so I have the perfect outfit all set up for you upstairs. Come now. We don’t have any time to lose.” Nigel says ushering both girls into the elevators.

Quinn is in absolute awe once she sees The Closet and the Beauty Department. When the blonde says that she might not be able to afford such amazing pieces of couture, Nigel tells her not to worry about a thing, since they are all samples sent in for one reason or another. He emphasises that a lot of the time, a lot of the clothing ends up being donated in order to make room. In thirty minutes time,
just as Nigel had predicted, both girls look ready to be a centre piece for Runway.

“Wow. I can’t believe how amazing you look.” Quinn says looking dreamily at Rachel. On impulse, Quinn grabs her camera and starts to snap random photos of Rachel.

“You’re the amazing one. I’m dying to kiss you.” Rachel whispers once Quinn is satisfied and puts her camera away.

“Don’t you dare. You’ll smudge your make up. I want copies of those pictures.” Nigel says behind the two girls. “Come now. Give me your things and I’ll take care of everything so you won’t have to haul your bags around. Roy is downstairs waiting for you. Andy and I will meet you at the theatre in time for the show.” Nigel says as he finishes getting the girls’ belongings together.

“What about my cameras?” Quinn asks a bit nervous.

“You won’t be allowed to take them with you because you’re not a member of the press. Don’t worry. I’ll personally deliver them to Six along with your other possessions. These are very special cameras to you, aren’t they?” Nigel says softly.

“Yes, they are. They were my Sweet Sixteen present from my Grandpa Aaron. This one…” Quinn says as she pulls the old 35mm film SLR from the bag before she continues “…was one of the cameras he used before he went mostly digital.” Quinn shares with Nigel. “The digital one is the one he used to teach me how to take photographs, and the one I use to practice with.” Quinn adds.

“Your grandfather is a photographer?” Nigel asks a bit interested.

“Yes. You might have heard of him. His name is Aaron Quinn.” The Head Cheerio says with pride.

“Good God! You are Aaron Quinn’s granddaughter?” Nigel asks in shock. “D, why didn’t you say anything?” Nigel turns to Rachel.

“It wasn’t my story to tell, and Quinn doesn’t like the attention. She only shares this with people she trusts.” Rachel answers softly. Nigel smiles in understanding at that.
“I was named after him actually. Not a lot of people know. Besides, most people I know aren’t that interested in photography or they just don’t realise we’re related.” Quinn replies with a shy smile.

“Don’t you worry about a thing. I’ll make sure nothing happens to your cameras. They are a piece of history. They will remain locked in my office and I will hand deliver them on my way to pick up Andy so they will go from my office to Andy’s apartment. And you and I Miss Fabray, will be having a nice long conversation tomorrow night over dinner where I get to grill you, should your sightseeing schedule allow it of course. Consider it payment for my services tonight.” Nigel says as he guides the girls to the waiting elevator.

“Will you still be coming to see us compete Saturday?” Rachel asks with a hopeful smile.

“Barring any emergencies here, I’ll be honoured to see you perform. Shoo, go enjoy dinner. We’ll see each other soon.” Nigel says hugging both girls.

“I wish you guys could join us for dinner.” Rachel says with a pout.

“I know, but it’s either catch up with as much work as possible or miss your performance Saturday. Real life doesn’t stop for anyone. I’ll text you if there are any changes and the shoot goes on longer than expected.” Nigel says ushering them to the elevators.

Once they are back on ground level, Nigel introduces them to Roy. Quinn can’t keep the smile off her face. Rachel has made sure that they are getting spoiled tonight.

“Enjoy your dinner girls. I’ll see you later at the theatre when the show is over. Enjoy the evening, ladies.” Roy says with a small bow, making both girls giggle and blush.
“Thank you so much for driving us here. We’ll see you later.” Rachel says smiling shyly.

Roy tilts his hat and gets back in the car to drive off.

“Are you ready?” Quinn asks nervously.

“Yes I am. No matter what happens and no matter what they say to me because surely they won’t be able to help themselves, remember that this is your night.” Rachel says as she takes Quinn’s hand to walk into the restaurant.

“Good evening Jack. I believe there is a five o’clock reservation for fourteen under my name.” Rachel says politely to the Maître d’.

“Ah yes, Rachel. Always a pleasure to have you here. Please follow me. Your party is already here.” The Maître d’ says as he guides them to the back where the others are.

* * *

Conversation between the laughing members of New Directions comes to an abrupt halt once they see Rachel and Quinn approaching. It takes them a few seconds to close their mouths at the sight before them.

“Have a good evening ladies and gentlemen. Your servers should be with your shortly.” The Maître d’ says politely once he is done assisting the latecomers with their seats.

The only noise is the din of other diners around them. Every single person at that table is staring at Rachel and Quinn in disbelief.

“Good evening everyone. I apologise for our tardiness, but traffic was heavier than we anticipated on our way here. I hope you had a pleasant flight and so far have enjoyed your experiences in New York.” Rachel says with a smile.
“Hey. Where is Coach Sylvester? I thought she was our second chaperone.” Quinn asks as she lets her eyes scan the faces around her, smirking at their reactions. She sends whatever deity listening a quick word of thanks that the last two seats are beside each other. She would hate to be separated from Rachel during this dinner.

“Coach said she would rather swim across shark infested waters while wearing a meat swimsuit and slicing one of her fingers and bleed openly in the water, than spend a minute of her valuable time with and I quote, ‘the loser mouth breathers, so good luck finding yourself another sucker. Without a second chaperone, you don’t get to go. Bye.’ We almost didn’t make it because somehow Coach convinced Mr. Figgins that Mr. Schue wouldn’t be able to keep an eye on all of us safely and that it would be inappropriate for him to chaperone a group of boys and girls. He conveniently forgot that it was just Mr. Schue for Nationals in Chicago and that everything was fine. But at the last minute, Miss Pillsbury took her place so here we are. We had to pay a penalty because of the passenger change at such short notice. We’re so glad for the extra money we had in our budget.” Santana answers, still staring at the girls.

“I was wondering how she was going to try and sabotage us. It seemed too good to be true that she just stopped altogether to make our lives impossible after Sectionals. Good to know it all worked out and glad to see you all here. How was your flight over?” Quinn asks as she grabs Rachel’s hand under the table.

“Doing great. Flight was boring as hell. Hotel is ok. We’re registered and ready to compete. We did some sightseeing today and got bored out of our mind in those museums. Now, cut the crap and tell us what this is all about?” Kurt says after he manages to recover from the shock.

Quinn frowns at Kurt’s reaction to the museums. Given the chance, she would go back to them without a moment’s hesitation.

“You don’t know? I thought Mr. Schuester told you about the change of plans.” Rachel answers with her brow scrunched up in confusion, looking between Kurt and said teacher.

“All he said was that you had a treat for us, for us to dress up and that it was a great opportunity, but he didn’t go into details. What’s going on and why are you doing this?” Puck says jumping in before the others can ruin the night. Quinn throws him a grateful look.

“I wanted to do something nice for the team. After dinner we’re going to meet my cousin and a friend of hers to see the West Side Story revival.” Rachel answers softly, looking at everyone before her gaze lands on Quinn. She can’t help the smile that graces her lips at the sight of the blonde sitting beside her, holding her hand.
“How did you manage to do this Rachel? Especially on such short notice.” Puck asks what everyone is dying to know. The ‘this must be costing you a fortune’ lingering in the air.

“I have been dying to see this play, but the only available chance for it was tonight, so I took matters in my hands and instead of abandoning you for the entire day, I hoped to give you all a nice surprise. My cousin’s friend pulled some strings and he happened to know the box seats we are using for tonight’s performance were available. That’s why it had to be tonight. They’re being used tomorrow and we’re competing Saturday.” Rachel replies.

“Of course you did. It never changes, does it? Once again, Rachel Berry swoops in and makes the decision for all of us and we have to follow like sheep. Did it ever occur to you that maybe we didn’t want to see West Side Story? Just because it’s your favourite musical doesn’t mean that it’s something the rest of us will enjoy.” Mercedes says in a huff.

Everyone at the table has enough decency to look embarrassed at Mercedes’ lack of tact and gratitude, even Kurt. Quinn instantly sees red when she hears the words and sees the way Rachel’s smile falters, but before she can verbally eviscerate Mercedes, Emma jumps in with the hopes of defusing the situation once she notices that Schuester is still gaping at Rachel and Quinn.

“That was absolutely uncalled for Mercedes. Rachel, thank you so much for your generosity.” Emma says surprising everyone and snapping Schuester out of his stupor.

“Miss Pillsbury is right guys. Besides, we are still going to see Wicked tomorrow night. It was part of our package. Unfortunately I couldn’t arrange for Rachel and Quinn to join us.” Schuester finally manages to gather his wits and say to the group. “I’m sorry girls. There was no in between, and it was either, pay the full package deal or just your registration fees. Paying for the pull package would have been a complete waste of our resources. I really tried. So if you want to see the show with us, you’re going to have to see if you can get some last minute tickets.” He adds.

“It’s okay Mr. Schuester. We knew it was a risk when we decided to come early. Besides, it all worked out in the end. The extra money was put to good use and we thwarted another one of Ms. Sylvester’s plan to end us. I guess it’s a good thing then that we get to see a play tonight, huh? As for last minute tickets, that all depends on Quinn.” Rachel says with a small shrug of her shoulders.

“Gosh Rachel, your selfishness knows no bounds.” Mercedes says facing Rachel, smirking once she notices the fallen look grace the beautiful diva’s face. “Did it ever occur to think that maybe Quinn wanted to be with us instead of being stuck with you today? Did it occur to you that maybe Quinn would have wanted to go see Wicked with her friends tomorrow night without having to spend a small fortune to get a last minute ticket? And even if she were to do so, there’s no way she’d be able to get tickets near us. She’ll end up being stuck with you for yet another night.” Mercedes continues, not one to pass up on an opportunity to put Rachel down or make her feel awful.
Quinn and Puck are about to get up and kill Mercedes, while the others stare in shock at the words. They all notice Rachel shift and getting ready to speak. They all brace for a diva-out.

Rachel turns to Quinn with an apologetic look and Quinn deflates at the sight of her girlfriend. “I’m sorry that we won’t be able join the others tomorrow evening. I thought grabbing two extra tickets for tomorrow wouldn’t have been that much of a big deal for the organisers. I’m sure we’ll be able to get some last minute tickets like Mr. Schuester suggested, but we’ll have to sit by ourselves and not the rest of the team. I just wanted to show you the city I have loved since I was a little girl. Please believe me that my intentions were to never put you in a situation where you have to give up the time you spend with your other friends in order to hang out with me.” Rachel says softly to Quinn.

Quinn’s heart breaks at the words and the sadness in the little diva’s voice. Leave it to Mercedes to ruin such a wonderful surprise. She turns around slightly to make sure she has Rachel’s full attention. “Rachie, don’t feel bad. I’m exactly where I want to be. I’m spending all my free time by choice with my best friend. I wouldn’t trade this week for anything in the world. You made this an experience of a lifetime. I love seeing New York City through your eyes. We both knew it was a possibility when we chose to come early. This won’t be our last visit here together. We’ll catch Wicked on our next visit together. Besides, this way, tomorrow night we can meet Andy and Nigel for that dinner we owe him.” Quinn says in a near whisper with a smile as she squeezes Rachel’s hand she still has a hold of under the table, away from prying eyes.

“Thanks Quinn.” Rachel leans in and whispers softly to Quinn, causing the blonde to shiver imperceptibly at the feel of Rachel’s temple brushing against her face.

Quinn’s demeanour shifts as she looks on to the two adults sitting with them. When she realises that one of them is too stunned to say anything and the other one is lowering his gaze to stare at an empty plate, she releases Rachel’s hand and turns back to face the others. She looks around and pins each and every one of them with her gaze before finally resting on Mercedes. They all know the next words will be spoken by McKinley’s Head Bitch In Charge.

“Jones, do not ever think you can get away with speaking for me. Do not delude yourself by thinking that you and I are friends because we’re not. Do not, for one second believe that because you and I are in the same team that I will not put you in your place each and every time you insult Rachel. I won’t allow you to use me in your quest to hurt Rachel, nor will I allow you to try and put a black mark on what has been one of the best vacations I have ever been on. You don’t like it, then leave, and don’t let the door hit your fat ass on your way out. You’re lucky my mom taught me manners and I actually learned how to behave in public, or the dressing down you’d be getting would be of epic proportions.” Quinn says in a deadly tone.

“I sure as hell don’t owe any of you an explanation, but I will humour you just so I can set some
facts straight. Rachel’s favourite play is Funny Girl. She arranged this evening for me. I told her West Side Story is one of my favourite movies and that I would love to see the play one day. By sheer coincidence there’s a revival happening. This is Rachel making that happen, so I would appreciate it if you could please smile and pretend to enjoy this night and to not ruin it for us. If you can’t play nice, I have no problem duct taping your mouth shut for the rest of the evening. I’m sure the nice staff in this fine establishment will have no problem procuring some for me. Or you can opt to leave, and again, don’t let the door hit your asses on the way out. Rachel didn’t have to include any of you. The only reason you are here is because I had no idea Rachel had set this up until just an hour or so ago. I knew some of you wouldn’t be able to let go of your jealousy and pettiness so given the option, I would have chosen to wait until tomorrow to meet with the rest of you and enjoy this treat without any of this aggravation.” Quinn says just loud enough for them to hear while looking intently at most of her teammates with a gaze that could have frozen and shattered steel in seconds. “Thank you for proving me right.” She adds while shaking her head.

“It’s okay, Quinn. They’re all entitled to their opinions. Let it go and enjoy the rest of the evening. Learn from my mistakes, and don’t let them hold that kind of power of you. The food here is fantastic.” Rachel says as she places her hand on top of Quinn’s thigh, rubbing circles in the hopes of calming the blonde down.

“No. It’s not okay Rach. I’m tired of people thinking they can treat you like shit. I’m fed up with it. You have gone out of your way to be a team player, but most if not all still have their heads so far up their asses, they can’t see it. Not even our teacher who is supposed to know better. But for you, I’ll tone it down for tonight. Thank you for this surprise and your thoughtfulness to make this trip unforgettable.” Quinn says as she calms down a little and grabs Rachel’s hand again.

Both adults stare at Quinn, knowing the blonde is right. They do know better, and they should have said something to stop this. They also know that they should say something about the way Quinn was talking to the rest of the group, but knowing Mercedes and the rest of them deserved it they’re caught in quite the quandary. In the end, they play dumb again since Quinn’s voice was just barely loud enough for them to hear.

“Shut the hell up Wheezy. Don’t ruin this night for the rest of us. I’d definitely choose West Side Story over sitting on my ass all night watching TV back at the hotel while stuffing my face with junk. I’m grateful Rachel decided to surprise us tonight.” Santana says when she sees Mercedes is about to run off with her mouth again. “Thanks Berry. Uh, I mean, thanks Rachel.” She adds while facing the brunette diva.

“You’re welcome.” Rachel replies confused. Out of everyone there, she never would have expected Santana López to come to her defence. Quinn is a given, and of course Puck, since they have started on a strange sibling-like relationship. She thought the Latina tolerated her at most. She wonders if she should check the weather forecast to see if there is a sudden blizzard in the Sahara Desert.
“Santana is right, thanks for doing this and including us. By the way, my Jewish American Princess, you look great. All that is missing is a handsome Jew by your side.” Puck adds as he turns to Rachel wiggling his eyebrows at her suggestively.

“Not going to happen Noah, but thank you for your compliment, and you are quite welcome.” Rachel says rolling her eyes. “Also, don’t call me that. You of all people should know that term was meant to be an insult.” She adds in a more stern voice.

“Shot down again, Puckerman.” Santana says laughing.

“Thanks Rachel. This is really cool.” Brittany says with a big smile.

The rest of the students, save for Mercedes, follow suit and thank Rachel accordingly.

“I can’t believe you all sold out for a fancy dinner and a stupid show.” Mercedes says shocked.

“That’s enough Mercedes. There is no need to behave like an ill-tempered five-year old in the midst of a tantrum. If you’re so unhappy and unwilling to enjoy Rachel’s hospitality I’m sure Mr. Schuester will be more than happy to accompany you and any other who wishes to return to the hotel this evening. No one is forcing you to stay. I would like to enjoy this rather unexpected but definitely welcomed change in our itinerary without further antagonism from you.” Emma says in a tone of voice that lets everyone know she means business.

Schuester clears his throat when he hears a few of them snickering at Emma’s words. “Rachel, why aren’t your cousin and your friend joining us for dinner tonight? I was looking forward to meeting her.” He asks in an attempt to change the subject.

“They both have to work late so they’re having dinner on the go. Unless there is a change of plans, you will certainly meet them at the theatre.” Rachel says with shrugging her shoulders.

Their servers arrive to give them menus before anything else can be said. They are left to make their decisions after being told what the specials for the day are and after reiterating that everything is taken care of and they can order anything they wish. Everyone at the table once again turns to stare at Rachel, who conveniently lowers her gaze at the menu in front of her, studying it as if her life depended on it. For now, they decide to drop it.
Dinner proceeds without any problems. Just as Rachel had said earlier, the food is fantastic. There is only one slight tense moment when Rachel reminds everyone that they can’t take their sweet time because they need to make their way to the theatre before the show begins, but a few glares from Emma, Quinn, Puck, and to everyone’s surprise, Santana have the usual suspects behaving. Rachel looks to Quinn perplexed, hoping the blonde might have some insight since Santana is her friend after all. Quinn just shrugs her shoulders as if to say ‘I have no clue either’.

“What did you guys do while you were here? You probably visited everything by now. Is that why you ditched us earlier today?” Puck asks as they wait for their dessert.

Rachel panics slightly, unsure of what to say. She can’t very well tell him they didn’t get as much sightseeing done because they spent the weekend running errands getting everything ready for her move.

“There is no such thing as ‘visiting everything’ Puck. New York City is huge. We did a lot walking around through museums and different parks. Instead of rushing through everything, we took our time wandering and exploring. We did some window shopping because seriously, things are expensive here, but it’s nice to see the displays. I dragged Rachel to a few camera stores to drool over accessories for my cameras. As for today, we didn’t necessarily ditch you. We spent the day wandering around Queens Botanical Garden and Rockefeller Center because Mr. Schue said you guys were going to visit the museums we have already visited. We saved the more iconic places for us to visit as a group.” Quinn says. She smiles when she feels Rachel squeeze her hand in gratitude.

“You’re spending too much time with Ber, uh, Rachel, Quinn. You’re beginning to sound like her.” Santana says as the servers arrive with their sweets, causing most of the kids to chuckle, Rachel to stick out her tongue at her, and Quinn to throw an almond from her dessert in Santana’s general direction.

They eat their dessert and just before they leave, Rachel excuses herself with the pretext of going to the restroom. Puck notices she makes a detour before she signs what he knows is the bill for their meal. He shakes his head at her generosity and hopes the friend who pulled strings to get them the seats for the play has also done something to help foot their meal’s bill. Quinn shrugs her shoulders when their eyes meet. On the way out, everyone’s jaws drop open in shock again when they see someone approach them and making a fuss over Rachel. It seems they have all been doing that around Rachel lately.

“Thank you for a lovely dinner Chef Leighton. The food was absolutely to die for. You’re probably sick of hearing this, but you outdid yourself tonight.” Rachel says to the Executive Chef and owner of the restaurant once he is done greeting Rachel.

“It’s Charles or Chuck, and it is always a pleasure to see you here Rachel. Please give my regards to
Andy and Nigel when you see them next. Jack should have your cabs waiting outside already. Enjoy the show.” Charles Leighton says smiling warmly.

“Thank you Chef Leighton. I will certainly let them know.” Rachel says with a big smile.

“It’s Charles or Chuck. You’re making me feel older than I am. Are you sure I won’t be able to convince you to give up your Broadway stardom in favour of becoming the next culinary superstar instead?” Charles says with a wink.

“I’m sure Chef Leighton. At least for now. Perhaps after a successful stage career I’ll consider your offer.” Rachel jokes back.

The chef and owner laughs at Rachel’s reply, and happily escorts her out to the front of the restaurant.

The rest follow her and sure enough, there are three taxis waiting on the curb for them. There is only a slight delay while Emma sanitises her seat. Once everything is sorted out, they are on the way to The Palace Theatre.

Rachel grins happily when Nigel steps to open the taxi door for her and offers her his hand the second it pulls up to the curb of the theatre.

“You clean up really nicely Mr. Kipling. But then again, that shouldn’t be too surprising.” Rachel says as Nigel opens the car door for her and helps her out of the taxi with a flourish.

“Why thank you Miss Berry. I am glad I meet your stamp of approval.” Nigel says with a wink as he steps to help Quinn out of the taxi next.

“I knew I would regret not having my camera here.” Quinn says giggling at Nigel’s playfulness. “Hey Andy. I’m so glad you could join us tonight.” Quinn adds when she sees Andy joining them by the entrance of the theatre.

“Hi Quinn. You girls look lovely. Nigel did a great job.” Andy says hugging Quinn and then Rachel.
“Hey Sunshine. Everything ok at work? You’re not going to be running behind schedule because of this right?” Rachel asks as she returns Andy’s hug.

“Nope, everything is great.” Andy replies as she scans the sea of faces staring at them, raising an eyebrow in Rachel’s direction.

“Oh right. I almost forgot. Everyone, this is Andrea Sachs, my cousin, and beside her is Nigel Kipling. They’re the ones who made this evening possible.” Rachel says with a proud smile while gesturing to the theatre.

“Andy, Nige, these are Mr. Schuester and Miss Pillsbury. It appears Ms. Sylvester opted out of joining us, so Miss Pillsbury, our guidance counsellor, once again stepped in to save the day for us.” Rachel says at the confused look on Andy’s face. “The rest are our teammates, Noah Puckerman, Santana López, Brittany Pierce, Tina Cohen-Chang, Artie Abrams, Mike Chang, Matthew Rutherford, Finn Hudson, Mercedes Jones, and Kurt Hummel.” Rachel continues with the introductions.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you both. Thank you so much for your generosity tonight.” Emma says extending her right hand to them.

“Nice to meet you as well and you are welcome.” Nigel says shaking her hand before he moves to Schuester to shake his with a nod of his head.

“The pleasure is all mine. We should be heading inside and into our seats.” Andy says shaking both adult’s hands.

Rachel breathes a sigh relief and thanks whatever deity that neither Andy nor Nigel let their protective streaks come out when meeting her Glee club.

“Thanks Sunshine.” Rachel whispers as Andy and she follow the rest inside.

“As much as I want to smack most them upside their heads, this is about making it a night to remember for you and Quinn, in a nice way.” Andy whispers back with a smile.

“Holy sh… crap. Rachel, whose box seats are these? How in the world did you manage this?” Puck asks waving his hand around after they settle in their seats.
“They are my employers’ actually. I’m glad you are enjoying them.” Nigel replies without giving any more details.

For once, they all take the hint and stop prodding. Intermission is spent getting souvenirs and discussing the first act of the play.

Everyone has a great time, and by the end of the evening, even Mercedes has a hard time finding something to complain about. It helps that Andy and Nigel have made it clear that they are very protective of Rachel. It is also very clear that Miss Pillsbury, Quinn, Puck, and Santana won’t tolerate any more outbursts from her, but most importantly, she knows she has no one’s support, not even Kurt’s. This is the first time that at least one of their teachers isn’t turning a blind eye.

They part company after all of them say their thanks to Rachel, Andy, and Nigel, some more sincerely than others.

Quinn and Rachel agree to meet the others at their hotel’s lobby at seven o’clock the following morning and take in a full day of sightseeing, before they part company for the night. Much to Rachel’s chagrin and Quinn’s amusement, Roy arrives to pick them up before the others can hail their taxis. Quinn smirks wickedly when she catches a glimpse of Mercedes and Kurt just as Roy opens the door to the town car and guides Rachel to the back seat.

“Thank you for a wonderful night, Rachie. It would have been perfect had it not been for Mercedes’ usual antics. I’m sorry it had to happen at all.” Quinn says pulling the brunette close to her while kissing her lips softly.

“It wasn’t your fault. Besides, it’s nothing new. I will admit I was pleasantly surprised by Santana’s behaviour though. What was up with that?” Rachel asks as she melts into Quinn’s embrace as much as she can while still wearing the seatbelt.

“What happened?” Andy asks concerned.

The girls go on to explain what happened from the moment they left to explore the city in the morning, up until the point where they met Andy and Nigel outside the theatre.

“What does that girl have against you D?” Nigel asks none too pleased.
“I have a better voice, better range, more talent, and more training than her. I also have no problem telling the rest of the team when they’re not doing their best, and thus hindering my chances of stardom. They seem to think that it’s my job to hold their hands and tell them they’re great when they in fact are not. While I admit that I might need help in the tact department, I also don’t attack them just to make myself feel better. I only point out their mistakes. I also praise them when they do a good job. It’s not my fault that they all are happy settling with acceptable while I only want and accept perfection.” Rachel answers in her usual blunt way.

Nigel raises an eyebrow at that, the words and attitude reminding him of his boss and her own quest for perfection within the pages of *Runway*, while Quinn and Andy shake their heads with a smile, used to Rachel’s directness.

“Rachel only speaks the truth. If we suck, she’ll tell us without mincing words, but she’ll also tell us why and she’ll always offer to help us improve. Unlike us, she has never just verbally attacked us to hurt us.” Quinn says in Rachel’s defence, earning her a sweet smile and another kiss from the diva.

“That’s one of the differences between my cousin’s search for perfection and your boss. Rachel’s attitude sometimes reminds me of her as well.” Andy says to Nigel. She smirks in satisfaction at the blush colouring Nigel’s face at those words. “I know Rachel sounds cocky, but she is that good. What you heard during Christmas break was just a run through. When she is truly performing, she will make that look as if it was sung by a tone deaf rank amateur. Prepare to be blown away Saturday.” She adds.

“The only reason we didn’t win Nationals this year was because Rachel didn’t sing any of the solos. This Saturday you’ll know why Juilliard broke protocol for Rachel.” Quinn adds with an adoring smile.

“Thanks Eggie. You’re not so bad yourself. Ever since you have allowed me to coach you, you have made huge improvements with your singing. You haven’t gone flat or sharp since.” Rachel beams proudly, pecking Quinn on the lips.

Quinn beams and returns the kiss, but keeps it chaste.

“Are we still on for dinner tomorrow night? Someone promised me a story earlier today.” Nigel says with an innocent smile.

“As long as it’s ok with Andy, why don’t you show up at Andy’s tomorrow night for dinner? I feel
like cooking. We’re going to part company fairly early with the others, so I should be able to have food ready for seven-ish, eight at the latest. This way we can get a good night’s sleep and be well rested for Saturday’s competition.” Rachel suggests.

“Sounds like a plan. Do you have anything in mind? Do I need to stop at the supermarket for anything specific?” Andy asks Rachel.

“ Nope. I’ll just make do with what you have. I’ll probably keep it simple.” Rachel replies.

Everyone is exhausted, so after taking turns to get ready, Quinn and Rachel fall asleep in each other’s arms almost immediately after their heads hit their respective pillows.

TBC...
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

It's been so long since I've even thought of writing that I had not realized this story is a few chapters behind from ff.net. I only found out when I was re-reading it in hopes of updating soon, and started editing for mistakes and such.

Really no excuse for the lack of updates, other than to say the muse went on a long vacation.

Disclaimers: Not mine.

Self-edited, so I probably missed a few grammatical and/or spelling mistakes here and there.

Chapter 10

The girls show up right on time to meet the others, with Rachel clutching a travel mug while Quinn follows Rachel, still half asleep. The girls reluctantly let go of each other’s hands once they reach the revolving doors of the hotel their teammates are staying in.

“How can you be so perky this early?” Puck mumbles at Rachel’s exuberant greeting.

“I wake up at six a.m. almost every day.” Rachel answers with a shrug of her shoulders, as if that explains everything. She fails to see the look of horror cross Puck’s face. “Come on, the day is getting wasted, and precious sightseeing time is being lost the longer we stand here like zombies.” Rachel adds.

The others, even the teachers look at her in disbelief. Puck is right, how is it humanly possible for Rachel to be this perky when the rest are barely conscious. Quinn quietly thinks to herself that it’s because Rachel sleeps like the dead, but she’s not dumb enough to share that with the others. There is no need to bring forth another round of questions.

They start by visiting the usual tourist places. At Mike’s insistence, they go for Dim Sum while they are visiting China Town. Quinn and Rachel silently wish they could have some alone time while they are atop the Empire State Building. They stand there, looking at the city below them. Quinn wishing she could wrap her arms around Rachel’s slim waist, while Rachel wishes to burrow herself into Quinn’s comforting embrace. They walk around Battery Park before they catch the ferry that will take them to Ellis Island. They forgo climbing to the top of the Statue of Liberty because of
Artie’s limitations, and the time constraint. They go as far up as the elevators will take them, which is to the base where Lady Liberty’s feet rest. Rachel makes a mental note that they’ll return and make it all the way to the top of Lady Liberty’s torch during Quinn’s next visit. The sight of the New York Skyline is unique from that perspective, and it’s to die for. She knows Quinn would be able to get some amazing photos. They visit Central Park on Santana’s request, where they have a late snack, and as expected, Brittany falls in love with the ducks and swans swimming lazily on one of the many ponds. Everyone is surprised at how at ease Rachel is with the subway system and how well she seems to know the city.

“How do you know New York so well?” Santana asks as they watch Brittany feeding the waterfowl with amused smiles. The curiosity is getting to her. Rachel seems like a totally different girl, so unlike the high-strung diva back in Ohio.

“I have spent every summer with Andy since I was six, so when she moved here after graduating from Northwestern, it was a given fact I would continue with that tradition. I have spent every summer here since I was eleven.” Rachel says with a shrug of her shoulders.

“That certainly explains why we never saw you much during the summers.” Santana says.

Quinn can’t help but smile at Santana’s effort to make Rachel feel included, though a part of her wishes this could have happened before the shorter brunette reached her breaking point. Only to realise that she too, could have reached out to Rachel before her brief fall from grace. They’re all guilty of putting their popularity first. Quinn is brought out from her depressing thoughts by Mercedes interrupting the brunettes’ conversation.

“Since you know the city so well, why didn’t you suggest a better itinerary for our sightseeing? We could have wasted a lot less time travelling around.” Mercedes says, still angry over the previous night’s happenings.

“Because every time she suggested something, you and Hummel jumped down her throat saying she was being a control freak again, and that being here for an extra few days didn’t make her an expert of the city.” Santana reminds her, ready to push her in the pond. The only reason she has not done so is because it would scare the waterfowl, and upset Brittany. Everyone is surprised because they were all expecting Quinn to jump in, not the Latina.

“No time like the present to take advantage of your knowledge Rachel. Where do you suggest we go next?” Emma asks, trying to defuse the situation and before Quinn takes over the verbal dressing down.
“If you all feel like it, we can stroll around the zoo here. Then we could head over to the United Nations Plaza. It’s less than a mile away, and it should take us next to no time on the subway. Even if we don’t do the tour, the view is exceptional.” Rachel says knowing Quinn would love to take pictures of the area. “Also, if you haven’t already made dinner plans, you can all head to Times Square and do some more sightseeing since the theatre district is right there, and there are always a few good choices to eat from. They are used to catering to theatre goers so they won’t keep you longer than necessary if you inform the Maître d’ you have a show to get to.” Rachel adds with a smile.

“Perfect. Lead the way.” Emma says before the others can say a thing.

“I can’t understand why we can’t go shopping, especially when Berry and Quinn actually managed to do so.” Kurt mumbles under his breath.

“Because if we don’t have time to visit and tour Yankee Stadium even if it’s too early to catch a spring training game, we don’t have time to hop from store to store and watch you and Jones drool over crap we can get back home.” Puck says clearly irritated that the subject of shopping is brought up yet again.

Kurt is about to say something else when he notices the looks that cross Puck and Santana’s faces so he decides to keep quiet. Once tempers settle some, they continue their sightseeing trip along the city. It is a very strange day because it seems that while most of the Gleeks were still actively ignoring Rachel; Puck, Santana, and Brittany were making a conscious effort to include the young diva in everything they did.

They finally part company when the others need to return to their hotel in order to get ready for Wicked. Rachel quickly gives a list of restaurants they might enjoy that also cater to the theatre crowd and tourists, meaning the service is quick and the food is still great.

“It’s a bummer you girls can’t join us later tonight.” Puck says when it’s clear Rachel and Quinn won’t try to get last minute tickets.

“Yes, too bad you are going to be missing one of the best musicals of all times. Such a shame.” Kurt adds with an overly sweet voice and fake concern.

Quinn is about to say something when she sees Rachel shake her head and smile evilly. Curious, she nods her head at her girlfriend.
“I actually saw Wicked with the original cast soon after it made its debut on Broadway. I had the privilege of enjoying both Ms. Chenoweth and Ms. Menzel’s performances before they left for other projects. It was such a wonderful birthday/Christmas/Hanukkah present from my dads. I have since seen it twice more while visiting Andy so I could compare the different leads.” Rachel says in an almost bored tone. Quinn has to bite the urge to burst out in laughter at the look on Kurt’s face. Puck, Santana, and Brittany are not as kind and they break out in guffaws. Rachel could have sworn she saw a look of approval on Santana’s usually bored and indifferent face.

“I just feel bad Quinn is going to miss it.” Rachel adds softly.

“Hey Rach, don’t get sad. Even knowing for certain I’d miss Wicked in order to be able to spend our entire Spring Break here I would have made the exact same choice. You also made it possible for me to see the one show I truly wanted.” Quinn says grabbing Rachel’s hand and squeezing it. She then pulls Rachel closer to her. “We’ll catch it when I come visit you after you get settled here.” Quinn leans and whispers softly in her ear with a certainty that leaves no doubt it will happen. It causes Rachel to beam a million megawatt smile and the others to wonder what was the last bit that was said between the two girls.

“Will you girls be all right returning to your cousin’s place on your own? Perhaps I should go with you and then return to the others.” Emma says, breaking the rising tension within the group.

“We’ll be fine Miss P. We’ve been doing this for the past few days and as you could see earlier, Rachel really knows her way around the city. We’ll text Mr. Schue once we make it back to Andy’s apartment so you know we arrived safely.” Quinn says with a reassuring smile, hoping to put the woman at ease.

“We appreciate your concern, Miss Pillsbury, but you really don’t have enough time to escort us and return to get ready for your show tonight, even if you take a taxi. I promise that we’ll be all right returning to Andy’s apartment. It’s barely four p.m. so there is no need to worry.” Rachel says. “I took the liberty of writing down detailed instructions on how to get there on the subway in case you want to avoid getting stuck in rush hour traffic. It’ll be crowded, but at least you won’t be stuck in a barely moving cab for who knows how long. If you have a hard time understanding my suggestions, you can also ask the hotel’s concierge or just use Google Maps for directions.” Rachel adds as she hands Emma a notepad.

“Thank you Rachel.” Emma says genuinely.

“Yes, thank you Rachel. Just make sure you text me to let me know you have arrived safely. We’ll see you all early tomorrow morning then.” Schuester says awkwardly, knowing the girls are right. Rachel knows the city better than anyone in their group does and they really don’t have the time to spare.
“See you tomorrow guys. Enjoy the show.” Rachel calls out as they head towards the closest subway station.

The remaining members of New Directions and their faculty advisers watch as the two girls walk away confidently. They wonder if they really know anything about Rachel. Unbeknownst to Santana, the rest echo her earlier thoughts. Rachel seems like a totally different girl here.

* * *

“Alone at last, well as alone as we can in a subway car full of commuters.” Quinn whispers as she wraps her arms around Rachel from behind the brunette. She smiles when she feels the girl lean against her.

“Mmmm I have missed your arms around me. It’s been sheer torture not being able to do this whenever I wanted.” Rachel says as she turns around and places a few chaste kisses on Quinn’s lips, mindful that they are in a public place and that even if they are in New York City, there are still homophobes lurking around, especially in such a crowded setting.

“I can’t wait until we’re in a less public place.” Rachel says nuzzling Quinn’s neck.

“You and me both, Rachie.” Quinn replies, drawing Rachel closer to her.

The other commuters are seemingly oblivious to the two girls, lost in their own worlds.

The moment the apartment door closes, Quinn pins Rachel to the door and kisses the brunette thoroughly, leaving them both breathless.

“I’ve missed you. I’ve missed it just being the two of us bumming around the city. Too bad we can’t ditch them Sunday.” Rachel says as she rests her head on Quinn’s shoulder.

“I know. It’s been awful having to remind myself to keep it friendly, but not going over that line. Having you all to myself for nearly a week has spoiled me.” Quinn says pulling Rachel impossibly closer.
“Come on, Eggie. I need to get started on dinner. I’d like to eat at a decent hour and be able to get enough rest for tomorrow.” Rachel says, pushing herself away from Quinn’s embrace and smiling at the noise of protest leaving Quinn’s mouth at the action.

“Think you can cook if I glue myself to your back?” Quinn asks with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

“Sure, if you want to risk getting food poisoning.” Rachel answers with a giggle.

“Spoilsport.” Quinn replies, sticking out her tongue at Rachel. The diva sees that, and immediately presses herself against her girlfriend again, sucking the tongue playfully. The kiss soon turns into a heated make out session.

“Stop tempting me.” Rachel says after they are both breathing hard once again. “Why don’t you shower while I start on dinner?” Rachel adds, knowing she won’t be able to concentrate on her cooking with Quinn around her.

“Can’t deal with the temptation?” Quinn asks knowingly.

“Uh huh.” Rachel admits blushing.

“You are absolutely adorable. I love you Rachie.” Quinn says with a smile.

“I love you too Eggie.” Rachel says, giving Quinn another peck on the lips before she gently smacks her ass in a way to encourage the blonde to move to her (their) bedroom.

Once Rachel is alone, she plugs her iPod on Andy’s dock, opens as many windows as she can, and starts getting things out of the fridge for dinner. She’s glad she prepped a lot of it before they left in the morning.

“Mmm whatever you’re making smells heavenly. Do you need help with anything?” Quinn asks joining Rachel in the kitchen.

“Nope. Everything is done. We just have to wait for the food to finish cooking in the oven. I’m
going to shower and change out of this. I stink of food.” Rachel says grimacing a bit, as she takes off her apron.

“Ok, I’ll finish cleaning up then. It’s only fair, since you did all the cooking.” Quinn says, unconsciously reaching to pull Rachel close.

“Let me shower first, Love. I smell like a restaurant.” Rachel says sidestepping Quinn.

“You smell delicious.” Quinn says grabbing on to one hand and pulling Rachel in for another kiss. They only break apart when they hear the front door opening.

“Hey Andy.” Rachel calls out as she walks to her bedroom to grab a change of clothing. “I’m taking a quick shower, and then we can catch up.” Rachel adds as she steps into the bathroom after she gives Quinn another peck on the lips.

By the time Rachel is done, Nigel is already there, and chatting with the others.

“Hey D. Food smells great.” Nigel says getting up to give Rachel a hug.

“Thanks.” Rachel says returning the hug and then plopping down on a chair.

“Tired?” Andy asks with a smile.

“Exhausted, but worth it. Quinn got some amazing pictures today.” Rachel answers looking at Quinn with an adoring smile.

Rachel gets up to the oven once the timer goes off, but she is stopped by Andy and Nigel.

“You girls sit and relax. You made dinner and cleaned up. Nigel and I will take care of the rest.” Andy says placing a hand on Rachel’s shoulder. “I won’t make the kitchen explode since everything is already cooked. I doubt even I can ruin dinner by just taking it out of the oven.” She adds with a sheepish smile, making everyone laugh. Everyone present knows just how proficient Andy is in a kitchen.
“So, someone here has been keeping things from me.” Nigel says looking at Rachel.

“It’s not her fault. I asked her to keep quiet. If I ever want to be taken seriously as a photographer, I want it to be because I’m good at what I do, and not because of who I’m related to.” Quinn says looking at Nigel and Andy.

“What am I missing here?” Andy asks scrunching her eyebrows in confusion as she sets her glass of water down.

“You mean you don’t know?” Nigel asks as his eyes open wide. “It seems our Miss Fabray here is the granddaughter of none other than Aaron Quinn.” He adds once he sees Andy shake her head in the negative.

Andy silently thanks The Powers That Be her mouth is empty because she is sure that had she been chewing something, one of her companions would be performing the Heimlich on her. She’s also positive that had she been drinking something, the other three would be wearing it right about now. She stares between the two girls, mouth opening and closing. As a journalist, she is only too familiar with Aaron Quinn’s work.

“Yeah, that was close to my reaction as well.” Nigel says with a smirk.

“Well, that certainly explains where you got your talent from. When I saw some of your work, your style reminded me of someone. I just couldn’t put my finger on it, because as much as I can his influence, you have your own style as well. I never would have guessed the two of you are related.” Andy says once she manages to work through the surprise. She was really impressed by what she saw of the photos Quinn had taken during their sightseeing trips.

“Rachel knew right away. She saw some of my work and some of Grandpa’s work hanging side by side in my room. She noticed his last name and my first name and connected the dots on the spot.” Quinn says, smiling fondly at the memory. “Please don’t be mad at Rachie for not saying anything. I asked her to keep it a secret even from you.” She adds.

“I’m not. I’m just surprised she managed to since she can’t stop bragging about how great you are with a camera.” Andy says reassuringly. “I still can’t believe I missed it.” She mumbles.

“Well, Quinn isn’t a very common name for a girl. I also had the luxury of seeing their work side by
“How did you get into photography?” Andy asks.

“I like the idea of capturing a moment or an image for eternity. I like how people can see so many different stories while looking at the same photograph. I like the power photos have over people. They can bring such a host of feelings and memories. It’s cliché, but that saying is true. A picture is worth a thousand words. I could never imagine being able to craft the words to express how I feel about some things, but I can grab my camera and show the world what I can’t say with words. Grandpa Aaron noticed it when I was playing with a point and shoot camera. He offered to teach me and I thought I was in heaven. He’s one of the only few relatives who isn’t fake in my family.” Quinn says.

Quinn tells the adults present that Aaron Quinn is her maternal grandfather and how her grandmother insisted on naming Quinn after him. The remainder of dinner is spent talking about Quinn’s experiences with her grandfather. She shares her frustration with her dad and his controlling attitude. Eventually, a promise is exacted from the teen to send the two adults samples of her own work, agreeing that it’s a good way for Quinn to start learning about putting together a portfolio of her work. By the end of the evening, both Andy and Nigel have a new found respect for the blonde girl. Her knowledge of photography rivals Rachel’s knowledge of music.

* * *

Early Saturday morning is spent making sure their costumes and props are all in order and ready for them use. They do a quick run through of their numbers before they are off to stroll around Central Park again under Rachel’s suggestion.

“But we went there already.” Mercedes points out the obvious.

“Maybe so, but we don’t have a lot time, and it is close to our venue. It will give us a good opportunity to relax before the competition. The place is huge and I’m sure we have only explored part of it. We need to return to Manhattan Studios no later than noon.” Emma says in a voice that lets everyone know that she won’t put up with diva fits this close to competition. She might not be their official faculty adviser, but she cares about them.

“I don’t see what the big deal is. This is my third visit to Central Park since I’ve arrived in the city and I’m still excited about it. Miss P is right. The place is huge, so I’m sure not even Rachel has seen the entire park in the four summers she has been staying in New York.” Quinn says rolling her eyes at what she feels is Mercedes trying to stir up problem just for hell of it.
“Can we go feed the ducks and swans again?” Brittany asks excited, ending any further exchanges between her teammates.

“Of course B. I’ll stop by a hot dog stand and pick up some bread.” Santana says with a smile.

It takes a lot of convincing, but after promising they won’t wander off, Rachel, Quinn, Brittany, Santana, and Puck spend their time by the pond, while the others decide to stroll around. When it’s time to return to their venue, Schuester and Emma are pleasantly surprised to find the others in pretty much the same spots they were in when they decided to split up earlier. Santana and Brittany are at the edge of the pond feeding the wildlife. Puck, Rachel, and Quinn are sitting under a big tree, joking around, with Quinn snapping the occasional photo.

When they return to the Hammerstein Ballroom inside the Manhattan Studios, everyone but Rachel is a nervous wreck. They are one of forty schools competing tonight, for three spots for the national competition in two months. The order of the performances has been selected at random, and as luck would have it, they are the very last team to perform in the preliminaries.

“How can you be so calm? We’re competing against some of the best show choirs in the country.” Puck asks as most of them pace up and down their dressing room.

“This is New York City. We will be performing at the Hammerstein Ballroom, where legends were born. I have dreamt of singing here since I could walk. I was born to do this.” Rachel says with a confident smile.

“Yes you were, and you’re going to be great today.” Quinn says a little calmer, finding Rachel’s enthusiasm and confidence contagious. Puck just nods.

“We are going to be great. We will finally be allowed to shine, without the shenanigans that plagued us during Sectionals and Regionals. This is our time.” Rachel adds with conviction to the rest of the group. They can’t help but agree with her. Some of them hate to admit it, but seeing their captain take charge and be so confident actually calms their nerves a little.

* * *

Andy, Leroy, and Nigel barely make it in time for the first school to sing. Traffic from LaGuardia had been surprisingly heavy for a Saturday, considering there were no concerts or games scheduled. They all breathe a sigh of relief when Andy receives the text informing them that New Directions won’t be singing until the very end of the preliminaries, still, they don’t want to be rude and walk in during someone else’s performance.
They are slowly making their way to the row of seats assigned to them in the balcony area, when Andy suddenly stops dead in her tracks, causing her two companions to bump into her.

“Andy, is everything ok?” Leroy asks concerned.

Andy swallows and turns around, miming for the two men to follow her.

“What’s going on?” Nigel asks.

“What!? Are you sure?” Nigel asks.

“Nigel, why didn’t you tell me that Miranda would be here?” Andy asks from a hidden spot in the balcony area.

“What!? Are you sure?” Nigel asks.

“Is there anyone else who has that hair and can carry herself in such a way?” Andy says, while pointing to her ex-employer’s iconic hair.

“I had no idea she would be here. I know the twins are involved in music, but she never mentioned they were interested in show choir. Believe me, I would have told you had I known she would be here.” Nigel whispers.

Leroy looks at his two companions and follow their gaze to a group of people sitting in the centre of the third row, and knows exactly why Andy is behaving the way she is. Sitting there as if she owns the world is none other than Miranda Priestly. They make their way outside once they start to receive stares and glares from those present because the first group is about to perform. They slowly make their way outside the ballroom/makeshift theatre.

“Oh well, it’s not like I didn’t expect to run into her at some point in the future once Rachel was settled here.” Then realisation and a wave of horror strike her. “Oh my God! This means that one or both twins are in Dalton’s Glee Club. So much for avoiding her at all costs.” Andy mumbles. “Did she know you were coming here with me today?” Andy asks Nigel once they are outside the Hammerstein.

“I don’t think so. The last time I saw her was Friday, when she threatened death, dismemberment,
and blacklisting to anyone present if we, well, if she had to work today. Now I know the reason. It should certainly prove to be an interesting day should we run into each other here.” Nigel replies.

“Who knows? She probably doesn’t even remember what I look like. I mean, it’s been nearly four years since I worked for her. I only lasted eight months.” Andy reasons.

“Oh, she remembers you, don’t you doubt that.” Nigel replies.

“Well, as long as she doesn’t use her influence to harm Rachel, then we can just ignore each other the way we have been doing so far.” Andy says hopefully.

“Relax Andy. For now, we make sure we stay out of sight, and concentrate on Rachel and her singing. As ruthless as Miranda is, even she hasn’t sunk low enough to attack children in order to seek retribution, so Rachel is safe.” Nigel says.

“Come on; let’s get to our seats now that the next group is setting up for their songs.” Leroy says guiding them back towards the door.

* * *

At last, it is their turn to sing. Just before they take their places on the stage, Rachel pulls a nervous Quinn to the side away from the others.

“You can do this. Do as Daddy said to me when I was so nervous before my audition a few months back. Just let the music wash over you and take you away in a journey.” Rachel whispers in Quinn’s ear. “I believe in you. I love you.” She adds with an encouraging smile and soft brush of lips on her cheek.

“Thanks Rachie. Go knock them dead and wow them. I love you too.” Quinn whispers back after she places a soft peck on Rachel’s lips.

Rachel is absolutely spot on, and by the time the last note fades in the ballroom, the sudden silence is broken by the thunderous applause of the audience. Eventually, they clear out of the stage and wait impatiently as the judges make their deliberations. After a twenty minute wait that feels more like twenty years, the judges are done and the MC is ready to announce the six finalists. Not surprising, they make it to the top six groups, but it is still a relief hearing their name announced. Like the preliminaries, the order is chosen at random, and this time, they are the first choir to sing, right after the dinner break.
"You guys did great. I’m so proud of you. Go ahead and change out of your costumes, grab a bite to eat and relax for a bit. There is a buffet set up for us three doors down to your left. Go mingle, have some fun, but be back here in two hours.” Schuester says to the assembled students. He leaves after a chorus of ‘yes Mr. Schue’.

“Oh my God. I’m so nervous I don’t think I can eat without throwing up right after.” Quinn says pacing back and forth in the backstage area assigned as the area for New Directions.

Quinn’s statement is met with nods of grunts of assent from the others.

“We should at least try to consume some sort of sustenance. It has been a long day, and we’ll need our energy reserves later when we have to perform again. We don’t want to risk becoming lightheaded or worse yet, pass out from exhaustion in the middle of our final.” Rachel says to the rest of her teammates.

Most of her teammates look at her and roll their eyes at the comment. Quinn instantly bristles at their reaction, but once again, it is Santana who jumps in to say something that surprises both the diva and the Head Cheerio.

“You guys are so predictable it’s pathetic. Rachel is right. No matter what, we need to replenish our energy sources, even if it’s something as simple as a bottle of juice or an energy bar. This might not be as strenuous as a Cheerios routine, but it’s enough to burn calories galore. I for one don’t plan on dropping like a dead fly just because I’m too stubborn or too stupid to listen to my captain in order to make a silly point. I’m at least grabbing a salad or something equally light.” Santana says, extending her pinkie to Brittany.

Rachel blinks a few times and turns to Quinn. “I’m going to join them and see what is available. Want to join us?” Rachel asks with a small smile.

“Of course.” Quinn says grabbing Rachel’s hand.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m starving. You want to starve yourselves, go ahead, but you so much as stumble half a step, let alone drop in a dead faint in the middle of our performance because you’re too dumb and ruin our chances of placing, I’ll hunt you down. Believe me when I say that dumpster drops, flagpole wedgies, and slushies are going to be the least of your worries.” Puck says as he turns around and heads in the direction of the other four.
The seven remaining students look at each other before they too head out to grab some food.

“I’m sorry.” Quinn whispers sadly.

“Whatever for, Eggie?” Rachel asks perplexed.

“My comment about eating started this whole thing. I should just keep my mouth shut around those morons.” Quinn replies, looking down at her salad.

“It’s not your fault Eggie. The majority of them will latch on to any excuse to do the exact opposite of what I suggest. I’m used to it. They act exactly as I expect them to. You are the only one that matters. Well, maybe Noah as well.” Rachel says as she brushes Quinn’s cheek with the back of her fingers.

“Don’t let Puck hear you say that. He’ll probably start sulking right away that you only mentioned him in passing, and that is something I don’t need to deal with.” Quinn says with a giggle. “You’re the only one that matters to me as well. I love you.” Quinn adds.

“I love you too.” Rachel says.

Before they can say anything else, they are joined by Santana, Brittany and Puck. Rachel wants to scream. Is it too much to ask for a few minutes of private time with her girlfriend? Granted, it’s not as if the other three know they’re interrupting anything, but still.

They talk about their trip and how much it sucks they have to fly back the next day.

Soon, it’s time to return to their assigned backstage area that also passes for their dressing room. They change into fresh costumes and set up the stage for their performance.

“Break a leg.” Quinn says with a wink before they take their places.

Rachel sets the bar so high that the remaining five teams agree that it has become a fight for second
and third place.

They leave the stage area and watch nervously as the other teams perform. With each group that comes and goes, their nerves get stronger. Finally, the last group sings, and they wait for the judges to deliberate.

They all have their fingers crossed when the MC announces the fourth, fifth and sixth place groups. It takes a moment for them to realise that New Directions isn’t amongst the ‘honourable mentions’. It takes every bit of self control to not cheer right then and there because they made it. They’re in the top three, so regardless of their placing; they qualified for Phoenix and a shot at twenty five thousand dollars if they manage to take first place.

Rachel’s smile nearly splits her face in two when the MC announces the runners up to be the Dalton School’s Sounds from Heaven. With any luck, she will be part of that team in September. It is between New Directions and another local team from New York vying for first place. Everyone except Quinn assumes that Rachel is this happy because they have a chance for first place.

“In first place, and a cheque for ten thousand dollars, McKinley High’s New Directions from Lima, Ohio.” The MC announces and once again, the audience goes wild.

Everyone on the stage cheers, they all hug each other, and Rachel has to remind herself to watch the screaming because the last thing she wants is risk damaging her vocal chords.

“Oh my God! We did it.” Rachel says excitedly as she pulls Quinn into a bone-crunching hug.

“No. You did it. You were right. You were born to do this. Don’t forget about me when you’re receiving your first Tony.” Quinn says, returning Rachel’s hug.

“Never. When it happens, you’ll be sitting beside me as my guest, and I will be thanking you personally during my acceptance speech. Better yet, you’ll be the one taking the pictures as it happens. We are forever.” Rachel says, still holding on to the taller girl for all she is worth. It takes a superhuman effort to keep from kissing each other.

Before they get a chance to separate, they are joined by the others in a giant group hug.

When they are finally ushered off stage, they are told to pose for group pictures, which will be used
for promotional purposes. Rachel notices Quinn’s faraway look.

“Everything ok, Eggie?” Rachel asks in a whisper.

“Yeah, I just wish I had my camera.” Quinn whispers back with a smile. “And don’t call me that in front of the others. They might overhear you, and I don’t want to give them any ideas. I’d rather not kill them since you’re the only one who gets to call me that.” Quinn adds a bit louder.

“This is one time I’m glad you don’t have it, because if you did, then you wouldn’t be part of the photo, and we can’t have that. The whole team has to be photographed.” Rachel says softly.

“You are such a goof.” Quinn says as she half-heartedly smacks the side of Rachel’s arms.

“What’s going on?” Brittany asks them as she joins them with Brittany in tow.

“Nothing, Rachel is just being a goof.” Quinn answers sticking out her tongue playfully at Rachel.

“So what else is new?” Santana says without the usual malice and mocking in her voice.

“Haha, very funny Santana.” Rachel says with a shake of her head.

“Be nice San.” Brittany says quickly.

“Yeah, be nice San.” Quinn repeats, causing all four of them to laugh.

The promotional pictures are finally taken, and they are allowed to change out of their costumes. Rachel’s jaw nearly hits the ground when she spots her family. There, in living colour, is Leroy walking towards them with Andy and Nigel in tow. Rachel flies to his arms once she recovers from the surprise. The slight look of disappointment that flutters for a millisecond once she discovers Dr. Berry isn’t there doesn’t escape Quinn’s watchful eyes. She wonders what it will take Dr. Berry to stop being such an ass.

“Daddy! What are you doing here? When did you get here? You’re supposed to be back in Lima.”
Rachel asks in shock, another huge smile on her face.


When Rachel is back on solid ground, she launches herself into Andy’s arms, much to everyone’s amusement, and in some cases, jealousy. All of them wish their parents and close family members could have made it to their competition.

“You were great, Hummingbird. Congratulations on first place. You clearly deserve it. There was never a doubt in my mind. I’m so proud of you.” Andy says as she wraps her arms around Rachel’s shoulders, not caring if Miranda walks in on them. There is no way she will miss meeting her cousin backstage after her win.

“You kept your balance again, Sunshine.” Rachel says with a giggle, arms still wrapped tightly around Andy’s waist.

“Yeah, well, I know what to expect now when you come charging me.” Andy says with a chuckle, making Quinn, Leroy and Nigel laugh.

Leroy walks over to Quinn and envelops the blonde in a hug. “Hey Quinn. Congratulations. I’m proud of you as well. How has your week been so far?” Leroy asks.

“Hi Leroy. Thanks, and it’s been great. Kinda bummed out we have to fly back tomorrow.” Quinn answers with a sad smile.

“Do I get a hug at all?” Nigel asks as he steps closer to the group.

“Nigel, you silly man. Of course you do. Thanks for everything.” Rachel says throwing her arms around him.

“Anytime. I’m glad I was able to help. They’re all correct. You, my dear girl are fantastic. I have no doubt that you’ll be performing on Broadway in the near future.” Nigel says softly.
Eventually, they get around to congratulating the rest of the team.

They chatter excitedly about the competition and their win, as they slowly make their way outside. Nigel and Andy exchange looks of relief, because it seems they have missed an encounter with the Dragon Lady, even though one of her daughters placed second in the competition. Andy won’t question her luck, and sends a quick and quiet prayer of thanks to whatever deity is watching over them.

Rachel and Quinn say their goodbyes to Nigel before they part ways.

“Thank you so much for everything you have done for us.” Rachel says while she’s still in his arms.

“It was my pleasure. I’m glad I got to help you make this a special trip for you.” Nigel replies, mindful that they’re surrounded by Rachel’s teammates.

When they separate, Quinn walks to him and throws her arms around him. “Thank you Nigel. You made me feel like a movie star. That was an experience to remember.” Quinn says to him. A few of the others hear the statement and wonder what that was about.

“You and Rachel made it easy for me. Remember, I want to see the photos you took of Rachel that night.” Nigel says with a smile.

Soon, they’re all on their way. Schuester and the others go back to their hotel, while Rachel and Quinn head back to Andy’s apartment with her family.

* * *

The following day, Andy surprises everyone and offers them the use of her apartment to stow their luggage so they don’t have to pay for an extra day at the hotel in order to do more sightseeing. They all agree to go for an early breakfast and another stroll around the city to squeeze in some last minute sightseeing, this time in Rockefeller Center at Mercedes and Kurt’s insistence.

Puck looks apologetically at Rachel and Quinn because he knows they went there already, but after vetoing their suggestions two days in a row, they know it will be easier to just give in.
“Don’t worry about it Noah. I love that place. Too bad it’s not winter time and we don’t get to see the Christmas tree and we don’t get to skate.” Rachel says with a genuine smile.

“We were all so bored with the museums; we could’ve come here Thursday.” Puck insists, while glaring at the other two divas.

“It’s no biggie Puck. The place is amazing and I can get some more photos taken. Besides, there is a tonne of things to do there. We both knew there would be overlapping of the more iconic places one tends to associate New York City with.” Quinn says with a shrug.

Like the previous day, the group is split up again. Quinn, Puck, Santana, and Brittany join Rachel and her family, while Schuester and the others head in the opposite direction after agreeing to meet at certain hour. Rachel is surprised when Brittany asks her to elaborate on her comment to Puck about the place in winter time. Quinn happily whips out her camera and continues to snap pictures. She is so happy, she easily ignores the others’ teasing of her because not only does she have her vintage 35mm SLR, but her digital SLR as well. She just shrugs saying that a memory card is a lot cheaper than the black and white film she prefers because she doesn’t have to pay to have the film developed, with the added bonus that she can immediately see the results in the little LCD screen instead of having to wait. She leaves out the part where she’ll go to her grandfather’s place and use his dark room so technically speaking cost isn’t that big of a deal.

Rachel happily tells the others what the place looks like in the winter, where the giant Christmas tree is and where the skating rink is. She shares with them memories of hot chocolate and skating to Christmas carols blasting through the speakers and the occasional live performances. Puck, Santana, and Brittany all remember Quinn’s words and they have to agree that seeing New York City through Rachel’s eyes is something else. For someone who has spent the last four summers in the city, the diva is still as excited about it as they all are. They wish that perhaps in the future they could without having the others ruin their time.

Hours later, Leroy ends up reminding them they need to return to Andy’s place to get their belongings and head to LaGuardia. There might not have to deal with rush hour traffic, since it’s Sunday, but they still need to go through airport security. They all groan as they send a text to the others so they can catch the subway back to Andy’s apartment.

Andy walks them down to the curb, where there are taxis waiting already.

“Thanks for everything Andy. I’m glad I finally got to meet you in person.” Quinn says pulling Andy into a hug.
“My pleasure Quinn.” Andy returns the hug. “Remember, things might not be easy, but it is possible to follow your dreams and be happy. You’re very talented. Don’t forget to send me samples of your work. It will be a good way for you to learn how to properly put together a portfolio so when the time comes for you to apply for college it’ll be easier and less daunting.” Andy says before she places a kiss on Quinn’s temple, leaving behind a beaming blonde. Her mind is already going overtime with what she can do to help Quinn towards achieving her dreams. It would be such a shame to have that talent wasted because of overbearing parents.

Rachel waits until everyone is in their taxis before she goes to say her goodbye to Andy. “Thanks Sunshine. Your words and actions meant the world to Quinn. I will see you in the summer.” Rachel says into Andy’s neck.

“See you in the summer Hummingbird. I can barely wait.” Andy says as she places a kiss on Rachel’s cheek. Their exchange is vague enough that to most everyone present, Rachel is just preparing for her next summer adventure in New York.

Rachel reluctantly steps away from Andy’s embrace when she hears the others rush her and remind her they have a plane to catch. They know they will be exhausted for school Monday morning, but no one cares. They had an excellent time in New York, especially Rachel and Quinn.

Rachel can’t help but feel sad that her little bubble is about to burst with the return to Ohio. They will have to go back to hiding the true nature of their relationship on a full time basis. The only thing that makes it bearable is the blonde sitting by her side napping with her head resting on the diva’s shoulder. Soon, the school year will come to an end and her inevitable move to New York City will mean saying a temporary goodbye to her girlfriend. She forces the thoughts from her mind, instead, she thinks of way to make their next few months together unforgettable.

TBC...
Chapter 11

Here's another chapter I've had sort of on hold for this story. I'm hoping that once I finish re-editing it while I re-read it, my muse will be kind enough to send some inspiration my way :)

Disclaimers: Not mine. Never will be. If the show and movie were mine, things would be much different.

Chapter 11

William McKinley High School’s Glee Club is understandably proud. It has been a week since their return from New York City and they are still riding the high of their first major win. They are nowhere close to being revered as Vocal Adrenaline is, but the rest of the school is starting to take notice. There are definitely fewer slushie facials overall for the rest of them. Rachel is still enjoying the reprieve that Quinn’s influence has given her since her return in January. As a team, they’re doing better than all the boys’ varsity teams. Only the Cheerios and girls’ varsity soccer and volleyball teams are doing better percentage wise, and that’s only because they have better funding, better coaching, and they have been around longer. When they take into account that New Directions has only existed since September, and that in the span of seven months they went from barely having a club to winning or placing in the top three of every competition they have been in, it speaks volumes of their talent as a whole. Yes, Rachel might very well be the best singer New Directions has, but she’s not above recognising other people’s talents.

The first order of business during the first ‘serious’ meeting they have once they are back is trying to figure out who will be singing the solos for Phoenix.

“It should be Rachel. First place is a guaranteed cheque for twenty-five thousand dollars. She’s led us to first place in every competition she has had the solos.” Quinn says.

“Of course you’d say that. For whatever incomprehensible reason, she’s your best friend so you’ll always take her side. Your opinion is biased.” Mercedes jumps in right away.

“It’s not fair. We should all get a chance to sing a solo. Rachel isn’t the only one with a good voice.” Kurt continues right after Mercedes is done.
“No one is saying that or even implying the opposite. I know we all have good voices. We’ll be facing the absolute best show choirs in the country. We only have a little over a month and a half to train and prepare ourselves. Our best chances lie with Rachel because out of all of us, she has the best voice, and the best training. First place means not only prize money, but also a better footing to ask for more funding. It might mean outside sponsorship so we won’t just rely on the school’s budget so maybe Coach might let up a bit on her quest to destroy us.” Quinn adds.

“Have you forgotten that we barely placed in Nationals because Rachel didn’t sing the solos? Quinn’s right. This is about winning, not fairness. We need the best to win. I say we put it to a secret vote so there’s no pressure or fear of backlash from anyone.” Santana says before anyone else has a chance to counter. The others stare at her open mouthed. Most of them wondering why all of a sudden Santana has had such a change of heart, while others wonder what kind of spell Rachel has put over the Cheerios and Puck.

Rachel looks perplexed. She has checked newscasts, and there haven’t been any unexplained blizzards in any tropical locale. There are no flocks of pigs sprouting wings and taking flight out of the blue. She has also checked the nominations for the Nobel Prizes and Finn’s name was nowhere near the list of nominees for any category. She’s not famous enough (yet), and even if she was, Ashton Kutcher is no longer doing Punk’d, still she looks around to see if maybe she can spot a hidden camera somewhere. She looks over to Quinn who shrugs her shoulders, giving her a similar perplexed look.

“That’s actually a good idea. Those who want to be considered, stand up. I’ll prepare the ballots. All you need to do is circle your choice.” Schuester says resigned. He wants to emphasise that winning isn’t everything, but team work is. He figures he can work on that next term, after they win, and maybe even score some outside sponsorship. “To be fair, those of you vying for a solo won’t be able to vote. If there is a tie, I’ll be the one to break it.” Schuester adds.

Rachel thinks if he’s the one breaking a tie, then her chances of singing the solos are shot to hell.

Quinn rolls her eyes. ‘Would it really be that difficult for Schuester to show some backbone and make an actual decision that results in the wellbeing of their club and not his need to be the popular teacher?’ She thinks.

Not surprising, Rachel, Mercedes, Kurt, and Finn stand up. When Schuester is sure no one else is going to volunteer, he walks into the small office area and prepares the ballots. He hands them out to the remaining students and everyone places their vote. Schuester looks at the ballots repeatedly, not really believing what he sees.

All twelve members think there is a tie from the look on Schuester’s face. Rachel prepares herself to sing background, and Quinn holds her hand, thinking the same.
“Rachel wins.” Schuester says shocked. He still has a hard time believing it. It’s the logical choice since Rachel is their best vocalist. He doesn’t mention that it was a landslide for Rachel with six votes out of eight.

The majority cheer. Quinn is beaming with pride. Mercedes and Kurt look surprised, hurt, and angry. They feel betrayed by the rest of them. Finn looks confused. No one is as shocked as Rachel is. She had expected only to get Quinn and Puck’s vote.

They decide to use six fresh songs, four for the actual competition, and two alternates, not so much for fear of leaks, but more for the possibility that the other teams might choose the same songs. Choosing the actual songs proves to be another nightmare because they all have different opinions. The only thing they can agree on is that no matter what they choose, it has to suit Rachel’s range, which is like saying the sky is blue. That girl can sing just about anything.

“We need to make sure that the songs we choose are challenging enough that it shows off Rachel’s amazing voice and versatility.” Quinn says with a sweet smile.

Rachel blushes uncharacteristically at the compliment.

Some of them nod in agreement, while others roll their eyes.

“We need to make sure the arrangements are unique enough that even if another team chooses the same songs, our version will stand out to the judges.” Rachel points out.

“Why bother? You saying you won’t be able to improvise a second time?” Mercedes says.

“I can sing anything at the drop of a hat, but that won’t give us the win. We need to be exceptional as a team if we hope to be first. It’s a show choir competition. Not a soloist competition.” Rachel says with confidence.

“Wouldn’t a unique arrangement work against us? The judges wouldn’t recognise the songs and then where does that put us?” Kurt asks.

“This isn’t about who can mimic the original artist of the songs best. This is about who has the best
interpretation of the songs. It’s about which team sounds best, and which team has the best overall technique. We need to make the songs ours.” Rachel answers.

“It isn’t that simple, Rachel. We can’t take too many risks if we want to win. We have to stick to what’s safe.” Schuester jumps in to say.

Quinn rolls her eyes. Figures he would contradict Rachel yet again.

“Mr. Schue, We won Sectionals because we didn’t stick to what’s safe. We could have performed our original set list and prayed our versions of the songs were better. Instead, Rachel came through and saved us from total humiliation. She literally pulled a song out of her ass, and then arranged a new song in a matter of minutes. All we had to do was learn the lyrics and come up with the choreography.” Puck adds to the conversation.

“Not to mention she arranged ‘jump’ for the mattress commercial on the fly as well.” Quinn adds with a proud smile.

“What do you suggest Rachel?” Schuester asks, defeated. He cannot argue with Puck or Quinn’s statements. He wasn’t present when they filmed the commercial, and he wasn’t at Sectionals because of the mattress incident. Even he has to agree that to be able to pull off what Rachel did on both occasions requires some major skills.

“Let’s start with picking songs we can all agree with. Then we can worry about arrangements.” Rachel answers. If everyone likes the song, their performances will have more heart.

With the date of their competition looming closer, they finally choose six songs that is a mixture of all their tastes. There are three Broadway classics, and three contemporary pieces. Rachel will sing the show tunes by herself, but the group number is split between them. Amidst protests from Schuester, Mercedes, and Kurt, but with the backing of the majority, Quinn and Rachel, as team co-captains, pick the best vocalists to compliment Rachel. Everyone wonders why all of a sudden Quinn is taking such an active role in the arrangements. Unbeknownst to them, Quinn is trying to learn as much as possible so that once the new school year starts, at least one of them will know what they’re doing.

* * *

In order to have actual ‘experience’, Quinn keeps her job at the local portrait studio as assistant to the photographer even though Rachel is convinced Quinn is much better with a camera. Rachel scales
down her voice lessons in order to fit the guitar lessons and her ballet lessons so that they still get to spend time together. Puck continues with his role of pseudo big brother. Santana and Brittany make it clear that they are interested in pursuing a friendship with Rachel, and they join Quinn in being pro-active about protecting Rachel from anyone who is stupid enough to think it is all right to pick on the pint-sized diva. The biggest downside of course, is that hanging out with the others, cuts down on their alone time.

When Quinn asks them about their sudden change of heart, Santana tells Quinn that having Rachel work so hard to get them all to New York, coupled with Rachel’s defence of the Cheerios during the set list debacle and accusations of being Sylvester’s spies, had given her a lot to think about. Brittany says she likes Rachel’s voice and that she looks all cuddly. They start a very tentative friendship once apologies are made.

Quinn has to leave Rachel for four days in order for the Cheerios to defend their Nationals title. It gives them a taste of what life will be like when the new school year starts. Puck makes sure to keep a closer eye on Rachel. He doesn’t look forward to having his privates ran through a grater should anyone do anything to Rachel during Quinn’s absence.

* * *

Quinn is nearly knocked off her feet with the force of Rachel’s hug once she steps inside the diva’s room upon her return. She smiles for the first time in days as she pulls Rachel even closer to her.

“These have been the four longest days of my life.” Rachel says before she captures Quinn’s lips with her own.

“Mine too.” Quinn answers when they finally separate long enough for Quinn to guide Rachel to her bed.

“What’s wrong, Rachie?” Quinn asks softly after they’re settled on the bed. “You’ve been acting really odd. I’ve noticed how you keep Puck, Santana, and Brittany at arm’s length. I know that you have no problem giving others, whether it’s deserved or not, a second, third and fourth chances. It’s because of that good heart that we are where we are today. But, I can’t help but notice how guarded you are with them. Why? I mean, they’ve proven to be sincere and they make an effort to include you and stuff.” Quinn clarifies once she sees Rachel hesitate, but still remaining quiet.

Rachel looks at her girlfriend and sighs. Of course Quinn would notice. She smiles sadly, as she settles her head on Quinn’s chest and absentely grabs one of the blonde’s hands. “First, let me start by saying that I love you and I don’t want you to feel bad about what I’m about to share with you,
okay?” Rachel says.

Quinn shifts slightly so she’s looking into Rachel’s cinnamon coloured eyes and wonders what is running through her girlfriend’s mind, and why the girl needs to emphasise that point. “Okay.” She agrees reluctantly. The last time something similar happened, Rachel was telling her about her move. She braces for the absolute worst, panicking that during their time apart, Rachel has let her doubts get in the way. She completely forgets about her original question as she silently prays that Rachel won’t break up with her. She is ready to flush her pride away and beg if it’s needed.

“I’ve never had friends before. I thought I was in heaven when we worked out our differences, and I honestly can say that I couldn’t have asked for anything more, even before we became more than friends. My relationship with Noah, but especially Santana, and Brittany is very new. I know it’s not fair, but part of me keeps waiting for the other shoe to drop. I keep waiting for ulterior motives to surface or for one of them to do something that will humiliate me.” Rachel says sadly.

“They won’t, Baby. I can see they’re truly sorry for how they’ve misjudged and treated you.” Quinn says gently, fighting the urge to sigh in relief when Rachel doesn’t mention breaking up. She hopes her words can quell some of Rachel’s doubts.

“I know I’m being fair. Even though things haven’t been perfect because Santana can be very abrasive, which combined with my flair for melodrama… well, you’ve seen the result. I know she’s very loyal to her friends. It’s hard enough knowing that I’ll have to say goodbye to you, however temporary that’ll be. Add them to the mix and I’m not sure what will happen when it’s time for me to go. When I started the ball rolling, you and I were barely on speaking terms. If things had remained the same, I’d only be saying good bye to my dads. But things did change, and definitely for the better between us. I told you the moment I knew I was going to those auditions.” Rachel continues softly.

“So you’re afraid you’ll have a hard time saying good bye to more people?” Quinn asks gently, understanding Rachel’s behaviour better.

“Partly. Let me explain myself better. You all have been wonderful and you all have made things within Glee bearable for me. I never thought I’d know what it feels like to have even just one person outside of my family, let alone a group of people standing up for me on a regular basis. I feel like a hypocrite because I’m willingly withholding information from them. They’ll probably hate me once they find out, and I’m just preparing myself for the heartache. I can almost hear the names, the insults, and the accusations once I tell them. I don’t want to get too attached because it’ll hurt less once they revert back to the way they’ve been treating me before.” Rachel says as she plays with Quinn’s fingers. She holds the blonde’s gaze and a few stray tears escape her eyes.

Quinn softly wipes away Rachel’s tears with her free hand. She remembers when Rachel had told her about her move and how much it hurt that the diva hadn’t confided in her right away, but she
also understands why. She’s happy and thankful she listened to what Rachel had to say before she acted.

“Are you planning on telling them soon?” Quinn asks.

“Yes. I don’t want our friendship to be based on a lie. If anything, it’ll help ease some of the guilt I feel whenever we spend time with them.” Rachel replies softly. “Do you think they’ll be able to keep it a secret until after I move?” Rachel asks.

“It’s not based on a lie. You’ve been nothing but sincere, if a little frosty. It’s understandable you want to make sure they’re trustworthy before you reveal something that important. They’ll deal once you tell them. I’ll do my best to keep them from spilling the beans, but just in case, you might want to prepare for the entire school to find out. Santana doesn’t offer her friendship lightly and Brittany is a sweetheart, but sometimes, she says things without realising she’s supposed to keep quiet. The only one who has surprised me has been Puck because he normally tries to get in the pants of anyone with two X chromosomes. Whatever you decide I’ll be behind you one hundred percent.” Quinn says as she too plays with Rachel’s fingers in her hand. “Are you having second thoughts about moving?” Quinn asks.

“Yes, I am. Time is running out, and I barely managed to function the few days you were away. I don’t know if I’ll survive New York without you.” Rachel admits.

“I love you Rachie. Listen to me, okay? Those four days have been by far the worst I’ve had, and that’s saying something considering the parents I have, but we’ll find a way. In the end, it’s about what’s best for you. As much as I want you to stay with me, I know that you need to go. Don’t let me hold you back. You don’t belong here. You’re meant to wow the rest of us with your voice on the best stages in the world. I’ll be the first one to drag your ass to New York once the school year is over. Don’t put your life on hold for anyone. Not even for me. I’ll do anything and everything I can so that when I graduate I’ll be joining you in New York. Our separation is only for two years, Baby. We are forever.” Quinn says, her eyes never wavering from Rachel’s eyes before she reaches down and places a loving kiss on Rachel’s lips.

“I wish I could take you with me.” Rachel says as she places a kiss on Quinn’s fingers.

“I wish I could go with you.” Quinn whispers sadly before she shifts their position again and covers Rachel’s lips with hers. “When will you tell them?” Quinn asks eventually.

“After Phoenix because I don’t know how they’ll react. I need to concentrate on my performance and I need them to do the same. It sounds horrible, but I don’t know if they can put aside personal
feelings and perform to the best of their ability. We need to be at our best if we wish to take first place.” Rachel says.

“It’s not horrible. It’s realistic. I expect nothing less when we’re in a cheerleading competition. Will you be all right with your mom being there as well?” Quinn asks.

“It’s nothing different from when we were in Regionals. We’re both professionals. While you were away, we’ve talked more frequently. We’ve both come to terms with the fact that we’re virtually strangers. We can’t expect to fall into a mother/daughter relationship out of the blue. I’m hoping that once we both relocate to New York, things will be less hectic. It should definitely be easier since we won’t have to deal with Dad’s disapproval or the stress that she’s coaching the competition. I figure we can start to become friends and hopefully one day we can move to something that resembles a mother-daughter relationship.” Rachel answers.

“I’m glad. I can see that she wants something similar in the way she looks at you. When do you plan on telling her?” Quinn continues.

“Probably after Phoenix as well. I don’t want her to think I’m following her. I don’t want her to think I’ll be making a pest of myself. Her moving to New York is an added bonus.” Rachel replies, worry clearly etched on her face.

“Just tell her that. You haven’t made a pest of yourself now so there is no reason for her to think that. She also knows you’ve been spending your summers in New York since you were eleven. And it’s not like you’ll be asking to live with her. I’m positive she’ll be ecstatic you’re going to be in the same city as her.” Quinn says smiling.

“Have your parents said anything about you spending most of the summer in New York with me?” Rachel asks.

“Not yet, but I think they’re ecstatic they won’t have to deal with me this summer. For appearances’ sake, my dad will wait further to give me the okay.” Quinn says bitterly. “At least I get to spend more time with you. Are you sure Andy will be okay with me crashing over for so long?” Quinn adds.

“Yes, silly. She was ecstatic when I mentioned that as a possibility. She also was asking about the portfolio you’re supposed to be sending her.” Rachel says with a smile.
“I talked to Grandpa Aaron and he’s helping me put it together. I’ll probably courier it to her soon.” Quinn says excited.

“Why not just e-mail her your work?” Rachel asks.

“I want her to see the actual printed work. I want to show that I can not only take photos but I can also develop the film and print the photos myself, even though that seems to be a lost art in this digital era. I also want her to see that I can use photo-editing software and most important, I don’t have to retouch my photos that much. Then again, it helps that my subject is perfect” Quinn replies looking adoringly at Rachel. “What’s with the rush?” Quinn asks.

“You’re the perfect one.” Rachel says as she kisses Quinn’s jaw. “As for her rush, I really don’t know. Andy says she’s curious.” Rachel adds scrunching her eyebrows, wondering the same thing.

Unfortunately, for Rachel, things at home are about the same. Leroy is sad, but proud of his daughter. He shows her nothing but his full support. Hiram, while not outright hostile, is still unhappy with Rachel’s decision to move and with her overall change. Hiram is convinced Rachel is compromising her convictions and her true self in order to please others, and although he’s not as vocal with his comments, he still drops them with enough frequency to ruin things for Rachel. She finds herself at odds, because she agrees partially with that, but she also knows that Andy is right. First impressions matter a hell of a lot, and if dressing a certain way gives her a slight advantage, then she’ll do just that. She’s not going to throw opportunities away just to prove a point. She has her family and Quinn who love her just the way she is.

* * *

Because the final in Phoenix takes place during the regular school year, they don’t have the luxury of extra time away from school. They are all disappointed that they won’t have time to sightsee the way they did in New York. As it is, they will be cutting it close by leaving Friday morning. Their competition will take place on Saturday, with the preliminaries being first thing in the morning. Then, they break for a show choir marketplace and food, before the final event in the evening. They will make their way to the Grand Canyon first thing next morning, and spend most of Sunday there before they fly back in the evening to resume school on Monday.

Sue’s role in their set list leak surfaces, and to everyone’s relief, it has resulted in her removal as their co-director. Like last time though, Figgins still insists on having a second chaperone, so Emma is once again the go to person for that job. Unlike the qualifying events, the teams competing in the finals are actually being sponsored by FAME events. They only have pay for the registration fees for the show choir marketplace and their transportation. The only catch is that they will get a total of four rooms with two double beds each. If they want more rooms, they will have to pay for them. Instead of spending the money for the extra rooms, they use it to arrange the short flight from Phoenix to the
Grand Canyon’s South Rim. They can technically afford both luxuries, but they’re of the mindset that saving as much money as possible is a good thing. There is no way of knowing what kind of funding they will get in the future. Hopefully a win or a top three placing will result in more funding.

“I’ll send Andy my portfolio once we return from Phoenix. I want to include photos of this trip.” Quinn tells Rachel with a smile as she checks to make sure all the accessories for her cameras are packed. “What I don’t get is why she wants me to send it to the Mirror instead of the apartment.” She adds.

“I imagine it’s because of her hectic schedule. There is no guarantee where she’ll be, which means that she might not be home when the package arrives. If it’s sent to her workplace, there’ll always be someone to sign for it.” Rachel says.

“Will you be sending a copy of it to Nigel as well? Or just the photos from Runway?” Rachel asks.

“I’ll send him a more personalised portfolio. I’ll probably send him the best photos I took of you that afternoon while we were in Elias-Clarke. I loved the whole process of you getting ready to the final look he got from you. You’re my guinea pig sort of speak. I’m still undecided on what I want. Part of me wants to follow Grandpa Aaron’s footsteps and part of me wants to go after the glamour of the fashion industry.” Quinn says. “Should I send it to Runway? Or should I send it to Andy and her deliver it to Nigel?” Quinn adds.

“Send it directly to Runway. It’s more professional that way. Just make sure it’s addressed to Nigel Kipling in the Art Department so it won’t mistakenly end up elsewhere.” Rachel says, looking at Quinn with adoring eyes.

“What is it?” Quinn asks.

“You’re so beautiful. I can look at you forever.” Rachel answers before she shifts and starts running her fingers all over Quinn’s face and neck, mapping every millimetre of her girlfriend’s face.

* * *

Schuester tries to make a point of separating the different cliques within Glee in order to foster better team dynamics. He argues that having him determine the rooming situation will teach them to get along better. Everyone groans in disapproval and look ready to start a mutiny. Emma puts a stop to it by stating the obvious. They need to get their rest in order to be able to give their best during the
competition. Forcing room assignments would result in everyone being tense and cause them undue stress, thus keeping them to getting the proper rest because they would have to not just share a room, but a bed with someone they don’t necessarily get along with. The result of course would be a compromised performance the following day. Everyone breathes a sigh of relief, while Schuester pouts like a child who’s been told he has to share his candy.

The three Cheerios and Rachel end up sharing one room, while Mercedes and Tina room with Emma. Quinn sends a quick prayer of thanks because any other set up would result in a very tense couple of nights. The boys’ pairing is a bit more complicated. Puck and Finn reluctantly agree to pair up, leaving Mike and Matt to join them in one room. Artie and Kurt share the last room with Schuester so the man can assist Artie.

* * *

Mercedes and Kurt give Rachel dirty looks when they see the diva talking openly with Shelby. They are convinced Rachel will betray them in her quest to improve her relationship with Shelby. It takes a superhuman effort for Quinn to resist the urge to kill them. How can they still question Rachel’s loyalty when the girl gives everything in her for their success? Her girl definitely does not need that kind of treatment and stress.

Rachel is uncharacteristically nervous that night. The rest chalk it up as the regular jitters of performing because of what is at stake. They fail to remember how at ease Rachel has always been when on stage. Only Quinn knows the real reason. They both hope that their friends will be able to keep things quiet until the last day of school. After that, Rachel doesn’t really care.

No one is surprised when Rachel decides to make it an early night, long before the curfew of ten p.m. or that Quinn is joining her. They return to their room after dinner, while the others opt to explore the hotel until the last possible second. Both girls are ecstatic they get to spend some time where they don’t have to watch how they behave with each other around their teammates.

“How are you holding up?” Quinn asks as she settles on the bed and opens her arms.

Rachel looks at her with a grateful smile before she all but lies on top of Quinn, burrowing in the blonde’s neck for a few seconds before letting out a contented sigh. “Better now that I’m in your arms.” Rachel says into the blonde’s neck.

“You don’t have to say anything to them. I can do it after you’re gone. That way they can be mad at me.” Quinn says, hating seeing Rachel so conflicted.
“Eggie, as tempting as that offer is, I won’t do that to you. I can’t have our friends mad at you because I’m too scared to tell them the truth. “Will you be with me when I tell them?” She adds.

“That’s a silly question. Of course I’ll be with you.” Quinn says as she pulls Rachel closer before she covers the diva’s mouth with her own.

They spend the time making out and talking about their summer together as they make tentative plans on what to do and where to go. The only downside of course is the fact that Quinn will have to return by the middle of August to spend some time with her parents and sister and to attend the mandatory Cheerios camp Sue holds the week before school starts. Quinn wonders why she continues to torture herself like that when she knows for a fact that NYU and Columbia won’t offer her a cheerleading scholarship. Still, the exercise is great, and if she’s honest with herself, the power is even better. If anything, it will look good on her transcript and college applications along with her work with the school’s newspaper, and her job as an assistant at the local portrait studio. She’ll gladly be in debt if it means following her dreams. She is done settling.

They move to a safer ‘best friends’ distance when they hear the lock click and the door to their room open. It’s not that they don’t trust the other two girls. They don’t want to risk Quinn’s parents finding out.

* * *

Not surprising, Leroy makes it to the competition. Once again, he shows up alone. Rachel is disappointed Hiram isn’t there, but she makes it a point to keep a brave front.

New Directions performs tenth out of the fifteen teams who qualified. By the time the last choir performs, there is no doubt in their minds they made it to the top six again. It comes as no surprise that Vocal Adrenaline and Dalton’s Sounds from Heaven are in the six groups vying for the National Champion title. The remaining teams consist of the groups that took first, fourth and fifth places at Nationals back in February. This time, everyone knows that New Directions is the team to beat because once again Rachel has been flawless. They draw the last spot for the finals. They’re then dismissed to explore the marketplace.

Rachel and Quinn automatically take off on their own, hoping for some time alone, only to be joined by Santana, Brittany and Puck. While most of the others are indifferent to Rachel, Mercedes and Kurt still give the diva attitude. Finn acts like a spurned lover ever since Rachel made it very clear that his attempts for more than friendship are not appreciated, and definitely unwanted. Rachel and Quinn do their best to stay away from the others.
Santana, Brittany and Puck notice how subdued Rachel is as they wander around the different exhibits and talks. It’s puzzling because they can hear the nervous chatter from the other teams. Everyone knows they are the team to beat. Maybe it’s because this is such an unfamiliar place for them to be. They have always been the underdog, but suddenly, after winning a few competitions, they are contenders.

“There’s no need to be nervous Rachel. You’re doing great and we’ve come this far because of you.” Brittany says cheerfully in an attempt to make the diva feel better.

“B’s right. We got this in the bag.” Santana adds.

“Thanks for your kind words. I really appreciate the support.” Rachel says sincerely. She is tempted to tell them right then and there.

Quinn automatically grabs Rachel’s hand and laces their fingers together. “Hey, everything will work out. Don’t stress about it so much. It’s almost over.” Quinn says vaguely.

Rachel smiles gratefully at Quinn and squeezes their hands together. She’s thankful of the contact and the lack of questions from the others in her group of dare she think it, friends. She hates that they have to hide the true nature of their relationship, but she knows better. Rachel sure as hell doesn’t want Quinn to experience the hate from the homophobes. She will gladly wear the label of ‘coward’ if it keeps her Quinn safe. They can fly their rainbow flags and proclaim their love openly once both of them are out of Lima.

They wander around the marketplace area, and listen to different talks and take in as many of the exhibits as they can. By the time they make it to the dining room where the buffet is set up, they come to the same conclusion. Will Schuester really needs to change his coaching methods if they wish to stay on top and be actual contenders during competitions. They cannot keep going with the notion of being fair and hand out solos just so everyone gets a chance. They have to be willing to use the best and only the best. And they need to train more and not leave their song selection to the very last second. They all hope that Mr. Schue and Miss Pillsbury are also wandering around, listening to the same talks.

Dinner continues in the same subdued tone. Santana, Brittany and Puck try to get Rachel out of whatever funk the girl seems to be in. They wonder why Quinn isn’t trying to be more hands on, but they figure the shorter blonde must know what’s she’s doing. Out of the four of them, no one knows Rachel better. By the time they make it back to the improvised backstage and set up area, they make it a point to reassure the diva that no matter what, they can count on their budding friendship. Only Quinn notices the flash of guilt that crosses Rachel’s eyes.
They change into new costumes and the girls get their makeup ready. When they are done, Rachel pulls out her iPod and her noise cancelling earbuds.

“What are you doing?” Puck asks curious.

“I already know what we’re up against since we’ve all competed against them in the past. I don’t want to go on stage influenced by what I hear. Regardless of how they do, I’ll go out and sing as if my life depended on it.” Rachel says softly before she plugs her ears and turns her music on.

Quinn follows suit, with her own iPod, and soon, one by one, the rest of New Directions are doing the same.

Rachel shakes her head in disbelief because this is the first time the others actually kind of, sort of listen to what she has to say without a major fight breaking. Not even from the usual suspects. Perhaps there are no flying pigs or blizzards in strange places, because she and Quinn have been transported to an alternate reality. She giggles at the absurdity of her thoughts, drawing strange looks her way. She will enjoy it while it lasts because she is sure that once they are done and their nervousness fades away, things will return to what is normal. Rachel pushes some of her darker thoughts aside and concentrates on each individual note coming from her iPod. She is a professional, damn it, and she will act like one. Even if it kills her, the show must go on.

When it’s their turn to sing, no one is surprised at the quality of Rachel’s performance. She nails her song and once again, the group feeds off of her energy. They receive a standing ovation when they are done. Rachel’s grin nearly splits her face in two when she sees Shelby mouthing ‘you did great. I’m very proud of you’ before she’s enveloped by Quinn in a bone-crunching hug. Soon, they share a group hug. When the MC announces the winning team, it’s no real surprise (at least to Rachel) that Vocal Adrenaline has come third, Sounds from Heaven second, and they’re announced as the first ever National Champions from the FAME event. Rachel can see the disappointment etched clearly in the other teams. She can certainly commiserate because that’s exactly how she felt when they came in third during the original Show Choir Nationals. They are asked to pose for promotional photos before they’re dismissed. Rachel is tempted to introduce herself to the Dalton team, but refrains from doing so. She doesn’t want to come across as conceited, nor does she want to be accused of bragging or wanting to rub in their win. She is content with smiling if she happens to make eye contact with anyone.

* * *

The following day, they check out as early as humanly possible. They make their way (half asleep for most) to the airport where they put their things in day lockers before they go to the proper terminal to board the small plane that will take them sightseeing.
By the time they land, everyone is awake and excited. Santana notices that even though Rachel’s spirits are definitely higher, the diva is still somewhat withdrawn. She wonders what is going on. She looks at Quinn and notices that her childhood friend looks sad and wonders if the two of them have had some sort of disagreement. She dismisses the thought once she notices how the two girls gravitate towards one another. When Mercedes and Kurt continue to throw barbs Rachel’s way, she imagines that’s the cause for Rachel’s behaviour, and that Quinn’s sadness is just her picking up on Rachel’s mood.

All introspection is forgotten when reach their destination. If the view when they were flying in was amazing, now that they’re actually there, it is truly breathtaking.

Quinn quickly grabs her cameras and starts snapping photos of the Grand Canyon, alternating with photos of Rachel, and the occasional photo of the rest of them.

“How do you only use the old camera on Rachel? There is more than just her in the team. Some of us might want to have our picture taken as well.” Finn says out of the blue when Quinn starts to focus her film camera on Rachel and takes a few photos.

“It’s my camera, my film and my talent. The day you pay for the film, the processing, and my time is the day you’ll have a say on who my subject is and which camera I should use. I’ve been taking photos of my friends and teammates when it’s been requested. There are others who brought their cameras as well and they sure as hell haven’t been asking others if they wished to be photographed. Why not pester them instead?” Quinn says after she lowers the camera, replaces the lens cap and puts it back safely in her bag.

“Why do you insist in causing problems when all we want to do is enjoy the beauty upon us? Leave us alone please.” Rachel says stepping between them. Rachel then turns around and runs a calming hand on Quinn’s forearm. “It’s okay, Quinn. Ignore him and let’s go find Daddy.” Rachel says as she settles her hand on top of Quinn’s.

“Dude, antagonising Rachel’s best friend is definitely not the way to get the girl to give you a chance.” Puck says shaking his head.

Those who hear, laugh at the exchange.

Soon, Quinn is once again snapping photos of everything around her, switching lenses and filters.
Rachel smiles at Quinn’s enthusiasm. She wishes the others would leave them alone long enough so that she could snuggle close to her girlfriend while they take in one of Mother Nature’s works of art. She makes a mental note of planning a return visit in the future with just Quinn.

The rest of the day is spent exploring and sightseeing. When it’s time to leave, they do so under protest.

Rachel is oblivious to anything and everything during the flight back to Ohio. Her mood darkens considerably, and for once, even Mercedes knows not to bother her. It helps that Leroy is within hearing distance and Quinn looks as if she is ready to rip anyone’s head off if they so much as look at Rachel funny. The day’s activities finally take a toll on everyone, and all twelve members of New Directions are asleep and out to the world until the plane touches down in Toledo.

* * *

Rachel and Quinn are relieved they won’t have to ride back to Lima with the rest of Glee.

“You girls go ahead and sit in the back. I don’t mind playing chauffer again.” Leroy says once they reach his SUV. He understands all too well the girls’ need to hide the true nature of their relationship.

“Thanks Daddy. I love you.” Rachel says as she pecks him on the cheek and gives him a one-armed hug. Her other hand never letting go of Quinn’s hands.

Leroy smiles and ruffles his daughter’s hair. He hates seeing his little girl so conflicted.

Quinn quickly sits behind Leroy, while Rachel settles beside the blonde on the middle seat.

“This is one of the few times I’m happy to be petite.” Rachel says as she snuggles into Quinn.

The other two chuckle at Rachel’s words.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Leroy asks once they’re settled in the car.
Rachel looks at Quinn’s encouraging smile and takes a deep breath. “I’m planning on telling Shelby, Santana, Brittany, and Noah I’m moving at the start of our summer break. I’m afraid of how they’ll react.” Rachel admits softly, leaning into Quinn’s comforting touch.

“Oh Sweetie, don’t let that get to you down. Shelby will be happy. The others will understand. Those of us who love you only want the best for you.” Leroy replies. “I thought you were upset about being separated from Quinn. Why did you wait until now? Since you’ve waited so long already, why not wait until the end of the school year? I mean, we’re talking about a month or so at most.” Leroy adds.

Rachel smiles as she feels Quinn’s grip tighten around her. She hates being reminded of their upcoming separation. Logically, she knows that two years are nothing in the grand scheme of life. Before things changed with Quinn, time wasn’t passing fast enough. Suddenly, it feels as if someone has put her life on fast forward. She has been quietly hoping for time to come to a standstill so she can be with Quinn for as long as she wishes.

“I hate lying to the few friends I have. They know I’ve been spending all my summers with Andy since she moved to New York, so Brittany has been making all these plans for us to hang out and do stuff upon my return. I feel like such a fake because I just nod my head and smile. Santana and Noah think it’s because I’m still unsure of their friendship. I guess in a way they’re correct because I am unsure, just not necessarily for the reasons they think. The guilt of withholding information and lying so blatantly to them has been eating at me. I’m sure they’re going to hate me and probably revert to treating me like before. I’m afraid they’re going to tell the rest I’m leaving, and I honestly don’t want them to know. I don’t think I can deal seeing the others’ looks of happiness once they know they won’t have to deal with me anymore after the last day of school.” Rachel admits quietly.

“Baby, they’ll be fine. You’ve only been friends with them since Spring Break. Trust is built over time. Once you explain the situation to them in the same manner you did with me, they’ll offer their support.” Quinn says as she places a kiss on Rachel’s temple.

“How can you be so sure?” Rachel asks as she nuzzles Quinn’s neck, sighing at the scent of Quinn’s perfume mixed in with something that is unique just to Quinn.

“Santana and Brittany know they have a lot to make up for because of the way they have treated you in the past. They understand it’s a work in progress. They know that anyone in their right mind would be suspicious at the sudden change in behaviour, so it’s only logical to think that they’ll understand your reluctance to share your secrets with them.” Quinn says gently. ‘And if your fears do come true, then they’ll just have to deal with me.’ Quinn thinks to herself.
Rachel snuggles as close as the seatbelts allow them to.

“Listen to Quinn, Baby Girl. You started feeling apprehensive when they first offered you their friendship, but over the past few months, you’ve discovered they’ve been sincere. Trust in that.” Leroy says gently. The last thing he wants is for his daughter to face yet another crisis. Granted, this one is self-created, but in his eyes, nothing but happiness is acceptable, especially when one takes into consideration the kind of life Rachel has had growing up. It truly amazes Leroy how wonderful Rachel is.

The rest of the drive is spent discussing their possible plans for the summer. Leroy has already planned in spending his vacation in New York helping Rachel get settled. He hopes Hiram can set aside his issues and if not show his support, then at least stop the hurtful comments that unfortunately have started to increase again. He supposes it’s because the time is getting closer for Rachel’s departure from Lima and from their everyday life. He understands being unhappy about that, but he will never accept nor will he ever understand Hiram’s need to lash out at their only daughter.

* * *

Quinn heads home grudgingly once they make their way back to Lima. ‘It’s not like they’d even notice if I’m gone for a few more days.’ Quinn thinks bitterly as she grabs her duffle bag while Rachel grabs the garment bag with their costumes.

“Here, let me help you with that.” Rachel says softly. “I hate it that you have to return here as well.” Rachel adds in a whisper. She wants to lean in and kiss her girlfriend, but she doesn’t want to risk blowing their cover.

“I know. It’s so stupid. They’re fine with us being friends and with me staying at your place, but they won’t ever allow you to stay here.” Quinn says angrily. “They’re such hypocrites.” Quinn adds bitterly.

“Shh. It’s okay Eggie. It could be so much worse. Your dad could all of a sudden decide that even being friends is a bad thing. At least he’s not saying you can’t sleep over.” Rachel says soothingly.

“That’s probably because it gets me out of the house and out of their sight.” Quinn can’t help but say.

Both girls know they need to get going, since Quinn still has insane Cheerios practice. Sue wants to
make sure they practice until the very last day of school.

“Come on, the sooner we get this over with, the sooner we get to fall asleep while we Skype.” Rachel says. “I know it’s not the same, but it’s better than nothing.” Rachel adds with a sad smile.

“Yeah. I know. Let’s get this over with.” Quinn says with a sigh.

“I’ll be right back, Daddy.” Rachel says softly before she turns around to follow Quinn inside.

The girls make a beeline to Quinn’s room. It doesn’t surprise either of them when neither one of the older Fabrays come out to greet their daughter, even after a weekend away.

Quinn tries to mask the pain she feels. Even though she knows to not get her hopes up, part of her always wishes for her parents to show her that she matters. She can’t bear to imagine what things will be like once Rachel is gone. ‘Don’t torture yourself with that. Two years are nothing.’ Quinn thinks as they trudge their way up the stairs.

Rachel fights the urge to march into their individual hiding places and give them each a piece of her mind at how poorly they treat Quinn. It kills her that Quinn will have to endure two more years of indifference before she can join her in New York permanently.

Quinn dumps her duffle bag on the floor. She immediately closes and locks her door once Rachel crosses the threshold.

“Just toss that anywhere.” Quinn says as she pulls Rachel into her. “I’ve missed holding you close.” She adds with a seductive smile.

“Not that I’m complaining, but you did hold me for the entire hour and a half it took Daddy to drive us back.” Rachel says with a giggle as she presses her body closer to Quinn. “And for the record, I’ve missed being in your arms as well.” She adds as she leans up to place a chaste kiss on Quinn’s lips.

The kiss soon deepens as their tongues begin their well choreographed dance. It’s their all familiar play for dominance that both girls know neither one will win, but they sure enjoy trying. They pull apart only when their lungs scream from lack of oxygen.
“I hate to do this, but I need to get back to Daddy and we don’t want your parents getting angry because I’m taking too long helping you with your luggage.” Rachel says sadly.

“I know Baby. I hate this part.” Quinn says as they reluctantly pull apart. “Come on. Let’s get going before I change my mind and end up following you home.” Quinn adds as she grabs Rachel’s hand and heads for the door.

“Wait.” Rachel says as she stops abruptly before they reach the door. She pulls the taller girl to her and kisses said girl senseless. “We won’t be able to do that once we leave the safety of your room, and I wanted to say good night to you properly.” Rachel says with a silly grin plastered on her face once she sees the dazed and confused look on her girlfriend. Kissing Quinn always leaves her giddy.

“Never thought of it, since we never hang out here, but you’re right.” Quinn says with her own goofy grin. “Good night, Baby. Sweet dreams.” Quinn whispers before she lowers her face and captures the brunette’s lips once more.

“Mmm. Good night Eggie.” Rachel mumbles through a series of playful nips at the blonde’s bottom lip and jaw line before they separate.

Reluctantly, they pull apart and make their way out the room and down the stairs towards the front door.

Quinn hooks her arm around Rachel’s. “What? Besties do things like this all the time.” Quinn says with a shrug. She refuses to let go of the diva unless it’s absolutely necessary.

Rachel smiles at that and allows Quinn to drag/guide her to the front door.

“You don’t have to walk me to the car.” Rachel says, not making any effort to pull her arm free or to start making her way to Leroy’s car.

“I want to.” Quinn says softly.

“It’s okay. You do, and I’d just have Daddy wait until I know you’re safely back inside. This would mean it’d take me longer to get back, and thus, delaying my night time routine an extra few minutes,
which of course would mean less Skype time for us.” Rachel says with a silly smile.

“You’re such a goof. You’re lucky I love you as much as I do.” Quinn whispers, her lips ghosting ever so slightly over the shell of Rachel’s ear.

Rachel shivers at the delicious feel of Quinn’s lips and breath. She has to fight the urge to pull the blonde for another kiss. As it is, they’re risking being caught in such an intimate position. Instead, she settles with placing her hand on her girlfriend’s forearm and sending her a look that communicates what her words can’t for now.

“Good night Eggie.” Rachel says as she reluctantly pulls away.

“G’nite Rachie.” Quinn whispers as she enjoys Rachel’s hand lingering on her arm for as long as possible.

With a final wave, Rachel turns around and nearly sprints to Leroy’s car. She can’t begin to imagine how tough it will be when she has to say goodbye to Quinn for longer than a few nights apart once summer settles in and her move is done.

“Things will work out in the end. You’ll see.” Leroy says gently once Rachel is buckled in.

“I know Daddy. I just don’t have to like the how.” Rachel says sadly.

“Do you regret the change in your relationship with Quinn?” Leroy asks as he pulls out of the Fabrays’ driveway.

“No, I don’t. Regardless of whether or not we acted on our deeper feelings, I’d still be feeling like this. I honestly feel as if I’m going to leave part of me behind. Don’t get me wrong Daddy. I love you and I’ll miss you tons, but I know it’s part of life, you know? Moving out while I make my mark in the world. I had no idea leaving Quinn behind would hurt this much.” Rachel says as tears begin to spill from her eyes.

“Hey, you have at least one more month here and then she’ll be joining you in New York for a big chunk of the summer. You’ll have the added bonus that you won’t have to hide the way you have to here.” Leroy says, his heart breaking at the sight of his daughter’s tears.
“And time will pass by so fast that in a blink of an eye I'll be saying goodbye to her for two years.” Rachel says dejected, fighting to keep more tears from spilling.

“It'll be Thanksgiving before you know it and you’'ll be back. You can see Quinn then. Soon after, it'’ll be Christmas break.” Leroy counters.

Rachel smiles at Leroy’s attempt to cheer her up. She quickly grabs a Kleenex to wipe her tears and to blow her nose. “Thanks Daddy.” Rachel says.

“Just take it one day at a time.” Leroy says in understanding. Things might be tense with Hiram, but he still loves his husband a lot. Even with him acting like a total ass, he still misses the man whenever they’re apart.

“I’m trying Daddy. I know that’s the only way I’ll survive being away from Quinn for extended periods of time.” Rachel says, glad they’re back at the house. It’s supposed to be home, but it hasn’t felt that way in a very long time. Judging by how she has felt while visiting Andy, she thought maybe New York would feel like home, especially after her last visit. Truth be told though, she only feels safe and home whenever she’s with Quinn. ‘God! I’ve become such a cliché and such a sap.’ Rachel thinks as she exits the car.

Leroy grabs her things before she has a chance to. “Go on, I got everything.” He says with a warm smile.

“Thanks Daddy.” Rachel says as kisses him on the cheek and grabs her messenger bag. “You’re the best.” She adds before she makes her way inside the house. Rachel smiles when she sees Hiram in the kitchen, thinking he is there to welcome her back. “Hi Dad.” Rachel greets softly, as she wraps her arms around his neck in an awkward hug.

“I see you haven’t forgotten you have more than one father.” Hiram says coldly as he pushes her away. He stops whatever else that he is about to say when he sees the anger in Leroy’s face as he walks in just after Rachel.

“Baby Girl, why don’t you go up and get ready for bed. Do you need anything from your bag?” Leroy says gently as he puts Rachel’s things on the breakfast island before he pulls his daughter into a comforting hug.
“My toiletries bag.” Rachel says barely above a whisper, melting into his arms and burrowing her face in his chest.

Leroy’s heart breaks when he hears Rachel’s voice and feels her tears soaking his shirt. He closes his eyes hoping to control his rising temper. “Go on then, grab it, and I’ll take the rest up to your room in a bit.” Leroy says as gently as he can. “I’m very proud of you and I love you very much.” He adds as he kisses the top of her head before he wipes her tears away lovingly.

“I love you too, Daddy.” Rachel whispers, grateful that she has Leroy in her corner. She can’t begin to imagine what it would feel like to have both parents against her. It makes her heart clench in pain and sympathy as she thinks of Quinn. She vows to do anything in her power to show Quinn how much she is loved. She stands on her tippy toes long enough to peck Leroy’s cheek. She debates saying something to Hiram, but self-preservation wins. She grabs whatever she needs from her suitcase, and then she turns around and walks out of the kitchen, making a beeline for the stairs.

“Don’t.” Leroy says curtly as he walks to the doorway that connects to the dining room when he notices Hiram is about to say something. When he hears the faint clicking of Rachel’s bedroom door closing he turns around, no longer attempting to contain the fury he feels from showing in his face.

“I cannot bloody believe you’d say something like that to my daughter after not seeing her for three days. Or that you’d physically push her away from you in such a manner.” Leroy says in a low voice, fighting the urge to hit the man he has been together with for twenty years.

“This wouldn’t be happening if you weren’t always spoiling her and giving in to all her demands…” Hiram starts to say, voice rising with each spoken word, until he is interrupted by Leroy’s index finger poking him in the chest.

“Lower your voice. The last thing I want my daughter to hear is the two of us arguing about her. She’s going through enough crap without us adding more to it.” Leroy hisses as he lowers his hand and clenches his fists beside him. “The only reason this, as you call it, is happening is your rotten attitude.” He adds.

“She’s my daughter too, yet, you’ve taken all the decision making out of my hands. No one talked to me about my feelings about her moving out so early. It’s almost like you’re happy she’s moving away.” Hiram says in a huff.

“Pull your head out of your ass and start acting as her father. Think of what’s best for Rachel and not what’s best for you. We both know that since we moved here, her life has been nothing but hell. I’m tired of seeing my baby girl skirting the fine line from having a complete meltdown. Rachel moving
on is the best for her emotional and professional wellbeing. I’m not happy I won’t get to see my little
girl every day, but I’m happy she gets a break from all the drama.” Leroy says for what feels like the
millionth time.

“No, it isn’t. It’s Rachel running away from her problems. She needs to stand up to her bullies. We
need to get the school board and the school involved in this. Letting her pack her bags and moving to
a different state only reinforces the notion that when things get hard, the solution is to run.” Hiram
says in a tone of voice that a person would use to explain something to a child.

“Do not patronise me, Hiram. I love you, but we know what it’s like to deal with the prejudice
Rachel is dealing with just for being our daughter.” Leroy says, fighting to keep his voice down.

“You don’t know what it’s like to be bullied. You were always big and tall. I survived my bullies in
school. I survived the name calling, the swirlies, the dumpster drops, the rent-a-toilet rolls, the
flagpole wedgies, and the beat ups. You never had to deal with it, not until you came out during
college, and even then, others were afraid to pick on you. All that I went through only served to
build character. Rachel is turning into someone I barely recognise. She shouldn’t have to change the
way she dresses or carries herself in order to please others. In the long run, she’ll thank me for it.”
Hiram says arrogantly.

“What kind of bubble do you live in? Do you hear the words coming out of your mouth? Yes, it’s
very commendable that you survived your bullying, but that doesn’t give you the right to play judge,
jury, and executioner when it comes to Rachel’s life. She isn’t running away. Her life here is
miserable. She is making her life better, and she is making her dreams come true. She is saving her
sanity. As for her recent changes? I’m glad to see them. If I had known that all it took for my baby
girl to feel less alienated with her peers was a new wardrobe, then I’d have forked out for one a long
time ago. If having Rachel dress different from the way she used to assures me that she’ll be treated
fairly, then I’m one hundred percent behind it. Her new wardrobe hasn’t changed who she is at the
core. She’s still the same sweet girl with the same values. She does, however, know that in this
world, she will be judged solely by her appearance. I’ll do whatever in my power to stack the odds in
know the young woman behind the clothes.” Leroy says with a shake of his head.

“You’re the one who lives in a dream world. I’m trying to prepare Rachel to face the harsh reality of
life. You’re sheltering her from everything that’s bad. You have to let her fall. You can’t keep
running after her with a safety net because the day you stop, she won’t know what to do.” Hiram
says, his frustration showing, as his voice starts to rise again.

“You’re absolutely unbelievable. Wake up Hiram, and stop pushing Rachel away. We have given
Rachel a solid core of beliefs. She knows the difference between right and wrong. Letting others
openly abuse her isn’t preparing her to face the real world. There is a difference between tough love,
being realistic, and being cruel. I finally see that spark of joy return to her eyes. I get to see the
relaxed and poised young woman we’ve raised. Will she make mistakes while she’s in New York? Of course she will. Will all her problems all of a sudden disappear? No, they won’t, but she gets a fresh start. One where there is no history or preconceived notions for others to judge her. She’ll get the best education possible and she gets to further her training in Juilliard with the best voice coaches in the world. I want what’s best for her, not what’s best for us.” Leroy tries to reason with Hiram yet again.

“How is Rachel moving out to be on her own be what’s best for her?” Hiram says defiantly.

“Rachel isn’t moving out on her own. She is moving in with Andy, who just so happens to be your niece, and the same woman who has been taking care of Rachel every summer since our daughter was six. Regardless of where she is physically, she will always have my love and my guidance. We’re never going to agree on this, and I’m too tired to go on in circles. I don’t want to say or do something I’ll regret later. I never thought I’d live to see the day where I have to protect my daughter from you. You’re supposed to be an adult. Act like one. You keep this up, and your relationship with Rachel will resemble the one Andy has with her mother.” Leroy says, but before he can continue, he is interrupted by the doorbell. He furrows his eyebrows and wonders who it might be at this hour on a Sunday night. “I’ll be in the guest room tonight.” He says as he makes his way to the front door, leaving behind a shocked Hiram.

TBC...
Chapter 12

Quinn closes the front door and frowns at the empty feel of the house. She debates whether or not to greet her parents. Russell is probably hiding in the den debating if one more drink will give him a hangover the following day and if so, can he fake his way through it. Judy is probably in the small library, nursing the last drink of the night, hoping that it would drown her sorrows and/or the reality she finds herself in. In the end, after casting a bitter glance at the closed doors, she chooses her sanity and returns to her bedroom.

Quinn pushes away her sadness and resentment. She’s not in the mood to deal with them. If they can’t bother to greet her after another absence, then she’s not going to ruin her night further. She really shouldn’t be surprised. They weren’t there when she returned from Spring Break, nor were they there when she returned from cheerleading Nationals. Part of her can’t wait for summer to arrive because she’ll be away for two glorious months in New York with Rachel away from this apathy. Another part of her wishes for time to stop. She would gladly endure anything her parents throw her way if it means Rachel gets to stay a bit longer.

Quinn gets everything she will need the following day ready. She steps in her bathroom to finish off her nightly routine. When she’s done, she grabs her laptop and sets it on her bedside table. She starts a game of solitaire while she waits for Rachel’s text so they can start their nightly Skype session whenever Quinn isn’t staying with the Berrys. She smiles when her cell phone goes off with an all too familiar ring tone and the smiling face of her girlfriend flashes on the screen. She wonders why Rachel is calling instead of sending the usual text. Not that she’ll complain. She loves the sound of Rachel’s voice.

* * *

Rachel calls Quinn the moment her bedroom door closes. Her tears are flowing freely as she waits for the blonde to pick up.

“Hey Rachie. That was a lot faster than I expected. Let me log on and we can start.” Quinn says. She’s about to joke about Rachel’s eagerness when she realises that no matter how much Rachel tries
to speed things up, it usually takes the diva longer to get ready for bed. She tenses when she factors in the time it would have taken Leroy to drive them back. “What’s wrong Rachie?” She asks, debating which parent she’s going to inform that she’ll be spending the night at the Berrys after all.

“I… I just needed to hear your voice after…” Rachel says, and proceeds to tell Quinn the small exchange with Hiram.

“I’m on my way.” Quinn says when Rachel is done. It kills Quinn that she’s not there to hold Rachel while the brunette is crying.

“It’s okay, Eggie. You shouldn’t risk upsetting your parents by spending all your time here.” Rachel says between sniffles.

“Baby, up until the day geography becomes an issue, I’ll always go to you when you need me to.” Quinn says. “My parents won’t notice. If they do, they certainly won’t care. As long as I don’t do something scandalous in their eyes, they don’t bother to acknowledge me. They’ll probably have another drink to celebrate another night of freedom from me.” She adds bitterly.

“We just came back from Phoenix, and you have an early practice tomorrow. I don’t want you to get in trouble with Ms. Sylvester because I’m too much of a baby to deal with things on my own. I just needed to hear you right away. Let me get ready so we can start our Skype session as planned. I’m sorry I messed up our routine.” Rachel says sadly.

“Don’t ever apologise for needing me, because I certainly don’t when I’m the one who needs you. There is nothing you can say or do that’ll prevent me from going to you, Rachie. Regardless of when and how I found out, I’d be heading your way. I’ll gladly walk around like a zombie on crutches and deal with Coach’s insults and put downs if it means I can make you feel better. I’ll be there in a flash. I love you Baby.” Quinn says gently.

“I love you too, Eggie.” Rachel says softly, relief evident in her voice.

* * *

Quinn grabs her things, glad that some of Rachel’s organisational skills are rubbing off on her because she doesn’t have to waste time packing. She doesn’t bother changing out of her pyjamas. As a precaution, she double checks she has everything. There’s no way she’ll come back in the morning if she can postpone it until after school. Hell, if it were up to her, she’d be staying with Rachel until the end of the school year. Just before she runs out, Quinn informs Judy she’s on her way to Rachel’s because of some unexpected schoolwork emergency. Judy looks at her youngest daughter in an alcohol induced stupor, nods and mumbles something about being careful. She considers telling Russell, but the thought of seeing him, let alone speak to him, fills the young blonde with dread and disgust. Given the choice, she would much rather French kiss a crocodile than interact with her ‘father’. As far as she’s concerned, he’s only her sperm donor and the man who passed on the Fabray name.

Quinn drives as fast as she can to the Berrys’ house without breaking too many traffic laws. She curses yet again, as she’s caught in another red light. While she waits for it to change, (she swears they’re taking longer) she wonders what’s worse. The blatant disregard and indifference she gets from her parents, or the back and forth thing between Dr. Berry and Rachel. She sighs because regardless, she thinks neither one of them deserve the kind of biological parents they have. At least Rachel has Leroy and Andy, and it seems like Shelby is doing her best to get to know the child she was a surrogate for. Before she starts to feel sorry for herself, Quinn reminds herself she has her grandparents Aaron and Jill. Along with Rachel, they are the only reason she hasn’t gone postal. When the light finally turns green, it takes all her willpower to not floor the gas pedal. Constantly
repeating under breath “getting in an accident won’t help, and neither will a speeding ticket” helps.

In the blink of an eye, Quinn flies out of her car and is standing by the front door balancing her things. She wants to kick herself the second her finger leaves the doorbell. She should have texted Leroy or Rachel. Instead, she has to risk running into and dealing with Dr. Berry if he’s the one answering the door. She’s not sure she can hold her tongue. As it is, she feels as if she deserves an award for the self control she has shown to date. Without Rachel or Leroy as buffers, she’s sure her protective side will cause problems. Quinn tenses involuntarily when the front door swings open. She relaxes when Leroy’s familiar tall frame is standing on the other side, his frown of confusion turning into a relieved smile.

“Quinn, your timing is perfect. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you’re psychic.” Leroy says once he sees the blonde standing there with a sheepish smile.

“Rachel called. I got here as fast as I could. I’m sorry to disturb you so late, but I’m not sorry that I can be here for Rachel.” Quinn says as she steps inside.

“You’re not disturbing me at all. You’re just what Rachel needs. Go work your magic. My little girl needs a reason to smile.” Leroy says with a grateful smile.

“Thanks.” Quinn says before she runs up the stairs.

Quinn opens the door, and Rachel jumps at the sound of the door opening. Quinn quickly drops her things and kicks the door closed before she takes a few steps over to where Rachel is. Her heart breaks when she sees the sadness in the eyes she loves so much.

* * *

Rachel nearly jumps to the ceiling when she steps out of her en suite wearing her favourite oversized bathrobe and sees Quinn closing the door to her room. She gives Quinn a watery smile before she surrenders to her girlfriend’s waiting arms. The feel of Quinn’s arms around her starts a fresh bout of tears. When she finally eases on her death grip, she feels Quinn gently guiding them to the bed.

“Oh Eggie, I’m so glad you didn’t listen to me and came.” Rachel says, her voice trembling with the effort to stop herself from crying again.

“Shh. I’ll always come to you whenever it’s physically possible for me to do so, just like I know you’ll do for me.” Quinn says gently as she sits with her back to the headboard with the diva safely tucked in her arms and sitting on her lap. Rachel slouches so her head is resting on the blonde’s chest. Quinn takes the chance to free Rachel’s hair from the confines of a messy bun. “Let it all out Baby. Don’t try to hold it in because that’ll only hurt more. I’m here to catch you and to keep you safe.” Quinn says when she sees Rachel fighting to keep her tears at bay.

Rachel clings to Quinn. Soon, sobs wrack her tiny frame. She mutters the occasional phrase here and there. They’re muffled by Quinn’s chest, so the blonde has no idea what Rachel is saying. Not that it matters, because all she wants is for her girl to stop hurting. They can talk about it after the brunette calms down. She holds Rachel tightly and runs her free hand through brown locks. She places kisses anywhere she can. Eventually, the sobs subside to whimpers. When Rachel finally stops, Quinn guides her to the en suite.

“Here, Baby. Sit while I get a few things ready.” Quinn says as she gently prods Rachel to sit on top of the closed toilet. She grabs a box of Kleenex and hands it to Rachel. She fills the sink with warm water and grabs a washcloth. Then as lovingly and as softly as possible, she wipes Rachel’s face clean. When Quinn is satisfied with her work, she places a chaste kiss on Rachel’s lips.
“I’m sorry I got you all snotty.” Rachel says between sniffles.

“It’s no big deal at all.” Quinn says adoringly. “Why don’t you finish here while I get a few things ready?” She asks as she heads back into the bedroom.

Rachel nods as she lets the water out of the sink and grabs her toothbrush.

Quinn goes through Rachel’s dresser and takes out two t-shirts and a pair of shorts. She changes into a clean shirt and places Rachel’s sleeping attire on the bed. She runs down to the kitchen and returns with a glass of water. She grabs Rachel’s iPod touch, fiddles with it and after finding a suitable playlist, plugs it into the docking station.

Rachel joins Quinn in the bedroom right as the first notes leave the speakers.

Quinn’s jaw drops open when she finally allows herself to take in the sight of her girlfriend still wearing that oversized bathrobe. “It’s sinful how sexy you are.” Quinn says as she walks over and wraps Rachel in her arms. She covers the brunette’s lips in a very intense kiss before Rachel has a chance to reply.

“Go ahead and get dressed while I get your things ready for tomorrow. You can veto my wardrobe choice if you don’t like it.” Quinn says gently, making sure she runs one of her hands over Rachel’s face in a tender caress, followed by a chaste kiss.

“I’ll be fine with whatever you choose. I trust you.” Rachel whispers, closing her eyes and leaning into Quinn’s touch.

Quinn makes her way to Rachel’s walk-in closet and picks out an outfit that she sets on the back of Rachel’s desk chair. She makes sure Rachel has all the books she’ll need before she makes her way to the bed. “Come here Baby.” She says as she lies down and holds her arms open.

Rachel lies down with her upper body draped over Quinn’s chest, tangling their legs together. She looks in Quinn’s eyes, getting lost in the depth of the love she sees, eventually drawing strength she’s sure she wouldn’t have on her own. “Why can’t Dad see he’s hurting me? I’ll be gone in a month and a half, maybe two, and it feels as if he’s treating me the way the people at school do. If I didn’t know better, I’d think he hates me. It feels like I’m only good enough for his love if I do what he wants, how he wants it, and when he wants it. Isn’t a parent’s love supposed to be unconditional? Why am I so hard to like and love?” Rachel asks, fresh tears spilling out.

“Shh. It’s not that Dr. Berry doesn’t love you. I believe he doesn’t know how to deal with the pain of what he sees as losing you, so he’s lashing out instead.” Quinn says. That belief is the only reason she hasn’t gone HBIC on the man yet. She leans over enough to place a kiss on Rachel’s forehead before continuing. “You’re not hard to like or hard to love. Once I opened my eyes, look at how easy it was for us to become friends. How easy it’s been for me to fall in love with you.

“The sheep at school are too stupid and too scared to have their own opinion. They’ve been told for so long that they’re not supposed to like you that they can’t see past the fear of rocking the boat and that’s their loss. The morons we have for teammates are jealous of your talent. We know we’re good, but the truth is, no matter how good our voices are, they pale in comparison to yours. We know you’re destined for greatness. That’s a tough pill to swallow, especially when we all have dreams, but knowing you’re the only one who has them within your grasp even now. The idiots at school treat you like that because they need to bring you down to their level. You’re a constant reminder to most of them that they’ll be lucky if they make it out of Lima, let alone Ohio.” Quinn adds with a loving smile before she places a kiss on the top of Rachel’s head.
“Daddy is sad I’m moving, but he accepts it and supports me in any way he can. Whether or not he thinks I’m making a mistake, he won’t interfere unless I’m about to do something monumentally stupid. He knows that in the end it’s my mistake to make because he won’t be able to shield me from the world forever. And no, I know he doesn’t think I’m making a mistake by transferring. He knows I’m thinking about my future. I’m not delusional enough to think that everything will be a cakewalk once I’m in New York. I know I have my work cut out in front of me. Even if I manage to get noticed, there’s no guarantee that I’ll make it big. It’s a risk I’m willing to take. Then, there’s you. One word from you, and I’d stay behind, yet you love me enough that you want what’s best for me. No one outside my family has loved me that much.” Rachel says, burrowing herself deeper within the safety of Quinn’s embrace. “Why can’t Dad do the same?” Rachel asks sadly. “What if he’s right? What if I can’t cut it? He keeps reminding me that here, in a town of ten-thousand, I’m good, but out there, in a city of millions, I’ll be lucky to be one of the bunch. What happens if the pressure and the competition get to be too much? I’m not sure if I can handle not being the best.” She adds softly.

Quinn tightens her hold on Rachel, hoping that the weight of her girlfriend’s body will be enough to keep the blonde where she is. Quinn wants to march into Leroy and Dr. Berry’s room and give the latter a good talking to. Hiram Berry is supposed to want the best for Rachel while preparing her for the challenges of the real world. He’s supposed to do anything and everything in his power to make things better. Not become a challenge himself. She takes a steadying breath and kisses Rachel softly. “Rachie, don’t sell yourself short. You’re the furthest thing from ‘just being one of the bunch’. You have a fantastic voice. A voice you’ve honed to near perfection here. Juilliard will perfect it before you even start college, and the world will bow at your feet. Yes, there are a lot of people with good voices out there, but there’s something special about yours that sets you apart. You’ll be fine with the competition because as talented as you are, nothing has come easy for you. We’ve made you work very hard for each and every solo. As for Dr. Hiram, I don’t know, Baby. Maybe he doesn’t realise his actions are hurting you because he’s so focused on his own pain. The only reason I haven’t smacked some sense into him, is because a very small part of me understands his pain. The thought of not being able to hold you like this whenever I want to, comes mid-August is debilitating. I wish I could make him understand that no matter how much he’s hurting, he shouldn’t lash out at you. Maybe he thinks that if he stays angry enough, it might hurt less.” Quinn says.

“You and Daddy aren’t lashing out.” Rachel points out the obvious again.

“I can’t speak for Leroy, but judging by the way he is with you, I would hazard a guess and say that no matter what happens he’ll always be in your corner. As for myself, I admit that when you first told me you’re moving I was angry and hurt. The temptation was there to push you away, because in my warped mentality, it would have meant sparing myself the pain of losing my best friend. Then I came to my senses. The thought of hurting you in any way almost made me physically ill.

“I’m glad I got over my stupidity and got to know you because in the process I’ve found my soul mate. I’ll never willingly hurt you again. I only want the best for you. If that includes being your personal cheerleader so that you can follow your dreams, then I’ll be more than happy to fulfill that role.” Quinn says as she shifts enough so that she can claim Rachel’s lips again.

When they pull apart, Rachel nuzzles Quinn’s neck. “How will I cope without you in New York?” She finally asks.

“We’ll survive the time apart and it’ll only make us stronger. I’m letting go so you can find yourself again. I’ll never be an obstacle. I’ll never hold you back for my own benefit. You don’t belong here, Rachie. We concentrate on the time we still have. As you said before, if we can’t be with each other physically, we can be with each other electronically. We’ll figure out a way so we won’t go nuts, but
as God is my witness, once this school year is over, you will move to New York City to fulfill your
dreams, even if I have to drag you there kicking and screaming. In two years’ time, come hell, or
high water, I’ll join you. I love you, Rachel. We are forever.” Quinn says with conviction.

“I love you too Eggie. At one point, I really thought I only had my family on my side. Since last
October, you’ve become one of my rocks. Thank you for making me feel so loved.” Rachel says as
she burrows impossibly closer into Quinn’s embrace.

“It’s so easy to love you, Baby. Don’t ever doubt that. If it weren’t for the fact that breathing is
involuntary, the lemmings would need someone to tell them when to inhale and exhale. Their
opinion doesn’t count. Remember that every time those morons say something hurtful.” Quinn says
warmly, already anticipating her girlfriend would bring that up again. She swallows the urge to
apologise again because she knows part of their behaviour is her doing. Instead, she kisses Rachel
and thanks her lucky stars that the brunette in her arms has such a forgiving heart.

“Eggie, let go of the past. Don’t hold on to something you can’t change.” Rachel says the moment
she feels Quinn stiffen slightly the way she does whenever their past is alluded to or mentioned.
Quinn’s breath hitches at the sadness she sees in Quinn’s eyes. She feels a wave of guilt wash over
her. She keeps forgetting that as bad as things are with her dad, her situation is very recent. She has
been lucky to grow up with two supportive fathers for most of her life. Unlike Quinn, who has had
to deal with Russell’s very vocal disapproval of just about every choice she has made and with
Judy’s indifference.

“I’m trying, Baby.” Quinn says as she gives Rachel another kiss. She frowns when she takes in the
shift in Rachel’s mood. “Baby, what’s wrong?” She asks with concern.

“I’m so sorry Eggie. Dad and the others are right. I am a spoiled, self-centred, and self-serving brat.”
Rachel replies brokenly.

“Whoa! Back it up a little, Baby. What brought that on? You’re not any of that. You’re the most
selfless girl I’ve met. Yes, you want every solo and you want to be the centre of the universe. So do
I. Well, not so much the solos part, but I sure as hell want the universe to revolve around me. I want
things my way all the time, like every human on this planet.” Quinn says. “But, when the chips are
down and any person you know needs anything, you’re the first one to offer help. Even if and when
we don’t deserve such kindness.” She adds when she sees Rachel is about to protest.

“But I am selfish. Don’t you get it? You’ve been dealing with your parents’ emotional neglect and
here I am, dumping my issues with Dad on you, without even thinking how hard things are for you.”
Rachel answers in the same broken whisper, a fresh bout of tears filling her eyes.

“Shh. The sperm donor has always been a dick. Mom, well, she’s been brainwashed into thinking
the sun rises and sets in his ass. It sucks, but it’s nothing new. I’m used to it. All the love and support
the sperm donor denied me, I got from my grandparents and now, from you as well.” Quinn says as
she wipes the tears off of Rachel’s cheek tenderly.

“But…” Rachel starts to say, only to be interrupted by a pair of lips on top of hers.

“No buts, Rachie. You didn’t have to forgive me at all, let alone extend your hand in friendship
when the whole thing with Finn, Puck, and my pregnancy scare became public. A selfish person
would have used that to bury me. You picked me up, dusted me off, and offered me your support
when no one else did. Santana and Brittany were supposed to be my closest friends at the time, and
they did nothing but follow along with the rest of the lemmings. Puck only wanted me around if I
slept with him whenever he felt like it. None of my so-called friends offered me any kindness. Their
reputations mattered more. You gave me your strength when I had none of my own.” Quinn says
once she breaks their kiss.

“I was the one told Finn.” Rachel says barely above a whisper, unable to meet Quinn’s eyes. “I’m so sorry.” She adds.

“Shh. I gave you no reason to keep quiet. I would have done the same, had the situation been reversed. Only difference is, I would have buried you. Just like you keep asking me to let go of my past mistakes, I’m asking you to do the same. You’re wonderful.” Quinn replies.

Rachel eventually lifts her gaze and gets lost in hazel eyes. “I like the way you see me. I hope that one day I can live up to it.” She says as she reaches to place a series of kisses along Quinn’s jaw when they finally break eye contact.

“I’m not the only one who sees that. Leroy and Andy do as well.” Quinn says gently. “Feeling better?” She asks with a soft smile when she notices the shift in Rachel’s mood.

“With you holding me? Always.” Rachel says snuggling so close that she’s nearly lying completely on top of Quinn.

“Good. Now, let’s get some sleep. It’s getting really late.” Quinn says. “Is the new time set?” Quinn asks as she slowly extricates herself long enough to set the sleep feature on the docking station.

“Yes. Do you think you can take my stuff to school so I can run there? I'll make sure to pack us something to eat and make sure we have enough caffeine to survive until at least lunch. It’s stupid to take two cars and Daddy has to work early tomorrow.” Rachel says once she’s settled on top of Quinn again.

“Of course Baby. Anything you want. Sweet dreams.” Quinn says with a kiss. She smiles when she notices the glass of water remains untouched.

Rachel returns the kiss with everything she has. “Sweet dreams, Eggie. I love you.” She says once they pull apart.

Within minutes, both girls are fast asleep.

* * *

Rachel’s iPod comes to life and Quinn groans at the five a.m. wake up call. She smiles when she notices that neither one of them have moved since falling asleep. Rachel pecks Quinn’s lips before she slowly extricates herself. Quinn frowns. They miss the warmth immediately.

“I’d love to stay in bed with you, but we both have a busy day ahead of us.” Rachel says gently.

“How can you be so perky this early, especially since we went to be so late?” Quinn grumbles.

“I’m sorry, Eggie. I knew it was too late for you to come here. And instead of doing the sensible thing and going to sleep right away, I kept you up.” Rachel says frowning.

“That was a stupid comment. I didn’t mean it in a bad way, Baby. I was trying to be a smartass. You know I’m always grumpy this early in the morning, regardless of the time I go to sleep. Come here.” Quinn says as she grabs Rachel’s hand and pulls the diva back on top of her.

Rachel yelps at the sudden movement before she relaxes at the familiarity of their position. “I love the feel of your arms around me like this. When you’re with me, when I know you believe in me, I feel as if I can do anything.” Rachel says before burying her face in the crook of Quinn’s neck.
“And here I was thinking it’s the other way around. Anyone of us would have crumbled a long time ago, if we had to face what you do every day for the past eight years.” Quinn says; her voice thick with tears.

“Eggie, what’s wrong?” Rachel asks immediately. She shifts her body so that she’s lying beside the blonde and pulls them as close as humanly possible. On impulse, she gives her girlfriend a chaste kiss that she hopes will convey just how much she loves Quinn.

“I’m so afraid that one you’re gone I won’t be strong enough. I’m afraid that the DNA provider’s words will get to me. I’m afraid you’ll find someone better, someone who deserves you.” Quinn admits. She had wanted to keep that to herself at least for now, but one look into those cinnamon eyes, and she knew she couldn’t lie to Rachel.

Rachel grabs Quinn’s hand and places it palm down on top of her chest. “Do you feel that?” She asks.

Quinn nods, her own heart matching Rachel’s immediately.

“Only you can make my heart speed up like that. This heart might be sitting in my body, but it belongs to you and only you. You have nothing to fear. No matter where I am, I know most people will see an overbearing diva, and I’m all right with that. I know that’s what I am. But when they see you, people see a goddess. I love you Lucy Quinn Fabray. No one and nothing compares to you. If anything, the long line of suitors vying for your attention is testament to how wonderful you are. I’m always afraid one day you’ll come to your senses and leave me. I’m afraid someone might come in and sweep you off your feet.” Rachel says. She cradles Quinn’s face with her free hand and brings their lips together for another kiss. She pulls away when she feels Quinn deepening it. “Morning breath, Eggie. I don’t want to gross you out.” She adds when she sees Quinn frown.

Quinn giggles at those words. “I doubt you’d have morning breath, but I won’t force mine on you. You’re not an overbearing diva. You don’t come across as one either. As a society, we’ve been conditioned to dislike strong women. People say it because they’re jealous of you. You’re talented, you’re confident and you’re drop dead gorgeous.” Quinn says. “I guess it’s a good thing you heart is mine, because mine has been yours longer than I can remember. Those morons can try all they want, but it won’t do them any good. I’m yours.” She adds.

The distance between their lips is shrinking again, and just as their lips are about to touch, an alarm goes off on the bedside table. Both girls groan at the reminder that the real world is waiting for them. Undeterred, they kiss briefly before pulling apart.

“We need to get up. I don’t want Ms. Sylvester to have an excuse to be mean to you.” Rachel says as she reluctantly leaves the safe cocoon of Quinn’s arms. “Well, meaner than usual.” She adds once she realises who she’s talking about. She grabs her things and heads to her en suite to change.

“Don’t I know it.” Quinn says as she forces herself to roll out of bed. “Don’t worry about breakfast. Coach has a meeting at eight. That’s why we have to be a half an hour early. If you can be ready by seven-thirty, I’ll drive us to the local Starbucks.” She adds as she quickly gets into the spandex shorts, her sports bra, and a William McKinley t-shirt.

“We’re eating lunch off-campus as well. Today is ‘super-surprise’ day and I refuse to eat only salad and French fries.” Rachel says making a disgusted face as she exits her bathroom wearing a pair of red running shorts, and a black sports bra.

Quinn is momentarily speechless at the sight. “Is that all you’re wearing for your run? You’ll get cold.” She manages to squeak out.
“Eggie, it’s May.” Rachel says as she gets her hair in a pony tail.

“Can you put on a tank top or a t-shirt? I don’t want some idiot ogling you; lose control of his car and accidentally hit you.” Quinn admits.

“Says the woman who parades year-round in a skin tight cheerleading uniform.” Rachel replies with a smirk. “I have to put up with idiots ogling you all the time. Besides, it’s not as if anyone will notice. You’re the only one who thinks I’m worth a second look.” She adds.

“Rachie, have you truly looked at yourself in a mirror? The only reason guys don’t trip over their tongues trying to ask you out is because they’re too concerned with their popularity. Every girl on the squad wishes she had your legs and your skin tone. I’m willing to bet that if they catch a glimpse of those gorgeous abs, they’ll be wishing for them as well.” Quinn says as she runs her eyes up and down Rachel’s body, barely managing to control the urge to pin the girl on the bed and ravage her.

“You make me feel so beautiful.” Rachel whispers, as she blushes crimson under Quinn’s appreciative gaze.

“You are beautiful Rachie. So much that I can barely breathe when I see you.” Quinn replies.

“We both know you’re the beautiful one. You’re the prettiest girl I’ve ever and will ever meet. Your nose matches your face perfectly. Mine is too big and it makes my face look weird.” Rachel says looking down at her feet.

Quinn takes a few steps forward and wraps her arms around Rachel’s waist, reveling in the feel of bare skin. “Your nose matches your face perfectly as well. I wouldn’t change a thing about you.” She says before she kisses the tip of Rachel’s nose.

Rachel smiles and is struck speechless at the adoration she can see in Quinn’s eyes. Instead of trying to find her now elusive, but very extensive vocabulary, she leans forward and up to capture Quinn’s lips with hers.

“Thank you, Eggie.” Rachel says once they separate for air.

“Uh…” Quinn mumbles in a daze.

Rachel giggles and forces herself to pull apart. “I’d love to continue this, but you need to get going, otherwise you’ll be late. I doubt Ms. Sylvester will be too thrilled if her captain is late.” She says with a sigh.

The mention of Sue snaps Quinn back to the here and now. She groans in disappointment once she looks at the clock on the iPod dock.

“I’ll see you in the choir room at seven-thirty. Be safe and have a good run, Baby.” Quinn says before giving Rachel a peck and heading out the door.

“Have a good practice, though that sounds like such an oxymoron.” Rachel says with a shake of her head, causing both girls to giggle.

Once Quinn is out the door, Rachel goes back to her room and gets her iPod from the dock, her arm band, the waist pack with her phone, and her noise-cancelling ear buds. She jots down a note to Leroy letting him know she’s already out and that she’ll probably text him later and will definitely see him after school. Within five minutes, she’s out the door running towards McKinley.

* * *
Rachel makes it to McKinley with time to spare. She dismisses the idea of adding a few laps in the track in favour of her sanity. She knows Quinn’s practice is there, and that more than likely she’s being yelled at by her coach. Rachel knows she’ll have to fight the urge to throw her running shoes at Ms. Sylvester. Instead, she opts to get ready and head to the choir room for some practice she knows she won’t get later in the day. Even though they still have Glee meetings until the end of the school year, she knows Mr. Schuester will use the time to relax and wind them down saying something or other about starting fresh the following year. She scoffs at the thought. How he expects them to be a winning show choir without her talent with that lax attitude is beyond her.

Rachel’s mind wanders during her scales. In a little over a month, she’ll be leaving Lima for good. If she has her way, she will return only to visit her dads and Quinn. There are times she is sure she’s in the middle of a dream when she thinks about Juilliard and their pre-college program. She wonders what it will be like to be trained by the best vocal coaches in North America. She wonders what it will be like once she starts her junior year in a new school. She wonders if things will be different or if her personality will alienate her from her peers. Rachel nearly chokes on air when she realises that in New York, she won’t have a soundproof room to practice. At most, she’ll have the balcony and the roof in the warmer months. Even then, she imagines there’s only so much singing their neighbours will take before complaining about the noise, more than likely giving Andy’s landlord the grounds to evict them. Not to mention that the air pollution might very well kill her vocal chords. She feels a full fledged panic attack coming. She forces herself to calm down when she starts to feel lightheaded. Eventually she sits down and pulls out her phone.

Rachel gets up and starts pacing as she waits for Andy to pick up. If there’s anyone who can come up with a solution, it’ll be her cousin.

“Hummingbird. To what do I owe this wonderful wakeup call?” Andy says half asleep.

“I thought you were up and about to head to work.” Rachel says confused, once she hears Andy’s sleep-addled voice. “I guess it’s a good thing I woke you up. I better let you go so you won’t be that late. I’ll call you after school.” She adds as calmly as she can.

Andy’s sleep-induced fog lifts at Rachel’s tone. “Rach, what’s going on? I’m up. I’m staying in today so I’m in no hurry to go anywhere. What happened? Did Uncle Hiram do something stupid again?” She says as she makes her way to her small kitchen to start the coffee maker.

“No, well, kind of, but that’s not the reason I’m calling.” Rachel says. “How come you’re not going to work? Is everything all right?” She asks confused.

“I spent the weekend editing my final draft for the *Time* article. There’s no way I’ll be able to be productive today, so my editor is letting me have the day off since everything at *The Mirror* is quiet and all caught up.” Andy replies.

“When is the article due? When does it come out?” Rachel fires back, momentarily forgetting why she’s calling.

“My final draft is due in two days. If they like it, then it’ll be out in two weeks.” Andy answers in a dreamy voice.

“When will you know?” Rachel asks as she literally bounces on the balls of her feet.

“By Friday at the latest.” Andy says. “If it’s not entirely Uncle Hiram, then what’s going on?” She asks after a small pause.

“Promise me you won’t do anything rash.” Rachel says quickly. She wouldn’t put it past Andy to fly
to Ohio and tell her dad off. The memory of the last incident is still fresh in her mind. He ripped Rachel apart verbally as he accused her of turning someone else against him. Andy had been livid when she found out. Only her job kept her in New York. She had been in the middle of a breaking story. It still didn’t stop Andy’s own verbal evisceration over the phone.

The request confirms it’s something bad. Andy swallows the urge to protest. She doesn’t because she knows how stubborn Rachel is. Their family’s stubborn streak is a blessing and a curse at the same time. “I won’t do anything rash, but I reserve the right to kick his rear next time I see him.” She finally relents.

Rachel nods, even though Andy can’t see her and tells Andy what happened upon her return from Phoenix. “You’d be so proud of Daddy and Quinn. Daddy stopped him from saying anything else. Quinn held me until I stopped crying. She kept me safe. She made me feel so loved. It didn’t matter how insensitive I was being by forgetting all the issues she has with her parents.” She says at the end of her tale.

“I’m going to kill him. Maybe not kill him, but seriously maim him. If I leave now, I’ll be there by early afternoon. That will give me enough time to cause him a world of pain. I can catch the redeye back to LaGuardia and be back to work tomorrow…” Andy starts to plot, only to be interrupted by Rachel’s throat clearing.

“Andy! You promised. Daddy dealt with him and Quinn dropped everything for me.” Rachel says. “And that’s not why I called.” She adds.

“Oh? I see how things work. I’m just an afterthought now that I’ve been replaced with a drop dead gorgeous blonde.” Andy says in a voice laced with humour. She’s glad there’s someone there for Rachel other than Leroy and herself.

“You’re irreplaceable, Sunshine.” Rachel says seriously. She knows Andy is joking, but she needs to make sure.

“Hey. I was joking. I’m ecstatic you and Quinn found each other. My brain is still asleep so I can’t help stupid things from leaving my mouth from time to time thinking they’re funny when they’re not. You know how I am before my coffee.” Andy says gently, wishing they could be having this talk in person so she can convey how sincere she is.

“I know, but I need to make sure you to know that no matter what, you’ll always be important to me. You’re irreplaceable. Without you, I wouldn’t have been able to put up with all the crap tossed my way.” Rachel says just as gentle.

“Yes, you would have. You’re a lot stronger than you give yourself credit for. If you didn’t call about Uncle Poopyhead, I mean, Uncle Hiram, then why did you? Not that I don’t love to hear from you, but you normally call me in the evenings and you don’t sound so bleh.” Andy replies.

“‘Bleh’? Such eloquence from a writer.” Rachel teases.

“Oh hush. I haven’t had my coffee yet, remember? My very extensive vocabulary and natural eloquence are allowed to falter. Enough stalling and get on with the talking.” Andy replies.

Rachel takes a deep breath and tells Andy about her little panic attack just minutes before. “I’m sorry. Now that the words have left my mouth and I actually heard them, I realise how stupid I’ve been. Dad is right. I’m a selfish and ungrateful brat. I should be ecstatic about everything, and here I am, fixating over something minor. I’ll figure something out. I’m sorry I ruined your day right off the start.” She says swallowing the giant lump that had settled on her throat.
“Rachie? What’s going?” Quinn asks the moment she walks in and catches the end of Rachel’s words. “Who’s on the phone?” She asks as she wraps her arms around Rachel’s waist from behind and kisses the diva’s shoulder.

“It’s Andy.” Rachel replies as she leans into Quinn’s body. “Sunshine, Quinn just walked in. I’m going to put you on speaker.” She adds.

“Hey Andy.” Quinn greets while Rachel extricates herself long enough to close and lock the door.

“Good morning Quinn. Thanks for being there and for taking care of our Hummingbird.” Andy says.

“I would have crawled to the moon and back.” Quinn replies. “Now, what’s going on? Why is my baby berating herself again?” She asks.

Andy quickly fills Quinn in, while Rachel looks down at her shoes, her cheeks flaming red.

“I’m sorry. I’ll try and work on my attitude. It doesn’t seem like it, but I am grateful, yet here I am, focusing on the negative again.” Rachel says fighting the urge to cry. She feels disgusted with herself.

Quinn pulls Rachel to her lap and nuzzles the diva’s neck and hair as she leaves a trail of kisses. She wants to find Hiram and go, as Santana likes to say, all Lima Heights Adjacent on him.

“Don’t listen to Dr. Berry. Your attitude is great.” Quinn says softly.

“Rachel, stop. That’s a very valid concern you have. We’ll figure something out. In the mean time, we can stick to the original plan and have you practice mostly in the balcony or on the roof while it’s warm. Our neighbours will be in for a treat.” Andy says. “If you’re really afraid of bothering them, keep your voice down a notch or two.” She adds with a chuckle.

“You know how loud I can be. I might start out soft, but I’ll probably forget.” Rachel counters lamely.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be spending most of the summer with you. I’ll make sure to remind you to keep your voice down.” Quinn says with a wink.

“See, Hummingbird? It’s not the perfect solution, but for now, it works. If you get too loud, I’m sure Quinn will find ways to keep your lips occupied.” Andy says with a chuckle.

Both girls blush a bright pink at those words.

“If we’re careful, that might work for a bit.” Rachel concedes.

“Quinn, how is your portfolio coming along?” Andy asks, changing the subject to something safer.

“It’s almost done. I’m sorry it’s taking this long, but I wanted to include the photos from our trip to Phoenix. I’m meeting with Grandpa Aaron tomorrow afternoon while Rachel is in ballet to ask some questions. I should have it ready by the end of the week at the latest.” Quinn answers.

“Good. Remember to send it to the Mirror. I’ll e-mail you the address. Rachel has all my contact info, if not, check our website.” Andy says.

“I already have you in my contacts and I have the Mirror bookmarked. I’ve been studying the photographs on your website. I was hoping that maybe I can ask you some questions in the
summer.” Quinn admits sheepishly.

“Good girl. That’s a very smart move, and you may ask me anything.” Andy replies. Looks like her instincts are correct about the girl.

They talk until Rachel’s stomach reminds them they haven’t had any breakfast yet. After a promise to call back later, they hang up and go on with their day.

* * *

Andy is glad they got Rachel to calm down. She also knows their current solution is temporary at best. As great of a singer as Rachel is, she doubts her neighbours would appreciate the singing on a daily basis. She paces around her kitchen, brainstorming when an idea hits her. She grabs her phone to start the ball rolling. She grabs a bowl of her favourite cereal and frowns at it. She can’t wait for Rachel to be there. She should feel guilty, but after the last few summers of eating Rachel’s cooking, she can’t help it.

Andy is out the front door a few hours later with a full-fledged plan in her head. The duration of her subway ride is spent going through different scenarios. Andy looks up nervously once she gets to her destination. She takes a deep breath and tells herself that the worst that can happen is they say no to her request, and it’s on to plan B. No harm done. She puts a smile on her face and makes her way confidently through The Dalton School’s main doors.

“Good morning. My name is Andrea Sachs. I have an eleven o’clock appointment with Mrs. Delaney.” Andy tells the man she remembers as the principal’s assistant.

“Good morning Miss Sachs. I’m Walter Shaw, Mrs. Delaney’s assistant. Please follow me.” A man says with a polite nod as he stands up.

They reach a slightly ajar door, and Walter knocks on it gently.

“Your eleven o’clock is here, Mrs. Delaney.” Walter says.

“Ah yes, please show her in, Walter.” Margaret Delaney says.

“Good morning Mrs. Delaney. Andrea Sachs. Thank you so much for seeing me on such short notice.” Andy says as she extends her right hand to the principal.

Margaret smiles at the confident handshake. “Please sit down.” She gestures to the chairs in front of her desk as she tries her best to place the young woman in her office. She looks very familiar. Perhaps she’s the mother of one of the younger students.

Andy smiles and sits down on one of the chairs, while she puts her messenger bag on the other.

“Would you either of you like something to drink?” Walter asks politely.

“I’m fine Walter.” Margaret says.

“Miss Sachs?” Walter asks turning her attention to Andy.

“No thanks.” Andy replies politely.

Walter nods and takes his leave, closing the door behind him.

“What may I do for you, Miss Sachs?” Margaret asks.
“I’m going straight to the point. My cousin Rachel Berry will be starting as a junior in September.” Andy starts, and eventually she explains the basic details.

“I remember. Very polite young lady, with a lot of questions.” Margaret says with a smile, finally realising who Andy is. “Is everything all right with Miss Berry?” She asks.

“Everything is great. Rachel can’t wait to begin. This is probably an odd request, but I was wondering, would she be able to use the facilities during this upcoming summer term to practice her singing? We live in an apartment complex so she won’t be able practice with the frequency she’s used to. She’s part of her current school’s glee club and I know for a fact she’ll be auditioning to join the one here.” Andy asks.

Margaret enters a few commands on her computer and pulls out Rachel’s file. “How often and where does Miss Berry practice for the time being?” She asks after skimming over it.

“It’s a mixture between her soundproofed room at home, her current school and at her voice coach’s house. As great as Rachel is, I doubt our neighbours will be too thrilled to hear her sing nearly every day for two hours.” Andy says with a smile. “Soundproofing isn’t an option since I don’t own the apartment.” Andy adds when she sees Margaret’s raised eyebrows.

“I see.” Margaret says neutrally. “Does she really practice two hours every day?” She asks. What kind of teenager would have that much dedication?

“Yes, she does. She’s a perfectionist. It’s what has made her the best vocalist in Ohio.” Andy says proudly. “Allow me to show you.” She adds as she pulls out her iPad and looks for her latest video.

Margaret’s eyes widen in surprise. She has already seen a similar video, courtesy of Richard Spencer, Sounds from Heaven’s vocal coach. At the time, she hadn’t made the connection. Rachel’s transcript showed her active in just about every club in McKinley. She had thought Rachel was just another member of the choir. No one knew the name of McKinley’s soloist. The programs only listed the names of the members of each choir, without going into details. Suddenly, Rachel’s interest in Dalton’s music facilities during the interview makes perfect sense. “It’s her.” Margaret blurts out. “Mr. Spencer, our choir and music teacher has spoken quite highly about a young lady from New Directions they had to face in our last two competitions. He’ll be over the moon to know she’s transferring over. Please inform Miss Berry she’ll be more than welcome to use our facilities in the summer for her practices. She only needs to sign-in here to get the keys to the music room.” She explains at Andy’s surprised look.

Andy closes her mouth with some effort. This turned out to be a lot easier than expected. “Thank you so much. Rachel will be ecstatic and relieved.” Andy says as calmly as she can.

Any further conversation is interrupted by a soft knock on the door.

“I apologise for the interruption, Mrs. Delaney, but the staff meeting will be starting shortly.” Walter says after he hears the soft ‘come in.’

“Thank you Walter.” Margaret says. “It’s been a pleasure seeing you again, Miss Sachs. We look forward to having Miss Berry here.” She says to Andy.

“Thank you for all your help and for seeing me in such short notice. I apologise for taking so much of your time.” Andy says, shaking hands again.

Andy pulls out her phone and grins when she sees the time. Rachel should be in the middle of her lunch.
“Are you still planning on telling Santana, Britt, and Puck about your transfer?” Quinn asks as they settle on a couch at the local Starbucks.

“Yes, this Friday after school. The longer I put it off, the more difficult it’ll be. This will give them the weekend to react. If it’s negative, I’m hoping that by Monday, they’ll be calm enough that maybe they’ll respect my wishes of keeping it a secret.” Rachel says softly. She’s dying to cuddle close to Quinn, but she knows it’s not possible. As it is, people are always giving her dirty looks whenever they’re seen together as friends. She has to settle for their knees touching.

“If they take it badly, I’ll do my best to keep them in line. If I have to, I’ll pull rank on Santana and threaten Puck to within an inch of his life. I doubt you’ll have to worry about Brittany. She’s a sweetheart and if anything, she’ll help me with Santana if she reacts badly.” Quinn says with confidence. She forces her hands to grab hold of her mug. All she wants is to wrap her arms around Rachel. She sighs. There’s only so much they can explain as best friends behaviour.

The girls’ morning goes on without major incidents. Word has spread that New Directions has won another competition. Begrudgingly, there is a moratorium on the slushie facials for most of New Directions. Only Kurt, Mercedes, and Artie remain as targets. Rachel sighs when all the blame lands squarely on her shoulders. It’s not unexpected, but it still sucks to be the one held responsible when bad things happen.

Quinn, Santana, and Brittany have been called for yet another meeting with Sue. Rachel ends up sitting in the cafeteria trying to eat her lunch while doing her best to pay attention to what Puck is saying. It’s hard to keep her eyes from rolling. There’s only so much she can nod and smile about the intricacies of ‘Call of Duty’ and the proper pH levels of swimming pools. She nearly drops to her knees and breaks into a prayer of thanks when her phone goes off with an all too familiar melody.

“I apologise, Noah, but this is an important call.” Rachel says just before she connects the call. She’s out of the cafeteria in less than thirty seconds, making a beeline for the choir room.

“Hey Sunshine.” Rachel greets as cheerfully as she can. “Please tell me you’re still in New York and that you’re not on the way to the house.” She pleads.

“I’m alone. Quinn is in a meeting with Ms. Sylvester. What’s going on?” Rachel answers relieved.

“Are you sitting down?” Andy asks, knowing that Rachel’s curiosity must be killing her.

“You got your article okayed by *Time* ahead of schedule, right? Is that why you’re calling me?” Rachel asks excitedly.

“What? No. That’s not why I’m calling. It’s still too early for that.” Andy says with a shake of her head. “I just got out of a meeting with Mrs. Delaney. You have permission to use Dalton’s facilities for your training during their summer term.” She adds. She wishes she could see Rachel’s face. She should have started a video chat instead. Hindsight and all, she thinks with a shake of her head.

Rachel sits down unceremoniously in the closest chair she finds. She can’t believe her luck. Most of her life, things have been hard, but in the last year, things have taken a turn for the better. She’s stunned into silence, with a dopey grin on her face. Only the sound of Andy’s voice asking if she is all right brings her out of her stupor.
“Sunshine, I… I don’t know what to say. You’ve done so much for me. You keep watching over me. I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to repay you. I…” Rachel starts to say when she hears a clattering sound before the connection breaks. At first, she thinks Andy reached a no-reception area. When Andy doesn’t call back in five minutes, she scrambles to find Andy’s contact information. She frowns when it goes straight to voice mail. Every attempt gets the same result. She’s willing herself not to panic, but it’s hard.

* * *

Andy is about to interrupt Rachel’s ranting when someone walks into her causing her to drop her phone. A high-heeled clad foot crushes her phone just as she’s about to reach for it.

“Shit.” Andy murmurs as she picks up the remnants of her phone. She hopes the SIM card hasn’t been damaged. All thoughts of lost photos and contacts fall to the wayside when she thinks about Rachel and the girl’s propensity to overreact. She immediately lets her eyes roam around the hallway, in search for a payphone. She curses under her breath when all she can see are glass cases filled with trophies and plaques. She remembers seeing a payphone outside Dalton’s main doors, and makes a dash for the main entrance. By now, she’s sure Rachel is making her way to the nearest airport so she can fly to New York if the girl hasn’t gone into a full-blown panic attack.

* * *

Miranda Priestly walks through Dalton’s corridors mumbling something or other about incompetence and being severely delayed after a meeting with one of the twins’ teachers involving another student. As she turns the corner, she runs into someone. She nearly falls as she steps on something. Whatever it is, had better not scuffed her heels. She is about to unleash all hell at the unfortunate fool when time comes to a standstill. Her knees nearly give out at the sight of her former assistant scanning the hallway. She waits to see what the brunette’s reaction will be once she’s recognised.

“Andréa!” Miranda calls out as the reporter sprints down the hallway. ‘What the hell?’ She asks herself as Andy ignores her and flees.

Miranda never expected their first official meeting as something as unprofessional as Andy fleeing in terror. There has to be something more to it. She’s supposed to be meeting Irv Ravitz, current Chairman of the Board for Elias-Clarke, for lunch in order to discuss Runway’s budget for the upcoming year. She curses when she notices she barely has thirty minutes, just enough time to make it to the restaurant of choice. Traffic on the way had been horrendous even by New York standards. Miranda’s mind goes into overdrive thinking up possible scenarios for Andy’s presence at Dalton. Miranda knows Andy didn’t have children while she was working for Runway. Even if she had given birth since quitting, they’d be too young to attend Dalton. She has to be here for a story. Miranda knows she has the backing of most members of the Board of Directors. It’s only a matter of playing her cards right. With her mind made up, she pulls out her phone.

“Call Irv and re-schedule the lunch meeting. Something came up.” Miranda says and cuts the connection. She replays Andy’s reaction, and she’s more convinced than ever that something is up. She’s sure Andy is about to break a major scandal that may involve her daughters. Screw Irv and his ego. Her girls always come first. There will be hell to pay if Andy doesn’t tell her what she has uncovered. ‘No one ignores Miranda Priestly in such a way’, she thinks as she picks up her pace.

When Miranda makes it outside, she ignores the open car door and her driver standing at full attention. She scans the street and frowns when she finally locates Andy going to a nearby payphone.
Roy does a double take as he pulls in front of Dalton’s main doors. Running out like a bat out of hell is none other than Andy. He swallows in relief when no one (Miranda) follows right after. He imagines Andy caught sight of her former boss and booked it. His relief vanishes when a few minutes later Miranda barges out of the door like a heat-seeking missile and ignores him as she searches the surrounding area. Instinctively, he follows Miranda’s line of sight. “Oh shit. She saw Andy.” He mumbles when he notices the predatory smirk on Miranda. He starts to say a prayer for the young brunette once he sees the murderous glint in Miranda’s eyes.

Rachel is going crazy wondering what happened to Andy. There’s no logical explanation, other than something horrible has taken place. All the clues point to it. First, the clattering sound and then total radio silence. She’s about to text Quinn and Leroy when her phone rings. She curses when it’s the default ringer and not Andy’s custom one. She’s about to dismiss the call as unimportant when the area code catches her eyes. Her stomach falls to her feet. Her suspicions have been confirmed. Something happened to Andy and someone is notifying her, though in the back of her mind, she wonders why they’re calling her and not her Uncle Morgan and her Aunt Ruth in Cincinnati. She connects the call with trembling hands.

“Hello?” Rachel says in a timid voice, bracing for the bad news she’s sure to hear.

Andy nearly dances out of joy when she sees the payphone, relief evident in her body language. She sprints the final distance and just about climbs into her purse as she searches for her wallet. With one of her credit cards securely in hand, she punches in the proper information as she dials Rachel’s number.

“Please pick up. Please pick up.” Andy mumbles. She knows Rachel screens her calls. She hopes the girl will recognise one of New York City’s many area codes.

Miranda walks a bit closer so she can at least hear Andy’s side of the conversation. It should give her a clue as to what kind of crisis she will be dealing with and what kind of damage control she will need to take. Her mind is already making a list of other schools for her girls and how to lessen the press from invading the twins’ privacy. Andy’s reaction is perplexing. Miranda could be doing a tap dance while wearing a rusty suit of armour and the brunette reporter would have been oblivious to it; her attention is so intent on the phone as she waits for the other party to pick up. What she manages to overhear and Andy’s subsequent reaction confuses her even more.

“Come on, Hummingbird. Pick up the phone. I can’t have you have a nervous breakdown because of a stupid accident.” Andy mumbles again as it continues to ring. She lets out the breath she has been holding when she finally hears the timid ‘hello’ on the other side of the connection. Her heart breaks at how scared Rachel sounds.

“Sweetie! Thank God you picked up.” Andy says as a wave of relief washes over her.

“Andy? What happened? Is everything okay? Are you okay?” Rachel asks as tears of relief fall from her eyes. “I can be on the next plane out if you need me there.” She adds.
Andy smiles warmly at Rachel’s words. She’d be turning the world inside out and upside down to reach Rachel had the situation been reversed. Maybe her cousin isn’t the only one with the tendency to overreact. “You can stay put for now. I promise I’m fine. No need to start World War III yet. I dropped my phone, and it somehow ended up crushed. I tried to find a payphone as fast as I could, but I’m not familiar with Dalton’s layout so I had to find my way out. I’m sorry I worried you.” She explains gently.

“I was so scared. I couldn’t get a hold of you. I kept calling and calling and all I got was your voicemail. I was bracing myself for the worst when I saw this number on my display. I was sure someone was going to notify me something bad happened to you. Are you sure you’re all right?” Rachel rambles.

“Sweetheart, I promise you that nothing bad happened. The only casualty was my phone.” Andy says in the same gentle tone.

“Everything is all right with the world again now that I know you’re fine. Please refrain from doing such things to me in the future. I’m too young to have coronaries and it’d be horrible for a young starlet to have gray hairs and worry-lines at such a tender age. Don’t you have a hands-free option or something like that in case you’re in the middle of a story and you need to take notes? That way you don’t have to hold on to the phone and thus avoid such misfortunate accidents.” Rachel says a lot calmer now.

“I promise you that as long as it’s within my power, I’ll never do anything to scare you like that again. Now you know how I feel whenever I think of all the hurdles you face every day. I’m always afraid one of those Neanderthals will do something to you. So if anyone has the right to complain about grey hairs, worry-lines and possible coronaries, it should be me. And yes, I do have a Bluetooth earpiece, but it’s pointless because if I need to take notes, I wouldn’t be on the phone. And if I were to have my phone out, I’d be using it to record an interview or conversation.” Andy says with an indulgent smile, even though Rachel can’t see it.

“I only have to deal with bullies. As a reporter, you have a potentially dangerous job, depending on what you’re assigned to write about.” Rachel counters. “I’m really happy you’re all right.” She adds.

“One hundred percent all right. I’m sorry to cut this short, but I have to go and find a replacement for my phone and inform my editor in case he needs to contact me. I’ll call you when everything is sorted out.” Andy says.

“Okay. I love you Andy.” Rachel replies.

“I love you too, Hummingbird.” Andy answers.

Andy gasps in shock once she turns around and comes face to face with her former boss. “Miranda.” She says barely above a whisper.

“Andréa.” Miranda replies just as soft.

TBC...
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Disclaimers: Not mine. Glee and The Devil Wears Prada belong to their respective PTBs and studios. I only borrow them to play with from time to time. No profit is being made.

I guess I should stop the broken record, but I always feel the need to warn that I don't have a beta and everything is self-edited. I should also mention that there's only so much one can re-read something before things start to sort of blur together. I guess I need to find that balance where I can still catch mistakes and not just skim through for the sake of hoping to catch something.

Also, I need to reiterate that I like fluff. I write fluff, with barely any angst squeezed in for the sake of plot. So for anyone expecting some angst-fill, non-stop suffering, boy, have you got the wrong story. There's enough crap in the real world that I don't like to include too much of it in my imaginary world.

Chapter 13

Andy knows that it was only a matter of time before she would run into Miranda, especially during that close call back in March. She had been hoping that it wouldn't be until Dalton’s first invitational that she would run into her former boss. Andy will even admit that a part of her has been coming up with some very wild schemes trying to come up with ways to delay their first face-to-face meet since she walked out on Miranda for as long as possible. She has played different scenarios of this very moment over and over, even before Rachel’s decision to come live with her. Her imagination has provided some very ludicrous situations, so nearly walking into her former boss after an emotionally charged phone conversation was at the very bottom of the list on how the two would meet again.

All Andy can do now is hope that Nigel is correct and no matter how angry Miranda might be with her, that her former boss will not do anything to make things more difficult for Rachel. She could have looked into other private and public schools when they were making their plans, but after some thorough research, Dalton proved to be the best school for Rachel. The school has consistently ranked in the top twenty schools in New York City. It’s one of the few schools that have equal emphasis in science, sports, and the arts. It really was a no-brainer. She hopes with everything in her that by thinking about her cousin’s future, she hasn’t torpedoed hers into oblivion.

* * *

Miranda once again feels as if time has stopped, or at the very least, it’s moving in slow motion. As
much as she tries, she can’t figure out what Andy is doing there. With the way the younger woman reacted when her phone conversation was disrupted, Miranda is sure Andy was calling in a breaking story. But after partially overhearing Andy’s half of the conversation, things don’t quite add up. It certainly didn’t appear as if the young reporter was talking to her editor. Then, Miranda’s paranoid side takes over. The side that has thwarted every single attempt Irv Ravitz has come up with to oust her from Runway. Of course Andy is doing a story. She was probably talking in code in case others were listening in. Why else would she be at Dalton? The thought of her daughters’ wellbeing snaps Miranda out of her frozen stupor, and she recovers first. She has to find out what is going on. Within seconds, the Dragon Lady is back. “What are you doing here?” She asks in her most intimidating voice. “I demand to know whatever story you are working on, since whatever scandal will directly affect my daughters.” She adds when all Andy does is stare at her blinking.

Miranda’s words finally manage to shake Andy of her own stupor. When the words finally register, she looks at Miranda as if she has grown a second head. Her latest story (the one she is currently researching) deals with the increase in violence and drug use in homeless shelters across the city. How in the world would that affect her daughters? Unless of course, they’re volunteering in one of those shelters. And why would there be a scandal? Unless of course, idiots automatically make stupid assumptions about drug use and the presence of rich teenagers. Even then, it’d be quite the stretch. Where in the world does this woman get her information? “What?” is all that Andy manages to say.

“Don’t play coy and innocent with me Andréea. We both know the only reason you’d ever be here is if there is a huge story brewing. What surprises me even more is that none of the major players are here. Normally my sources are quick on the uptake, so whatever it is, must be something really underhanded if they have no knowledge of it.” Miranda replies, frosty as ever.

Andy blinks a few times and chuckles quietly when Miranda’s unique logic finally makes sense. “There’s no story Miranda. At least not one that deals with or involves Dalton. I’m here for personal reasons.” She replies. “And even if there was a story, you know better than anyone that I’d never reveal anything.” She adds with a shrug of her shoulders.

“Don’t lie to me Andréea. You have no school-age children so that rules out anything personal. I’m not asking you to betray your source, nor am I asking so I can break the story before you do. If you recall, I publish a fashion magazine and Elias-Clarke doesn’t have any newspapers or news magazines. Right now, I couldn’t care less that you’re a rising star in the journalistic world. I’m asking for information so I can make sure my daughters won’t be harmed by any scandals.” Miranda hisses menacingly, not realising she has unwittingly admitted she has been following Andy’s career since the brunette left Runway.

Andy should feel insulted at Miranda’s demanding tone, but a big part of her understands the editor’s behaviour. She is half tempted to drag it on and let the woman suffer, but she refrains. All she has to do is think about Rachel and she understands. God knows she dug as deep as she could to make sure there were not hidden surprises when she was compiling a list of schools for Rachel.
“Miranda, rest assured that there are no stories involving Dalton or anyone who works here. I don’t even know why you’d make such an assumption…” Andy starts to say only to be interrupted again.

“Why else would a reporter be here? What kind of personal matters does a young, single woman have with a school?” Miranda interjects after a quick glance at Andy’s left hand.

Andy sighs. “Well, if you were to let me finish, then I’d be more than happy to tell you.” She snaps, getting tired of being interrupted.

Miranda raises an eyebrow at the outburst. She forgets that out of every assistant she has had, Andy has always been the most outspoken, stubborn, and proud, especially nearing the end of her short tenure with the magazine. She nods tersely at the reporter.

“Thank you. Now, as I’ve been trying to say, I’m well aware I have no school-aged children, or any children for that matter. That still doesn’t stop me from being here for personal reasons. I’m doing a friend a favour by enquiring about Dalton’s admissions requirements. He and his family might be moving to New York City. After checking out Dalton’s website, he wanted me to get a feel for the place.” Andy says twisting the truth. She figures that this way, she explains her presence near the school without giving away any information that might paint a giant target on Rachel’s back.

Miranda looks at her skeptically. “Why did you run away the moment you saw me?” She finally asks, still suspicious.

Andy’s eyes widen at those words. She had assumed Miranda had seen her as she was heading inside Dalton, probably to talk to one of the teachers. She had been so focused on finding a way to get a hold of Rachel; she would have easily missed a herd of stampeding polka-dotted elephants in tutus carving a path through Dalton’s corridors. “I was distracted while in the middle of an important conversation when my phone met an untimely demise. I needed to find a way to get in touch again to prevent the other party from going into a panic. I didn’t even realise you were inside Dalton when I was. I honestly didn’t see you.” She finally says as she fishes the remnants of said device to show Miranda, still unaware that the person she bumped into was her former boss.

“Do you honestly expect me to believe such a flimsy story? What do you take me for Andréa?” Miranda asks, raising an eyebrow. The woman literally walked into her. How can Andy claim she was unaware of her presence? “Who were you talking to just now?” She adds.

“Listen Miranda, I mean no disrespect, but that was a private conversation. All you need to know is
that the party on the other end isn’t associated with journalism in any way, shape or form. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to let my editor know that I’ll be incommunicado until I replace my phone.” Andy says. “I truly wish that we could have met under better circumstances. Have a wonderful day, Miranda.” She adds as she starts to walk away from the silver-haired editor.

Miranda runs through what happened earlier in the hallway and has to admit that Andy never once looked up from her destroyed mobile device. “Andréa, wait.” She says, feeling bad.

Andy stops and turns around. It wouldn’t do her career any good to antagonise the Dragon Lady further. “Yes, Miranda? What can I do for you?” She asks softly, the words bringing back so many good and bad memories.

Miranda clears her throat uncharacteristically before she lets her eyes roam around them for a bit. Once she’s sure no one is listening or even looking in their general direction, she starts to speak. “I do feel bad for the untimely demise of your phone, but really, couldn’t you at least pay more attention and watch where you’re going? I nearly broke my neck when I stepped on that blasted thing. As a reporter, isn’t it your job to be aware of your surroundings? Instead, you nearly plough me over in your haste.” Miranda says.

“You mean to say you were the person I bumped into earlier?” Andy blurts out.

“Wasn’t I speaking in English just now?” Miranda snaps, not happy that her apology, something she rarely gives, isn’t appreciated.

Andy’s eyebrows shoot up to her hairline at the words. It takes a bit of effort, but she manages to keep the ‘maybe you should have been paying attention as well and not walk around as if you own the universe’ from leaving her mouth, just barely so. “You’re correct, Miranda. I should have been paying more attention to where I was going. I apologise for any stress my carelessness might have caused.” She says instead, because no matter what, she should have been paying more attention to her surroundings. She takes the silence that follows as her cue to leave. She is about to do so, when Miranda starts to speak. Once again, she’s stopped in her tracks.

“Was this a work-issued device?” Miranda asks.

Andy blinks a few times at the question. Definitely not what she was expecting.

“No. It was my own phone. I don’t like the idea of having two separate wireless devices, so I came
to an agreement with my editor. *The Mirror* gives me access to one of their corporate plans.” Andy says. “It’s a win-win situation for everyone involved. I get to have a single phone and my employers save a bundle because I pay for everything. In return, I get to use it for personal purposes as well as work related ones, but I get a plan with unlimited everything for a fraction of the price. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I really need to replace said phone.” She adds at the raised eyebrow she gets.

“Even though you ran into me, it was still my shoe that killed your phone. Since your phone didn’t damage my shoe and your employer won’t be issuing you a new one, allow me to replace it.” Miranda says, surprised at her own words and actions. She smiles inwardly when she sees Andy is equally shocked.

“Thank you for the offer, Miranda, but that won’t be necessary. I really should have been paying more attention to my surroundings. I’m grateful that you didn’t injure yourself when you accidentally stepped on it.” Andy says once she recovers the use of her brain.

“This isn’t up for discussion. I won’t risk someone finding out about this mishap and start to spread vile rumours about me attacking you and destroying your property. This way, even if somehow someone were to find out and twists things around and put the blame on me, at least you also have to admit that I didn’t hesitate in replacing your phone.” Miranda says dismissively as she pulls out her phone and contacts her office. “Drop whatever you are doing and pay attention to what you’ll be told. I need you to replace a wireless device… Of course it isn’t mine, how else would I be calling you if I needed mine replaced… You don’t need to concern yourself with the hows or the whys. Just that you need to get it done. Wait.” She says once the call is connected. She shoves the phone to Andy. “Let the new Emily know what service provider you use and she’ll make sure to have someone waiting for you with possible options.” She adds.

Andy fights the urge to roll her eyes. She knows there is no way this can pass as a Runway expense, and she really doesn’t want to owe Miranda anything. Even though this will be an unexpected expense, thankfully, the days where she is scrambling to make ends meet are over and done with. “I’m really grateful for the gesture, but that really isn’t necessary. I can replace my own phone.” She insists.

“Hurry up, Andréa. I don’t have all day, and the new Emily certainly doesn’t have a second to spare. Don’t make this more difficult than it has to be.” Miranda says as she shoves her smartphone into Andy’s hand, completely ignoring the brunette.

Andy relents and takes the proffered phone. She knows it’s pointless to argue. She could just as easily take the subway to the closest AT&T and sort everything out herself. Instead, she tells Miranda’s assistant the details she needs in one of the most awkward conversations she has ever had. When she’s done, she wordlessly hands the phone back to Miranda. She hopes she wasn’t just supposed to disconnect the call. Andy closes her eyes in relief when all Miranda does is take the phone and brings to her ear again.
“Emily, make sure you meet with Andréa at whichever wireless provider she uses and have a few models ready, in case they don’t have the exact phone… How should I know? However long it’ll take her to arrive… That’s not my problem. That’s all.” Miranda says and disconnects the call. “Emily will be waiting for you. You should have everything replaced no later than this afternoon. She’s to stay put at the closest location to Elias-Clarke until you show.” She says.

Andy considers saying something about not wanting to disrupt the assistant’s day. She knows it’s a waste of time, and it would probably make things more difficult for the girl in question. “Thank you, Miranda. Have a good day.” She says instead, as she walks back to the payphone. She quickly calls The Mirror and lets her editor know she’ll be out of reach until she can get her cell phone replaced and that she’ll call when that happens.

Miranda turns around, without another word. Once again, she pulls out her phone, this time calling her first assistant. “Emily, call Smith and Wollensky. Tell them to have my usual table ready… No. I don’t know how long I’ll be. I need to finish some business at Dalton first. Do not tell Irv I’ll be there.” She says before she disconnects the call. Without another word, she walks back inside the school.

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Nigel’s eyebrows furrow in confusion when his phone rings and Roy’s number flashes on his display.

“Roy, what’s going on? Is Miranda all right?” Nigel asks when he connects the call.

“Miranda ran into Andy at Dalton.” Roy answers without preambles.

Nigel nearly drops his phone at the news. “Oh my God. What happened? Is Andy all right? Did World War III erupt?” He asks in a whisper, as he walks and closes his office door.

“I couldn’t see or hear much, but…” Roy says, recounting what he could. “I guess, batten down the hatches, because by the time Miranda went back to Dalton, she looked very unhappy.” He adds.

“Thanks for the heads up. I’ll issue a vague warning so everyone is on their toes.” Nigel says before they end their brief conversation.
“I wish to speak Margaret right away.” Miranda demands the moment she makes eye contact with Walter Shaw.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Priestly, but Mrs. Delaney in the middle of a staff meeting.” Walter says as he swallows nervously. “Actually, I’m sure Mrs. Delaney will be more than happy to see you.” He amends after wilting under Miranda’s relentless glare.

Miranda doesn’t bother with a reply as she enters the principal’s office and takes a seat.

Walter nearly trips over his feet as he quickly walks over to the conference room, not wanting to subject himself to the wrath of the Dragon Lady. He knocks and enters only after he hears a faint ‘come in’. He swallows when all eyes land on him as he makes a beeline to Margaret.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but Ms. Priestly is in your office. She insisted on seeing you right away.” Walter says. “I tried to tell her you were in a meeting, but, uh, Ms. Priestly wouldn’t take ‘no’ for an answer.” He adds.

“It’s all right Walter. You did the right thing by coming to get me.” Margaret says to her harried assistant. “I apologise, ladies and gentlemen, but duty calls.” She adds to the group of assembled administrators.

They all nod in understanding, all having dealt with Miranda at some point or another. Most of the time, it’s easier to give in than to fight the woman.

Nigel immediately calls Andy, only to be directed straight to her voicemail. “Six, I guess you’re underground or something. Call me the second you can. Roy called to tell me about your encounter with Miranda.” He finally says after he gets Andy’s voicemail for the sixth time. When he hangs up his phone, he walks to Miranda’s office in search of Emily and start his vague warning, unaware that
Emily is in a near-panic state already, after her conversations with Marissa, the current second assistant, and Miranda.

Nigel considers calling a last minute meeting with all key-personnel, but decides a somewhat vague approach is the best way to tackle this. No need to start a blind panic just yet. He only decides to personally say something to Emily and Marissa because as Miranda’s assistants, they have to deal directly with the editor. He pulls out his cell phone and sends out a mass text with only the words ‘DEFCON 5’, letting all recipients know that Miranda is in a bad mood and they need to be on their toes with their work and to be near perfect (more than usual).

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Emily stares blankly at her phone while she processes the last two conversations. Marissa has to be wrong about the person she is told to wait for at an AT&T store. It has to be. After all, ‘Andrea’ is a very common name. She tells herself and the current ‘new her’ that it’s probably some weird coincidence. Miranda had been in a horrendous mood when everything happened three years ago, so no one ever mentions the name ‘Andrea Sachs’ for fear of being fired on the spot and then blackballed in the fashion industry. Even with Nigel’s text, Emily still holds on to the notion that it’s nothing more than some strange coincidence Serena and she will laugh off while having a few drinks after work. After all, crises are common in *Runway*’s day-to-day dealings. She asks herself for the millionth time why she chose to stay behind as Miranda’s senior assistant yet again. ‘Right, the immense power that comes with being said assistant was something I couldn’t, and won’t give up’, she reminds herself. Her worst fears are confirmed when she sees Nigel approaching.

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Nigel’s hackles rise when he sees Emily’s look of panic dart between himself, the office’s landline, and her cell phone. ‘Don’t panic. She’s probably freaking because of the message I sent is all’ he tells himself. Still, he can’t help the feeling of doom from overtaking him the closer he gets to his destination.

“Nigel, does your visit have anything to do with your text?” Emily asks without preambles. ‘Please say no, please say no’ she thinks as she waits expectantly for the answer.

“Unfortunately, yes. I just got off the phone with Roy, and he informed me that Miranda ran into Andy outside of Dalton’s main entrance.” Nigel answers.

Emily’s face pales considerably at those words. She’s thankful she is sitting down; otherwise, she’d be ungracefully sprawled on the floor. “Oh my God! This is bad. What were you thinking when you
sent that message? I’m raising the threat level to DEFCON 1.” She finally says as she grabs for her cell phone.

“Emily, calm down. It’s not that bad…” Nigel starts to say, only to be interrupted by Emily’s shrill voice.

“Not that bad! Nigel, Miranda called to cancel lunch with Irv; then she called to tell Marissa to drop everything and meet Andy at an AT&T store to replace Andy’s cell phone. Who knows what happened when those two met.” Emily says.

Nigel’s eyes widen in surprise. Roy hadn’t mentioned a thing about a destroyed cell phone. “I have no clue what happened, but according to what Roy told me…” He starts to say and, fills Emily in on his conversation with Miranda’s company driver.

“It makes no sense. Are you sure there was no confrontation when Miranda finally caught up with Andy?” Emily asks.

“As far as Roy could tell, no. Their conversation was very soft, so he couldn’t hear anything. All he said was that Andy had run out of Dalton as if the hounds of hell were chasing after her. When he didn’t see Miranda right after, he assumed Andy was trying to avoid her. It wasn’t until when Miranda followed out shortly that he realised they had seen each other, but I already told you that.” Nigel says.

“Maybe something happened when they were inside Dalton. There probably was some form of altercation, and the exchange outside was Miranda’s way of doing damage control. It would explain why she told Marissa to replace Andy’s phone.” Emily says.

“Perhaps, we don’t know for sure. As volatile as Miranda is, she has never been violent, so it would be wise to stop any and all speculation.” Nigel says, trying to convince them both.

“You think something is up. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have come to warn me.” Emily points out.

“I only came to let you know because you have to deal with Miranda directly whenever she’s in her office so you and Marissa won’t be blindsided. The rest of us well, we just need to anticipate possible situations and make sure that things are as close to perfect as they can get. For the sake of everyone, please keep me informed if anything else happens.” Nigel says.
“You’re quite right, Nigel. Speculating won’t get us anywhere. I’ll keep my eyes open and will let you know if anything needs to get done. Miranda had me call Smith and Wollensky to have her usual table ready. Let’s hope that after a nice lunch, she’ll return in a better mood.” Emily replies before they each return to work.

Deep down, both Nigel and Emily know that won’t be the case.

Like Miranda, Emily immediately thinks Andy is in the middle of a breaking story involving Dalton. She quickly takes care of the most important matters of the day before she opens a browser and starts to do some hunting. She debates calling her usual contacts with the major papers and ask questions when she sees nothing. She only stops because she doesn’t want to alert them if they happen to be unaware of any scandal brewing in Dalton. If she is the cause for other reporters sniffing around the twins’ school, she’ll be dead faster than it takes to blink. Maybe she needs to cultivate and expand her contacts to include not just the writers of the entertainment and fashion sections of the city’s papers, but maybe their other writers as well. The only problem is, she’s not sure which reporters she should befriend. It’s not as if she could just call the editors on behalf of Miranda and start asking them which reporters they would send if anything worthwhile might affect her boss. For the first time since Andy left, she curses herself for not taking the budding journalist’s offer of keeping in touch. If she calls all of a sudden to ask to ‘hang out’, it would just raise too many questions.

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Nigel has to fight the urge to call Andy again. Now that he knows her cell phone is currently in need of replacing, there is no point in leaving the girl another message. He knows that Andy will call the moment she can. Besides, it’s not like he can talk freely while he is still on Runway’s premises. As much as he tries to, he can’t help but wonder what happened. In the years he had known and worked with and under Miranda, he has never known the woman to behave in a manner which might cause a scandal, and Miranda grabbing and destroying someone’s property like that is definitely scandal-worthy.

The fact that Roy hasn’t called back or sent a warning text has to be a good sign. He quickly opens up the usual celebrity gossip websites and sighs relieved when there is no mention of Miranda going crazy and destroying someone’s cell phone. If that incident ever became public, the press would certainly have a field day, especially if and when Andy’s identity and past history with Runway and subsequently Miranda were to be uncovered as well. Eventually, he manages to force his attention back to his work. Like he said to Emily before he left Miranda’s outer office area, the only way to make sure they all survive is for them to be as perfect as possible when they finally turn in their mock-ups for the night’s ‘book’ assembly.

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Margaret quickly reschedules the meeting for the following day before she starts the trek back to her office. She knows that the longer Miranda waits, the more difficulty she will have in smoothing over whatever it is that Miranda feels one of the teachers messed up.

“Good afternoon, Miranda. I apologise for the wait. What can I do for you?” Margaret says when she enters her office. She hopes this will help in keeping the mercurial woman currently sitting by her desk calm, or at the very least from becoming more irritated, though if one were to judge by appearances alone, one would be blindsided, since the editor appears to be the perfect picture of calm and poise.

Miranda keeps her features in a calm mask. She wonders what the best approach might be. She could try and be coy and beat around the bush hoping for the principal to give her some information, or she could attack directly. In the end, she chooses the direct approach. The faster she finds out what is going on, the faster she can do damage control.

“I demand to know what that reporter for The New York Mirror, Andréa Sachs was doing here. I asked her point blank if she was working on a story and not only did she deny it, but she gave me some ludicrous tale about getting admissions information for a friend’s child. If there is something that will affect my daughters, I have every right to know.” Miranda says.

“I’m sorry Miranda. The reason behind Miss Sachs’ visit is not something I can freely discuss with you or anyone who isn’t a member of my staff.” Margaret says as calmly as she can. Thankfully, she manages to keep her face impassive as she digests Miranda’s words. She wonders why Andy chose to lie to Miranda about her visit here. She stops herself from speculating further, since everything about Rachel checks out. No matter what, one of the things she is immensely proud of is the privacy and the sense of security her school provides all present and future students. Regardless of who is asking.

“You can’t or you won’t?” Miranda asks.

“Both. I won’t reveal any information that might compromise the privacy of any student or future student there. It’s the same courtesy I extend your daughters. My adherence to our strict privacy policies and my commitment to the protection of our students is the reason I’ve been principal for nearly twenty-five years. All you need to know is that whatever Miss Sachs was here for, had nothing to do with a story of any kind.” Margaret says. She had no clue Andy was a reporter. She quietly files that information away, thinking that it might come to be useful in the future.

“My daughters have been students here since kindergarten. The least you and this school can do is protect them from any and all scandals. Do I need to make alternative arrangements for their education?” Miranda fires back.
“I am, and we are. Since Cassidy and Caroline have been enrolled here, I have made sure no one from the press has access to them while they are in school grounds. It’s the same for any and all students, regardless of their parents’ fame.” Margaret counters. “Let me put it like this, Miranda. If I were to bend the rules for you, how could you be sure I’m not doing the same for someone else? You know that if there is ever anything that would jeopardise your girls’ privacy and/or safety I’ll be the first one to contact you with all the relevant information. It’s the same I would do for any and all of my students.” She adds when she sees Miranda’s incredulous look.

Miranda has to admit the principal has made a very good point. She won’t just pull her daughters out unless there is a legitimate reason. So far, Margaret Delaney has always been fair and always made it a priority to protect her daughters and all of Dalton’s students. The woman had made sure to keep the girls safe from the prying eyes of reporters when both her divorces were made public, or whenever there was a power shift in the fashion industry involving her. She could try and threaten the woman and the school, but unless she’s ready to pull her daughters out and throw them into a new school, she has to watch how she talks to the principal. Her daughters would have an absolute fit if they were pulled out on a suspicion on her part without any proof. There’s also no guarantee that the new school might have her daughters’ best interest at heart. For now, she’ll keep an eye open, do the proper research, and make sure her girls can transfer at the drop of a hat.

“You’re correct, but you can’t blame me for desire to protect them. My girls have gone through enough just by having one of their parents constantly in the spotlight. They have gone through so much when their father and I separated, and then they had to deal with the circus that was my latest separation.” Miranda finally concedes.

“I understand, Miranda. Rest assured that we will always make sure your daughters are in a safe environment every second they spend here.” Margaret says. “Now, is there anything else I may do for you?” She adds.

“No. That is all.” Miranda says. “Have a good day, and thank you for seeing me in such short notice.” She adds, knowing that it’s in her best interest to be in the woman’s good graces. She’s out of the office in a flash, and on her way to the front.

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Roy had made sure to stay put this time. He doesn’t want to even imagine what his life would be like if Miranda was to come out and he is nowhere to be found. He immediately jumps out and opens the door for the editor the second he sees her coming out of the front doors.

“Smith and Wollensky. And make sure to avoid the traffic this time.” Miranda says the moment Roy
Roy nods and pulls out with a prayer in his head. It’s not like it’s his fault there is traffic in New York City. Not that he would ever say that aloud.

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Andy makes amazing time on the subway. It’s only taken her just a little over twenty minutes to get to the destination. Once she makes it inside the AT&T, she scans the people there. There are several well dressed young women, but only one is dressed in the latest fashion and looks like she’s about to pass out from a panic attack. That has to be Miranda’s second assistant. At least she hopes so, as she makes her way with a smile in her face.

“Hello, I hope I don’t have the wrong person. You must be Miranda’s junior assistant. I’m Andrea Sachs, but you can call me Andy.” Andy says as she extends her right hand. She knows she has the right person when a look of sheer panic appears on the young woman’s face. If she hadn’t made her time spent working in Runway completely off-limits, she would ask Nigel what kind of stories are floating around regarding her attitude and sudden departure.

“Oh my God, it’s you.” The woman replies. “I mean, it’s very nice to finally meet you. I’m Marissa Nichols.” She adds with a slight grimace.

“I apologise for keeping you waiting. I would have taken a cab, but with the midday traffic, it would have taken me longer to get here. At least there were not many unscheduled delays or detours on the subway.” Andy says neutrally. She is grateful she didn’t reveal to Miranda that the future student isn’t just a prospect, or that said future student is her cousin, if this is the reaction her name causes after three years.

“I’m sorry for my outburst. I’ve already made a fool of myself asking every woman who has entered the store if she is the ‘Andrea’ I was told me to meet. I guess I should have asked for a way of identifying you when we were on the phone earlier.” Marissa rambles nervously. She has no idea what is going on. All she knows is that she isn’t supposed to speak of the woman standing in front of her, but do her best to emulate her work ethics and drive.

“My apologies. That was an oversight on my part as well. I was caught by complete surprise when Miranda insisted in having my phone replaced. Normally I’m more on the ball.” Andy replies as calmly as she can.
“That’s understandable, especially with the way you left so abruptly.” Marissa says before she clamps her hand over her mouth. “I’m so sorry. That was none of my business. May we please start over?” She adds, blushing a deep crimson.

“Apology accepted. Now, why don’t we take care of business, since I’m sure you have a very busy day ahead of you.” Andy says. Maybe she’ll have to reconsider talking about certain things with Nigel.

All Marissa can do is nod, because she is afraid of what might come out of her mouth should she attempt to reply verbally.

Within half an hour, and a bit of convincing on the clerk’s end, Andy walks out with a brand new iPhone and a very thankful Marissa. The young woman is extremely surprised at how fast and painless the whole thing was. By the time they part ways, Marissa wonders why Andy left the way she did and why Miranda didn’t ruin her. Everyone in the publishing world knows how vindictive Runway’s editor-in-chief can be.

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Andy isn’t surprised that during the time the salesclerk was setting things up for her phone, the device exploded with notifications of new voicemails, and text messages waiting for her attention. She is thankful that the phone comes pre-charged to about fifty-percent capacity because this way, she won’t have to wait until she’s home to return the most important calls. As short as the amount of time she spent without a smartphone, she found that it was very hard for her to get by. She didn’t realise how much she depended on the device to stay in touch and to keep her e-mails up to date. She makes a mental note to speak with Greg about writing an article on people’s dependency on smartphones. She might hold off and see what happens once the hype of the new iPad dies down and competitors start to release their own product to compete.

Andy pushes aside thoughts of possible new articles and immediately lets her editors know her phone has been replaced. She groans when she hears Nigel’s message. She sends a quick text letting him know she’ll call him once she’s home. She needs to get a feel for what Miranda might know. She has a feeling Miranda will dig deeper until she’s satisfied Andy isn’t working on exposing anything wild involving Dalton and figures out what Andy was doing there in the first place.

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Quinn rushes out of Sue’s office with Santana and Brittany in tow. She hates it that she didn’t get to spend her lunch with Rachel. In a way, she can see why Sue is worried. With a big chunk of
Cheerios graduating soon, they need to figure out the best way to find replacements and still remain competitive enough to be able to defend and win another Nationals title.

“Slow down Q. I’m sure the midget is fine with Puck. You made sure she’s off limits since we returned from Christmas break, so I don’t get why you’re in such a rush. Besides, ever since she stopped dressing like a seventy-year-old toddler, people have left her alone. They’re too busy ogling and drooling over her.” Santana says as she finally manages to walk beside Quinn, instead of trailing after her. She’s almost positive Quinn and Rachel are hiding a similar secret to herself and Brittany, if some of the hand-holding she’s seen is any indication. Still, she’ll give them the same courtesy the other two are giving Brittany and her.

With a supernatural effort, Quinn manages to slow down her strides some. “You’re right. I guess I’m not yet used to it. It doesn’t help that our own teammates still treat Rachel so poorly.” She says as calmly as possible. She can’t possibly tell them the real reason why she is always so intent on spending every free moment she has by Rachel’s side. She also has to get her jealousy under control. Just thinking about the number of people openly ogling her girlfriend is enough to set her blood boiling. Part of her is sad the lemmings are too stupid and afraid to act on their lust, and part of her is ecstatic she doesn’t have competition for Rachel’s affections.

“I thought it was only Kurt and Mercedes because they’re jelly of Rachel’s awesomeness. And Finn, ‘cause she’s not interested in him the way she was before.” Brittany says flanking Quinn’s other side.

“You’re right Britt. The others might not be trying to hang out with Rachel, but at least they’ve stopped attacking her openly.” Quinn says. She forces herself not to react about the comments of others openly ogling Rachel, or Finn’s obvious interest. If she acknowledges it, she’ll end up outing them. Her mood improves drastically once they enter the cafeteria, only to have it plummet when Rachel is nowhere in sight and she sees Puck goofing off with Mike and Matt.

Santana and Brittany follow Quinn’s gaze once they notice the change in Quinn’s posture. All three are now making a beeline for the Mohawked boy, Rachel nowhere in sight.

“He better pray nothing bad happened to Rachel, or Quinn’s gonna do bad things to him.” Brittany says to Santana quietly.

Santana nods and silently thinks that she’ll help Quinn castrate Puck if something happened to Rachel. In the span of two months, she has seen how different Rachel truly is. It sucks and it hurts that the diva still keeps an emotional distance between them. Not that she can blame Rachel for it. After years of systematic torture and bullying, she’s only too grateful that the girl even talks to them.
Puck and the other boys stop their video game talk once they notice the look on the Unholy Trinity as they approach them. Mike and Matt send a quick prayer of thanks once they notice the murderous looks they (mostly Quinn) have are directed at Puck and not them. They make some lame ass excuse about algebra and leave Puck to face the girls alone. No matter how curious they are, they don’t want to be anywhere near the Unholy Trinity when they’re intent on bloodshed.

“Chickens! You guys don’t even take algebra. I’d stick up for you if you were the ones they were after.” Puck starts to say, only to have the words die in his throat once the girls are in front of him.

“Where the hell is Rachel, Puck?” Quinn hisses out. She knows she’s being irrational. More than likely, her girlfriend got bored and decided to go do something more productive. But her ultra-protective, loud, and somewhat irrational side keeps reminding her that Rachel would have texted her if that were the case.

“Calm down Fabray. I’m sure everything is okay. She got a phone call from her cousin in New York and said she needed a quiet place to talk. I haven’t seen her since.” Puck says swallowing a sudden lump in his throat. Quinn looks nothing short of murderous.

“Did she say where she went?” Quinn asks as she pulls out her phone to text Rachel. That explains Rachel sudden disappearance. They probably had to talk about something related to her move. She only hopes it’s nothing bad, since they’re in the middle of school still, even if it’s their lunch break.

“I don’t remember.” Puck says. Silently, he hopes everything is all right.

Quinn is about to say something to Puck when her phone chirps with Rachel’s reply.

Rachel Berry

In the choir room.
Just finished talking w/ Andy.
Think you can meet me here?
I don’t feel like talking dealing w/ the others.

Quinn lets out a relieved sigh as she replies with her own text.
“OMW, Baby. See you in a bit.”

“That was Rachel. I’m going to go and make sure she’s okay. See you guys in Glee later. Quinn says to the others without looking at them. She takes off before any of them can offer to join her.

“Is it just me, or do you get the feeling those two have been up to something?” Santana asks after a moment of silence. Whatever it is, she’s sure it has nothing to do with their ‘extracurricular’ activities. Rachel has been acting all weird since the beginning of the school year.

“You get the feeling they’ve been keeping something from us as well?” Puck asks as he runs a hand through is Mowhawk.

“Duh! Of course I’ve noticed. I have do have eyes. Who do you think I am? Finnept?” Santana says turning around, ready to follow Quinn.

“San, where are you going?” Brittany asks, following Santana out of the cafeteria.

“I’m going to find out what the hell is going on with Quinn and Rachel. Those two have been acting awfully strange, especially Rachel.” Santana says, walking a bit faster, in the hopes of catching up with the Head Cheerio.

Puck, not one to be left behind, gets up and scrambles to catch up to the two Cheerios.

“Are you sure we should be following her?” Brittany asks as she quickens her stride, in order to walk beside the Latina, as opposed to merely following her.

“Britt, what if something bad is happening to Rachel? Wouldn’t you want to make sure the midget is doing okay? Quinn could be acting all pit bull-like because Rachel is being picked on by someone whenever she’s alone and we can’t do anything to protect her.” Santana answers slowing down a bit, now that she knows the general direction Quinn has taken off to. Figures the midget would seek privacy in the choir room.

“No. I don’t want anything bad to happen to Rachel. She’s been picked on enough. It took most people here almost a year of beatings for the jocks to know not to call me and Becky names whenever you or Q weren’t around.” Brittany answers.
“That’s why we need to make sure those two aren’t getting into something they can’t handle.”
Santana says with a gentle smile.

Puck can’t fight the logic, though he admits that as worried as he is about Rachel’s odd behaviour, he is also very curious. He silently follows the girls, saying to himself that if Rachel and Quinn are in over their head with something dangerous, then they might need his muscles to bail them out. That it has nothing to do with curiosity. After all, friends help each other out, right?

* * *

Quinn makes her way as quickly as she can to the choir room. After the rollercoaster of emotions Rachel has been through since their return from Phoenix, she has a hard time leaving the girl alone. She still can’t believe how Dr. Hiram could so easily flip-flop like that. Granted, there are parts of her that wish she could handcuff Rachel to her and never let go. They could finish high school here and then leave for New York together. Thankfully, she loves Rachel enough to let go. She knows the education Rachel will get at Dalton will be one of the best the entire country has to offer. She knows that the pre-college program at Juilliard will improve Rachel’s range and control even more. She loves Rachel enough to never want the diva to be stuck in this backwater town. She keeps telling herself that two years are nothing, and that they have the holidays. She just has to figure out a way to convince her parents that spending every waking moment with Rachel during said holidays is normal for ‘best friends’. She smiles when she reaches the choir room and can hear the piano in the background. Her smile drops when she looks and sees traces of dry tears on her Rachel’s eyes.

“Rachie? What happened?” Quinn asks as she sits beside the diva on the piano bench and wraps her arms around her girlfriend.

Rachel smiles at the feel of strong arms holding her. She burrows deeper into the embrace and inhales Quinn’s familiar scent. She quickly kisses the cheerleader on the side of her jaw and neck before she places a barely there peck on willing lips. “Everything is fine now. Once again, I was overreacting.” She says as she reluctantly pulls away. Even if they’re alone in the choir room, they are still in school.

“You overreact? No!” Quinn says with mock surprise, earning herself a light slap on the shoulder. “Seriously, considering how you’ve had to deal with things mostly on your own, I’m surprised you’re not getting a visit from the men in the white uniforms ready to give you a custom fitting with a straight jacket. Now, tell me what caused the tears and if I need to kick someone’s ass.” She adds playfully.

“Remember how I was freaking out earlier when I was thinking about where I’d practice during the
summer? Well, it turns out that Andy came up with a plan and while she was telling me, her phone somehow got destroyed. I couldn’t get a hold of her and I automatically thought something happened to her. Anyway, eventually she found a payphone and told me what happened. They were tears of relief.” She adds.

“So Andy is okay? Nothing bad happened except for her phone biting it?” Quinn asks.

“Yes, she assured me she’s fine and that she’ll contact me when she has everything sorted out. Probably after I’m home later tonight.” Rachel says with a relieved smile.

* * *

Santana, Brittany, and Puck listen to the conversation taking place inside the choir room. They know they shouldn’t, but they can’t stop themselves. They try to look as inconspicuously as possible while they stand outside the closed door.

Santana finds it odd that Rachel would freak out about not having a place to practice during the summer. Didn’t she say she has spent every summer in NYC since she was twelve? Why would not having a place to practice her singing be such a big deal now? She fights the urge to walk in and ask, because she knows the diva will stop talking the moment they are seen. No matter what they do, Rachel is still very guarded around them.

* * *

“Did she tell you how you’ll practice your singing over the summer? And just out of curiosity, how did you manage in the past?” Quinn asks.

Rachel blushes at the last question, which only serves to pique Quinn’s curiosity even more.

“Rachie? You know you can tell me anything, right?” Quinn asks.

“In the past it didn’t matter as much because I wasn’t going to attend Juilliard’s pre-college program. Since I’m starting this September, I wanted to make sure my future classmates aren’t better prepared than I am. I can’t even imagine how horrible my voice will sound after a break of nearly three months with next to no practice. I can’t risk being the only one like that.” Rachel says, biting her bottom lip in that adorable way that makes Quinn want to devour the diva with kisses.
“How do you know the other candidates will practice in the summer?” Quinn asks, though she knows the answer already. God knows that if it were up to Sue, all Cheerios would have mandatory practice all summer long, not just during the last two weeks of the summer vacation.

“The professors I spoke with while auditioning told me that the majority of the pre-college candidates are already vying for an undergrad spot. They were very realistic, and even with all the praise I received, they told me that I’d be among people who would be nearly as talented as I am. If I even dream about attending Juilliard or any other top performing arts college for my undergrad, I need to make sure I’m not just one of the bunch, but the best. I didn’t fight tooth and nail to finish high school in New York only to be part of the background. I need to prove to myself I can cut it. I need to prove to Dad that I’m an exceptional singer and performer not just here in Lima, but in New York as well.” Rachel says.

“So, what did Andy come up with?” Quinn asks, fighting the lump that is slowly forming in her throat.

“Andy went to Dalton and somehow managed to convince Mrs. Delaney, the school’s principal to allow me to use their facilities during their summer session.” Rachel answers excited.

“It’s really happening, isn’t it? You’re really moving to New York once school ends, aren’t you?” Quinn asks, voice thick with tears.

“I… Yes. My tuition for both places has been paid for, but…” Rachel says, only to be cut off.

“You are what?!?” Santana asks as she ploughs in the choir room. A mixture of hurt and astonishment in her face. She is followed inside by Brittany and Puck.

Rachel and Quinn’s eyes widen at the intrusion. So much for waiting until Friday.

“Did we hear you say you’re moving to New York?” Puck asks crossing his arms.

“Of course she is. Haven’t you been paying attention, Puck? Rachel has always said she’ll be moving to New York after graduation and be on Broadway.” Brittany says.
“Quinn said Rachel is leaving after school ends.” Santana adds. She’s surprised at how upset she is.

“She probably means when we all graduate high school.” Brittany says. She hopes they misheard, since the door was closed and they were standing outside. “Please Rach; tell them it’s a mistake.” She adds.

Rachel looks at the clock hanging in the far wall. Lunch is almost over and they are supposed to be in class soon. She knows there is no way they will wait until after Glee. Not if she wants to keep her departure a secret for as long as she can. She pulls out her phone and dials Leroy’s number. “Daddy, something came up and I’m going to miss the rest of the school day… No, nothing too dire. Just an important conversation I need to have with Noah, Santana, and Brittany that I don’t want others overhearing… I know I said I was going to do it this Friday, but the cat is out of the bag now. I’ll tell you everything when you get home tonight… Thanks Daddy. I love you too.” She says. Then she turns to look at four sets of eyes looking at her with a mixture of confusion and betrayal. She closes her eyes and forces herself to remain calm.

“I normally don’t condone skipping school in any way, shape or form, but this is a conversation that cannot be had on school premises. I doubt the three of you will agree to wait until after our day’s commitments are over.” Rachel finally says once she thinks she has her emotions under control.

“What the fuck is going on?” Santana asks.

“Not here, please. I know it’s too much to ask, but do you think you could follow me home and I’ll tell you everything.” Rachel pleads.

After what feels like a lifetime; Santana, Brittany, and Puck nod their agreement. For a moment, it appeared as if they were going to say no and demand an explanation right then and there.

“Do any of you wish to return after we’re done with our conversation? If not, I suggest we go grab what books are necessary and meet back in my house in about fifteen minutes or so.” Rachel asks with a sigh.

“Fine, but don’t think you’re getting out of this. I want a full explanation.” Santana says before she storms out in a way that rivals Rachel’s usual diva storm outs. She is followed by a silent Brittany.

Puck stays behind, still staring blankly at Rachel and Quinn. “I’m not leaving the two of you out of my sight until I find out what the hell is going on.” He says.
“Have it your way. I’m going to my locker to get my things.” Quinn says as she gently guides a still stupefied Rachel out of the choir room and to their respective lockers.

True to his word, Puck shadows the girls and follows them as closely as he can in his truck.

“I guess I should have been more careful and waited until we were back home before I went into any details over what happened.” Rachel says as they manoeuvre the surprisingly full streets of Lima.

“It’s not your fault, Rachie. I should have made sure they weren’t following me. When Puck told me you got a phone call from Andy I sort of overreacted myself. I knew it had to be important for Andy to be calling you during school hours. I should have known better.” Quinn counters.

“It’s not your fault, Eggie. Things happen for a reason and things don’t happen for a reason.” Rachel says with a shrug. Repeating that over and over has been one of the few ways she has been able to cope with everything. “I just hope they won’t be too angry and revert back to the way things were before, or even worse yet.” She quietly admits.

“I doubt they will. For whatever reason, Puck looks at you like you’re his long lost good, fraternal twin. I nearly ripped Puck’s head off when I thought he ditched you to goof off with Mike and Matt. I thought it was my imagination when it looked like Santana and Brittany wanted to hurt him just as bad. As I said before, they’ll be angry, but they’ll get over it.” Quinn says gently.

“I hope so.” Rachel says as Quinn pulls in the driveway. She isn’t surprised to see that Santana is already parked by the curb waiting for them and immediately pulls up behind, blocking Quinn’s car. Puck parks by the curb. “Here goes nothing.” She says as she reaches for her messenger bag.

Before Rachel can fully turn around and reach for the door, Quinn grabs one of her hands. “No matter what happens, you have me. I’m always on your side. On the off chance I’m wrong and they lash out at you, they’ll have to deal with me as well. I won’t let them hurt you.” She says. ‘I won’t hold back with them.’ She thinks to herself.

Rachel nods, and finally, gathers enough courage to get out of the car. She is quickly joined by the others and they silently walk to the front door.

Rachel gestures for the others to find a place to sit while she puts her things away. Eventually she settles down on one of the loveseats in the big living room.
Quinn immediately mouths ‘I’ll be right back’ before she disappears to the kitchen and comes out with a single glass of water that she places in front of Rachel before she settles beside the diva.

Rachel sends her girlfriend a grateful look. She has to fight the urge to burrow into Quinn’s arms, but there is no way she is going to risk outing them. As it is, she’s not sure how people haven’t pieced things together, seeing as they spend every possible moment together and neither of them are dating or showing any interest in dating anyone.

The group of teenagers stare at one another, unsure of how to start the conversation.

“San said that you’re moving once school is over in a month. Is that true Rach?” Brittany asks, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

“Before Rachel answers, I need you guys to promise me that no matter what, you’re going to hear everything she has to say before you react. You may ask questions, but you may not attack her just for the hell of it.” Quinn says as she scoots closer to Rachel.

“You’re in no position to demand anything. This is about Rachel, not you. She’s been lying to us for god knows how long.” Puck snaps.

“This conversation concerns my best friend, therefore it concerns me. Before you go self-righteous on us, remember none of you are fault-free. We could have stopped being douche bags a hell of a lot sooner. Rachel has her reasons for keeping things to herself.” Quinn says, not backing down one bit.

Santana’s protest dies in her throat at those words. Once again, she feels they’re lucky Rachel has given them yet another chance. She can only nod. The others follow Santana’s lead.

“Quinn, it’s not really necessary. I mean…” Rachel starts to say, but Quinn’s hand squeezing hers in support stops her.

“Yes, it is. You’ve been through enough crap to last you several lifetimes. I won’t allow anything else bad to happen in my presence.” Quinn says gently to Rachel. She then turns to their friends. “Do I have your word you’re not going to overreact?” She asks. She’s not just happy with a nod. She’s only satisfied when she hears them mumble ‘yes’. She then turns her attention back to Rachel. “Go ahead, Rachie. I know this is hard, so take all the time you need.” She adds, her voice immediately losing its bite.
Rachel smiles gratefully as she reaches for the glass of water in front of her and takes a sip.

As much as Quinn hates it, at least it’s a small sip and Rachel isn’t gulping the water down.

“It’s true. When this school year ends, I’m moving to New York City. It’s been something I’ve considered for quite some time. My cousin Andy and I have been talking about that possibility on and off for years.” Rachel says.

“What do you mean years? Why now?” Santana asks in a tone of voice so gentle that it causes everyone to do a double-take.

“I’ve been bullied for as long as I can remember. Up until last October, I had no friends here. I’ve reached my breaking point. If I stay, I’m going to have a nervous breakdown or end up with a severe case of depression.” Rachel answers.

“I didn’t think it was that bad.” Brittany says sadly.

“So now you’re running away? That’s really brave of you.” Puck snaps.

“Are you deaf, Puckerman? Didn’t I say to let Rachel finish so you wouldn’t overreact and end up being an ass?” Quinn snaps back in full HBIC mode.

“You said it was fine for us to ask questions. I was asking a question.” Puck says in a more contrite tone of voice. No matter how much Quinn has softened up since she and Rachel have become friends, the HBIC is never far behind.

“You weren’t. You’re being an asshole. Now shut the fuck up and let Rachel speak.” Santana snarls at him, surprising everyone.

“Noah, do you have any idea what it feels like to be bullied every day of your life?” Rachel asks.

“Come on, Rachel. So you got a few slushies thrown at you from time to time. You got called a few
names before Quinn stopped it. What’s the big deal? We’ve all been called names before. Since I
joined Glee, I’ve had idiots from the hockey team slushy me and call me names until I put a stop to it.
Hell, Santana just called me an asshole and you don’t see me packing my bags and moving to a
different city.” Puck answers condescendingly.

Before either Quinn or Santana can react, Brittany reaches over and slaps the boy. “You’re being a
poopyhead, Puck. If you really think that comes even close to what Rachel has gone through, then
you’re definitely a hell of a lot dumber than what everyone thinks I am.” She says in the same sad
voice.

“How would you know?” Puck asks, mindful of his tone because he doesn’t want to piss off Santana
or Quinn more than they already are. Not to mention, his cheek is burning something fierce.

“Rachel and I started going to dance together since we were four. I’ve noticed that everyone has
picked on Rachel because of her dads, the way she talks, the stuff she wears and her dreams. Your
bullying only lasted for a little bit. People have been mean to Rachel for many years, and it’s not just
kids, but their parents also. You don’t know what that is like. You never will.” Brittany says.

“And you do?” Puck scoffs, earning himself a slap to the back of his head from a fuming Latina.

“Yes, I do. I’ve had people call me slow and dumb and a retard because I learn things differently. I
don’t get bullied is because I’m a Cheerio and Santana makes sure people are afraid to call me
names. It didn’t always stop them when San wasn’t around. At least, for me things got better because
I have a best friend who has kept me safe and everyone at school is afraid to mess with a Cheerio.
Now, shut up and let Rach finish talking.” Brittany says.

“That’s why you never picked on me or called me names.” Rachel says to Brittany. “Thank you.”
She adds.

“Don’t thank me. I don’t deserve it. I know what it feels like to be picked on, but I was too afraid to
stand up for you.” Brittany says even sadder.

“That still doesn’t explain why you’re moving to New York and why you kept it a secret from us.
Friends tell each other shit. I guess the concept is too new for you and…” Puck starts to say, only to
have Santana slap him even harder. “What the fuck, López?” He asks.

“Consider yourself lucky I’m not beating the shit out of you.” Santana snaps.
“Enough! Puck, I swear you’re this close (said with thumb and index finger held nearly touching) to having your mouth duct-taped shut. I get that you’re hurt, but it doesn’t give you the right to hurt her back. This is exactly why Rachel was hesitating telling any of you.” Quinn hisses. When she sees Rachel reaching for the glass over water and take a much bigger sip, she wants nothing more than to slap him until her hand hurts. Instead, she tightens her hold on the diva.

“You’ve been taking Finn lessons, Puck. Haven’t you been listening at all?” Brittany says as she gets up to sit on the floor in front of the loveseat Rachel and Quinn are sharing.

“Why are you defending her? She’s been lying to you too. You should be pissed off because friends don’t do that to each other.” Puck says, getting more agitated.

“Because she needs more people to defend her.” Brittany answers.

“This is your last warning, Puckerman. Keep this up and I’ll sew your lips together. Fuck the duct tape.” Santana threatens the boy as she grabs a handful of his t-shirt with one hand, and pokes his swelling cheek with the other. “Go on, Rachel. He won’t interrupt anymore.” She adds.

“I made the decision to move at the beginning of the school year. I applied to The Dalton School after the second week of classes, and I sent Juilliard a DVD of one of my performances. By Thanksgiving, I had already gotten my conditional acceptance to Dalton. That’s why I left early Christmas break. I had to write my admissions exam and I had to audition for Juilliard’s pre-college vocal program. Other than my dads and Quinn, no else in Ohio knows. I spent the first half of our Spring Break doing my final interview with Dalton, paying my tuition fees, and getting everything settled at Andy’s apartment.” Rachel says.

“Is that why you’ve been so distant with us?” Santana asks.

“No. I’ve only kept my distance because I’ve been preparing myself for the heartbreak of having you return to treating me like before once I told you. Judging by how Noah reacted, I guess I wasn’t too far off the mark. I didn’t mean to hurt any of you by my omission. I know I’m in no position to ask anything of you, but if you decide to rescind your friendship, all I ask is that you keep quiet about my plans until after I’m gone. I know nearly the entire school hates me, and I don’t think I can take the happy looks once they find out ‘the homo-spawn’ is finally leaving.” Rachel says. “Quinn, I hate to do this to you, but do you think you can entertain our guests. I need some time alone, and I don’t think I can deal with them treating me like before in my own home.” She adds.
“Of course Rachie. Go lie down.” Quinn says.

“I’m not mad at you, Rach. I’ll be your friend if you’ll have me.” Brittany says as she puts a hand on the diva’s knee.

“I’m not pissed either, at least not anymore. Besides, you ain’t getting rid of me so easily.” Santana says, making the diva smile sadly.

Rachel’s smile fades when she sees Puck’s scowl. She leaves without uttering another word.

“Don’t you care that she’s been lying to us all this time? I get it that things have been shitty for her before, but we’ve been her friends for awhile now. She has no reason to leave.” Puck says, not willing to back down.

“You don’t get to be an asshole because your feelings are hurt. If that were the case, Rachel has more than enough reasons to be a complete bitch to us. Instead, she accepted our apology and gave us a chance to get to know her. If you’re going to shove your head up your ass, it’s your call. You don’t have to be nice to us, but if you go back to treating her like shit, or you say one word about her plans to anyone outside of this house, I’ll castrate you with two rusty nails attached to a car battery.” Quinn says the moment she’s sure Rachel is out of earshot.

“And when Quinn is done, I’ll shove your balls so far up your ass that you’ll choke on them.” Santana says with a growl.

“We’re called the Unholy Trinity for a reason, Puck. Don’t mess with us, because dumpster dives and slushies will only be the beginning. Are we making ourselves clear?” Brittany says, surprising them.

“Crystal. I won’t say a thing, but don’t expect me to be your friend after this.” Puck says before he gets up and leaves in a huff.

TBC...
Chapter 14

Rachel’s first instinct is to call Andy. Her cousin always has good advice and more often than not, she helps Rachel put things back into perspective. She only stops when she remembers Andy is probably in the midst of replacing her cell phone and making sure she has a way to stay in touch with work-related people and news sources. She wants Quinn, but for now, that is also not a possibility. She feels slightly guilty she left her girlfriend to deal with the downfall of another mess of her creation. What surprises Rachel to no end are Santana and Brittany’s reactions. Out of the three of them, she had expected Santana’s behaviour to be the worst, especially after the way the Latina had behaved at school when they were overheard. She had thought it’d be up to Quinn and maybe Noah to get the Latina to back off, instead of the three Cheerios keeping Noah in line. She knows she should be downstairs trying to do some damage control and hope that things won’t revert to the way they have always been. The more jaded side of her can’t help but think that if anything, she should have left Lima the second her freshman year of high school had ended and her bullying instead of stopping had gotten worse.

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“Is Rachel going to be okay?” Brittany asks the moment the front door slams with such force that the noise makes her jump.

“I hope so.” Quinn manages to say after she sighs. “Thank you for not jumping down her throat the way Puck did.” She adds a bit surprised.

“Have things really been that shitty for her?” Santana asks out of nowhere, ignoring Quinn’s comment.

“I think so, but I honestly don’t know. Rachel doesn’t like talking about that too much, so I don’t push.” Quinn answers looking ashamed.

“It’s not your fault, Quinnie. Most people are poopheads who are too afraid of love that isn’t the kind we’re used to seeing.” Brittany says to Quinn before she turns her attention to Santana.

Quinn pales at those words. She thought they were being so careful with their relationship. Then again, she has never been one to be overly physically affectionate with anyone, but Rachel and she are always touching in some form. She shouldn’t be surprised. She wonders if the entire school knows, or if it’s just Brittany and by default, Santana. She wonders how soon until the news and rumours reach her parents. If so, she wonders how long she’ll have to pack when they kick her out and disown her. She needs to figure out where she’ll live and how she’ll live. Before she goes into a full panic attack, she needs to gather more information. She’s about to ask for clarification to find out
exactly how much they know and how many people know. If it’s only the two of them, maybe ask them to keep yet another secret when Brittany continues to speak.

“And yes, Sanny it really has been that bad for Rachel. When I started going to the dance studio, I heard parents tell their kids not to go near the fags’ daughter because they might catch something or be converted. Some went as far as ask Madame Bouvier to kick Rachel off the dance classes and ban her from the studio. At least she’s always been good to Rachel and told those meanies that if they had a problem with how she runs her studio that they didn’t have to bring their kids to her. When that didn’t work, some of the parents and their kids started being mean to Rachel hoping she’d quit.” Brittany says, answering the Latina’s question.

Quinn has to force herself to not sigh in relief. They don’t know. Brittany is talking about Rachel’s dads and how Rachel has been treated as a result. She feels a horrible wave of guilt wash over her once the dancer’s words register. Her ‘father’ was one of those parents, and sadly, she had listened then, because it was easier than to go against him. At least she has the comfort of knowing that even though she bullied Rachel, she never said a single negative thing about her fathers’ sexual orientation. She has to fight the urge to laugh because the moment Russell finds out she’s in fact gay, or at the very least bi, he would be sure to spout how he had been right all along, and Rachel and her family brainwashed her.

“At least it hasn’t all been bad. That was just a fluke, right?” Santana says as a way to assuage her own guilt. Growing up in a devout Catholic family, she knows only too well how Christianity in general views homosexuality, and she has of course, heard some of the comments her Abuela Alma and some of her uncles and aunts have said about it. It’s the reason she is hidden so deep in the closet.

“It’s been mostly bad. Mrs. Kingston, our fourth grade teacher was a bitch to Rachel. She never stopped the bullies and she was always taunting her about going to her daddies whenever she was bullied by the other kids. She went as far as to say that it was the way certain families raise their kids, by always putting the blame on others, and by having others fix their mistakes for them. Rachel had to transfer to a different class because of it.” Brittany counters sadly.

Quinn and Santana close their eyes in sympathy as they feel their hearts clench. Aren’t teachers supposed to be impartial and look out for the best interest of all students? Right. If that were the case, then all the bullying that takes place in McKinley wouldn’t be so obvious and out of control.

Quinn is sure leaving is the best solution for Rachel and once again vows to make sure it’s as painless as possible. If she has to bring her inner HBIC out to play, then so be it. At least this time, Rachel will benefit from her darker side. As much as she hates to admit it, she didn’t just inherit her last name from the Fabray side of her family tree. She also inherited the ruthlessness and conniving nature from them.

“Not that I don’t appreciate it, but what brought the change of heart. I know you were ready to go all ‘Lima Heights Adjacent’ on her when you overheard us talking earlier.” Quinn says before Brittany can provide more examples. The guilt is overwhelming. It’s getting more and more difficult to not go postal, and she’s only hearing about it. She can’t imagine how Rachel deals with everything. She only experienced some of it when her pregnancy scare was made public soon after she joined Glee. For Quinn, it all ended once those rumours were quashed. Then, it was only a matter of figuring out the best ways to go about exacting her revenge on the sheep. No wonder the girl is at her breaking point. She also needs to know Santana isn’t going to suddenly change her mind again and start acting like an ass. It’d be nice to have one of her best friends truly in her corner once Rachel is off to greener and better pastures.
“You’re right. Rachel didn’t have to give any of us another chance. I get that it takes more than a couple of months of being nice to gain someone’s trust, especially hers, considering how we’ve treated her over the years. God knows there are a lot of personal things about me she doesn’t know, things that I’m not exactly comfortable sharing with her. Then Puck’s words to her were like a slap on the face. That asshole really thinks that Rachel should be grateful we finally pulled our heads out of our asses and befriended her, when it should be the other way around. I sure as hell would have demanded my parents move if I had to go through all that crap she has in school. And that’s before finding out the extra shit from Britt.” She adds looking between Quinn and Brittany.

“So you’re not going to all of a sudden change your mind and start treating her like shit again?” Quinn asks.

“I won’t. I’m arrogant as hell, but I’m not stupid. In her place, I’d have never forgiven us. And if I did, I’d be having a hard time trusting us as well. I’d be paranoid about evil schemes and similar shit if I were her.” Santana answers.

“We won’t say anything to anyone either. We’ll let Rachel be the one to tell others if she wants. We’ll make sure to keep Puck from blabbing.” Brittany says. “Come on, San. We gotta go so Quinn can make sure Rach is okay.” She adds as she gets up from the couch and starts to pull Santana up with her.

“Thanks guys. We’ll talk. Once Rachel realises you guys aren’t going back to treating her like crap, she’ll stop pushing you away.” Quinn says as she guides the other two to the front door.

“Let Rachel know that we’re not mad and that we’d like to clear the air between us for real. That we won’t go back to being shitheads.” Santana says.

“We’re not going to change our minds, even after we go home and think about it.” Brittany says as if reading Quinn’s mind.

“Thanks for all the support.” Quinn says as she waves gratefully at them.

Quinn finally closes the front door after she sees Santana’s car drive off. She can’t help the relief she feels when she notices that Rachel’s glass of water is still sitting on top of the coffee table, and even though she drank about half of it. At least it’s not empty and she didn’t need a refill. She nearly does a happy dance at that. She quickly takes it to the kitchen, refills it, and takes it up to Rachel’s room just in case. Her heart breaks when she sees her girlfriend curled up on the side of the bed. She can’t help but think how tiny she looks. She quickly sets the glass on the bedside table and gets up on the bed, gently spooning the girl and draping her arm lovingly over the diva’s side.

Rachel smiles when she feels a strong arm wrap around her, but she can’t help looking at the clock on her iPod dock. She’s surprised she’s been alone for barely ten minutes. She turns around so she’s now facing Quinn.

“The girls and I were persuading Puck to stay quiet. They left after they made me promise I’ll take care of you and that we’ll talk after you’re not so sad. I’m sorry it took me so long to come back.” Quinn says.

“I’m sorry I put you in such a spot. I was being selfish again. I should have dealt with everything first, but I didn’t I could handle them attacking me here where I’m supposed to feel safe and…” Rachel starts to rant, only to have it cut short when strong arms pull her closer.

“Shh. I’m glad I was able to do something. I’m sorry I couldn’t stop Puck from saying all that crap. I’m sorry he took things the way he did. At least Brittany and Santana understand.” Quinn says.
“You had nothing to do with how Noah reacted. I was expecting some sort of backlash, but it still hurt. Part of me was hopeful it wouldn’t happen. I’m surprised Santana and Brittany didn’t since I was expecting Santana to be the one lashing out. I’m glad they seem to be taking things so well, but will that change once they realise Noah is right and I’ve been lying to them for better part of a year now?” Rachel says.

“Rachie, no matter what, you’re well within your right to keep any and all parts of your life private. Just because someone became your friend over the last couple of months doesn’t mean that they get an in on your life. What you tell us and how much depends on what makes you comfortable. If we can’t take it, then it’s our fault for making assumptions. Real friends understand the need for privacy. We know trust is earned. That’s why San backed down once she had a chance to think things through on the way here. It’s why Britt never lashed out. We messed up with you in the first place and blaming you for having trust issues with us is stupid. Puck is wrong. Just because you don’t share every nuance of your life with everyone in it doesn’t make you a liar any more than it makes me or others. You’re a great person to have as a friend.” Quinn says as she traces patterns wherever her fingers happen to touch.

“I love you. You always know what to say to keep me calm. You’ve been keeping me safe even at the risk of your own popularity. Thank you. I trust you with my life. You’ve shown me that when it comes to you, I have nothing to be afraid of. I know I can tell you anything.” Rachel says with adoration.

“I love you too, Baby. And the feeling is mutual.” Quinn answers immediately. “What good is popularity if I still have to conform to others? I’m only sorry I didn’t step up to it sooner. I’m sorry we can’t be a couple in the open.” She adds, ashamed that she’s afraid.

“Eggie… don’t. Your parents would disown you in a heartbeat, and that’s only one of the horrible things they can do to you. They could send you to one of those horrible anti-gay conversion camps. We know how small-minded people here are. I can’t bear the thought of people treating you the way my dads and I are treated, or that you’d have to face that type of discrimination by yourself until graduation. In a few months, Lima will be nothing more than a bad memory for me. I could never forgive myself if being with me were to expose you to the uglier side of discrimination. I admit that it’d be nice to be able to walk around without having to hide so the world can know you’re off the market, but the price is too high. Your safety matters more than my insecurities and jealousy. I trust you.” Rachel says as she shifts enough to kiss Quinn tenderly.

“That’s one of the reasons I love you so much. No matter what happens, you always do your best to protect me in your own way. Don’t worry, Rachie. I’ll make sure Puck stays quiet.” Quinn says once they pull apart.

“I’m afraid.” Rachel says as they shift again so Quinn is on her back with Rachel draped nearly on top of her.

“Of what, Baby?” Quinn asks, though she has a very good idea.

“What if you can’t get Noah to back off? What if he tells everyone out of spite? I know that I’ll be gone so they can’t ridicule me for being rejected. I don’t think I can take the looks of sheer happiness everyone is going to have because they finally will be rid of me.” Rachel admits.

“If that happens, we’ll deal with it together. They might react poorly, they might not. But one thing I can say for sure is that everyone will be even more jealous of you.” Quinn says.

“They won’t. What’s there to be jealous about?” Rachel asks seriously.
“Tons. Everyone knows how talented you are. It’s the reason Shelby sent Jesse to spy on you in the first place. Before you joined Glee, McKinley’s show choir was nothing more than a joke. Suddenly, after one invitational, we have the vocal coach of one of the best show choirs in the country nervous enough to send in a spy. Now, your talent is getting you out of Loserville a hell of a lot sooner. We all want to leave. Most won’t get to. It sounds sick and pathetic, but their jealousy will only grow and unfortunately, they’ll show it in the same horrible ways they’ve done. But you won’t have to because I’ll put a stop to it before it’ll happen. And in the off chance I can’t, you won’t go through it alone. I’ll be with you every step of the way.” Quinn answers.

“What happens with Santana, Brittany and Noah now?” Rachel asks.

“I can’t speak for Puck, because he’s being a dick. But you don’t have to worry about San and Britt. What happens with those two is really up to you.” Quinn tells her with a smile.

“What do you mean up to me?” Rachel asks.

“You told me that you’ve been keeping your distance because you were afraid to get close in case they were going to regress once they found out. Well, you confirmed you’re moving, and they still want to be your friends. I think you should talk to them and hear what they have to say.” Quinn answers.

“Will you be there?” Rachel asks.

“Of course, Baby. That goes for everything and every situation. I’ll be with you for as long as you’ll allow me.” Quinn says with a sappy smile.

“I love you, Quinn.” Rachel says in awe.

“I love you too, Rachel. We’ve missed maybe a period. If we hurry, we can make the last two and make it to Glee. Would you like that? Or would you rather take the day off?” Quinn asks.

“Do you know if Noah is back at McKinley?” Rachel asks slightly worried.

“If you’re worried about running into him, don’t. He’ll take any excuse handed to him to skip school. I doubt he’ll return. Even if he’s there and tries to start something, I’ll put a stop to it before he can say your name.” Quinn answers.

“Daddy will excuse me from the rest of the school day, but will you get in trouble for skipping?” Rachel asks.

“No. I’ll say Coach needed us for something Cheerio related, since San and Britt are also gone. Unless we do something stupid, Figgins won’t go to Coach to confirm our alibis. If Coach asks, all I have to do is tell her that we were brainstorming ideas on how to replace the Cheerios that are graduating this year. After all, that was the reason we were called in a meeting with her in the first place. She’ll see it as initiative and not push things because it saves her tons of work.” Quinn answers with a gentle smile.

“What happens if Ms. Sylvester asks you what ideas you came up with?” Rachel pushes. She doesn’t want Quinn to get in trouble. Maybe she should do the responsible thing, return to school, and deal with the possible repercussions.

“I’ve already come up with a list of which alternates will be bumped to full cheering status. We won’t be holding try outs yet because we want to see what the new crop of freshmen will yield. I’m not captain just because I sit around stroking my chin maniacally while trying to come up with ideas on how to best terrorise the lemmings. I know what I’m doing to make sure our team remains
number one. It’s the reason I’m captain and San is my second in command.” Quinn tells Rachel proudly.

“Then may we enjoy the day off? I’ve been through so many emotions, I’m mentally exhausted.” Rachel says blushing slightly, for once letting go of her need to be on top of every little detail that might affect her life. If Noah chooses to make an announcement, there isn’t anything she can do, and she honestly doesn’t think Quinn could either. At least not without getting in trouble.

“Anything you want, Baby. I should have you sign something as proof that Rachel Berry is willingly skipping class. No one would ever believe me.” Quinn says with a mischievous smile.

“It’s your bad influence on me.” Rachel says as she captures the blonde’s lips.

No more words are exchanged for the time being.

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“San, why are we going back to school?” Brittany asks when she notices the direction Santana is driving.

“I want to circle the parking lot and make sure Puck isn’t going to do something stupid like blabbing his big mouth just for shits and giggles.” Santana replies casually.

“That’s so sweet of you. That’s why I love you so much.” Brittany says as she kisses the back of Santana’s free hand.

“Whatever. Make sure no one knows this side of me, or I’ll never be able to protect us.” Santana says as she glances nervously to make sure no one has seen them, even though they’re safely ensconced in the privacy of her car. Tinted windows rock, but one can never be too sure.

Once she is sure Puck’s truck is nowhere near McKinley, Santana drives them back to her place so they can enjoy the rest of the afternoon doing something a lot more enjoyable than the reviews some teachers have already started in order to get them ready for finals. She knows that as usual, the three of them will be each other’s alibis if their absence comes into question the next day. Ah, the perks of being a high-ranking Cheerio.

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When Quinn is sure Rachel is out to the world napping contentedly, she pulls out her phone to call her second in command.

“Is Rachel okay? Did Puck show up to throw another temper tantrum?” Santana asks worried. Damn. She really does have a soft spot for the diva.

“No, but I don’t trust that asshole. You have any clue where he is? I want to deliver a message in case he gets any funny ideas.” Quinn answers in a low voice.

“Why the fuck are you whispering?” Santana asks, knowing full why, but she’s curious to know if Quinn will trust her enough with an honest answer. They have drifted apart, but she knows a lot of it is her own fault with how she treated her captain after the baby scare and cheating became public fodder.

“I’m still at Rachel’s, and she finally settled down into a nap. I want to make sure she doesn’t wake up. One, I want her to rest, and two; I doubt she’ll be happy with what I’ve planned. Even though it’ll benefit her, she’ll try to talk me out of it.” Quinn whispers back.

“Gotcha. What did you have in mind, Cap?” Santana asks with a smile on her face. Maybe things
aren’t as bad as she thought.

“Well…” Quinn starts her explanation. “But, it all hinges on your willingness to help to make it even more believable. Are you in?” She adds with an evil glint in her eyes. So much for not stroking her chin maniacally. It takes everything in her not to do so and cackle like a mad woman.

“My God Q! No wonder Coach thinks you’re a younger version of her. I’m in. Remind me to never get you truly pissed at me.” Santana replies with awe. “You want to come pick me and B up, or do you want to meet at Puck’s? He should be there now ‘cause today his mom is working late and he has to be home for the brat.” She adds after she checks the time.

“I’ll pick you up. Be there in ten.” Quinn says before she ends the call. She scribbles a quick note to let Rachel know that she’s heading home to pick up a few changes of clothes and at the last second decides to add that she’ll also have a talk with Puck to make sure he hasn’t said anything and to make sure it stays that way.

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Quinn makes double sure Santana’s parents aren’t going to return suddenly. What she wants to do cannot be done with any parent present, and she wants to make sure phase one is complete before they confront Puck. She carefully and quickly hacks into Dr. López’s home computer to access Lima General’s labs. She fills in a few forms with practiced ease and prints them. After making sure nothing can be traced back to them and that it won’t incriminate Santana’s father, the hazel-eyed blonde turns everything off.

“You sure my dad won’t get in trouble at work? He could lose his license or some shit like that.” Santana asks for what feels like the millionth time.

“No one will know. Lima General isn’t known for its kick-ass firewalls. Only another master hacker will be able to find out their server has been compromised, and even then, it’ll only show that someone piggy-backed off of your dad’s machine. I made sure to re-route everything through countless severs and proxies around the globe. If anyone ever looks, it will look like someone used your dad’s access to hack in. Since no one has any reason to even suspect someone in this backwater town would want to hack into the hospital records and tamper with them, there’s no reason to check.” Quinn answers with a shrug of her shoulders.

“If you can do all that why did you have to do that here? Why not use the internet café in town, or one of the computers in the library or one of the school’s computers?” Brittany asks.

“Dr. López’s computer has the remote access link to Lima General’s servers already. So even without his log in information, it’s like a built in back door that won’t leave traces. I would have used Dr. Berry’s computer, but the man uses a laptop that is only in his study when he’s home. Hacking through the internet café’s ISP would have required more time that we don’t have because I’d then have to do more work fooling the firewall from an un-authorised machine. I’d also have to disable the software they have that tracks what sites those machines visit. Same with the local library and the school’s computers. Besides, everyone knows us and we’d have stuck out like Finn in a dwarf convention. No one would believe we’d brainstorm Cheerios related stuff in the school library, an internet café or the town library. I promise you no one will know.” Quinn answers, hoping her answer will reassure her friends.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Q. How come I never found out about your computer skills before? And how in the world did you learn to do shit like that?” Santana asks with a shake of her head.

“I had to pass my time somehow while in Bible study, Christ Crusaders meetings, or stuck at home before Russell decided I was old enough to date; so let’s just say I’ve done a lot of reading. Besides,
there’s no way I want Coach to know I can do all this geeky shit. Unlike most hackers, no one knows I exist in the cyber world because I don’t hack into shit that will get me in trouble, and if I were to do that, I’m not stupid enough to brag about it, and I’d like to keep it that way. It’s not the hacking that gets people in trouble. It’s their need to brag about it.” Quinn replies.

“Why are you even bothering with photography? Why not become some super rich consultant to some dot-com start up company? Or better yet, why not start your own?” Santana pushes.

“I love photography. My, uh, less than savoury skills are more like something that were born out of necessity and boredom.” Quinn says. “Come on, I want to finish this before Rach wakes up.” She adds hoping that’s enough for Santana and Brittany to drop the subject.

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Puck isn’t surprised to see the three Cheerios at his doorstep. He’s only surprised it took them this long. He was sure they would show up minutes after he left the Berrys’ house, not hours later.

“Abby, go to your room and do homework, read, play or whatever it is you do there. Don’t even think about trying to sneak out to snoop on us.” He says in a stern voice. He has a feeling this is one conversation he doesn’t want his sister repeating to their mother.

Abby looks at the cheerleaders and his brother and decides it’s best to do what he says. They all look like they can’t wait to hurt someone. She has dealt with the cheerleaders in the past. Out of those three, only the taller blonde is somewhat nice, mainly because she stays in the background while the other two do their thing. The Latina is quick to call her names and the hazel-eyed blonde who stares at her as if with nothing but sheer will she could be frozen on the spot. She’s well aware of their reputation and the rumours, so she wouldn’t be surprised if somehow they manage to make her unpopular like they have with other kids in Puck’s high school. She wouldn’t put it past those two to have that kind of influence in her elementary school or leave a set of instructions for others to do their bidding as she moves through middle, and eventually high school. She has seen firsthand what those cheerleaders can do. So Abby all but runs up to her room, slams the door shut. She turns on the radio loud enough to drown anything from downstairs just so she won’t be tempted to listen in. She can get dirt on Puck another time.

“What the fuck do you want?” Puck asks with false bravado. He knows better than most not to cross the Unholy Trinity. When it’s just one of them it’s no big deal, but those three feed off of each other, and together, they are beyond scary.

“Stop playing dumb. We all know why we’re here. In war, it’s called a pre-emptive strike. You should know all about those, since you waste your free time with Finn playing Call of Duty. But, in case you’ve taken too many hits to the head, I’ll dumb it down for you and we shall call this a warning. Here goes, so pay attention. You will not say a word about Rachel’s plans to anyone until she’s ready. Simple enough, or do I need to dumb it down for you some more?” Quinn says with distaste. She really should consider having her head examined. How in the name of all that is holy did she ever agree to give her virginity to this tool? Right, Finn had been mooning over Rachel like a love-sick calf, and to top it off, she was having a fat day. The bastard preyed on her insecurities and got her tipsy enough to impair her judgement when she went to him for a little ego-stroke.

“How do you know I haven’t said anything yet?” Puck asks.

“You hate school too much to return there unless you absolutely have to, so there’s no one to tell yet. But, just in case, I’ve checked Jewfro’s blog already and there’s nothing posted.” Quinn fires back with a smirk. So predictable.

“What makes you think I won’t say anything tomorrow? Hell, all I have to do is act shocked and ask if the rumours about Rachel transferring are true.” Puck counters.
Quinn shakes her head. What is it with some men and their inability to deal with a sad situation? She pulls out her iPhone, opens her e-mail client, and the photos app. She shows Puck a screenshot of a Lima General lab report stating he has tested positive for just about every STD known to human kind that isn’t HIV, followed by an e-mail addressed to Jewfro. “Right now, the only people who know about Rachel’s plans are Rachel, her dads, Santana, Brittany, her cousin Andy, you, and me. If anyone else in Lima or adjacent towns finds out I’ll send Jewfro the e-mail I just showed you sitting snugly in my drafts folder. In case you were unsure, that photo I showed you is a screenshot of the attachment in said e-mail.” She says with a self-satisfied smile.

Puck pales at those words, but valiantly tries to save face. It won’t do to let them see him squirm. “No one will believe you. Everyone knows I’m clean. I’ll tell everyone you’re lying and trying to get back at me for pushing you off the top.” He says hoping to sound confident.

“Ah, but have you forgotten? Most people don’t care about the truth. The lemmings certainly didn’t care I wasn’t pregnant, yet the rumours aided by your stupid bragging were enough to leave me to deal with the consequences. I was nearly kicked out of my house. It took some creative lying to convince Russell you were nothing but a conniving, lying self-serving bastard spreading vile rumours about me in order to raise your popularity. Thank God your manwhore ways speak for themselves. That pregnancy scare can now be used in my favour, since it’s confirmation you lie about using protection. A few keystrokes, and the entire school will know via Jewfro’s blog that you’re a walking Petri dish of STDs.” Quinn says casually.

“You’d fuck up my life for one of the school’s biggest losers?” Puck asks.

Before Quinn can even react, Brittany once again slaps him. “Why do you have to be such a meanie? I thought you cared about Rachel. I thought you were her friend. I even told Quinn she didn’t have to do this. I see I’m wrong.” Brittany asks sadly.

“I was, until we found out she decided to lie to us like we don’t matter. Real friends don’t keep secrets from each other.” Puck starts to say only to be interrupted by a fuming Quinn.

“Right. Because you’re such a great friend and such an open book to all of us.” Quinn retorts.

“That’s different.” Puck hedges.

“I personally don’t give a flying rat’s ass what your dirty little secrets are. I’m only here to make sure you keep your mouth shut about one particular secret that doesn’t belong to you, or the biggest manwhore in the state of Ohio will have to become very well acquainted with his right hand.” Quinn says eerily calm.

“What if Brittany lets it slip in one of her ditzy moments or her dads talk about it. You’re gonna ruin my life if someone else blabs?” Puck asks in a near panic. He knows he’s clean, but he also knows that even if he subjects himself to get tested and posts the results on his Facebook page it won’t do him any good. Quinn is right. No one cares about the truth. Their fellow schoolmates only care about wild and crazy rumours, regardless of whether or not there’s an ounce of truth in them. “Look, if you’re sore about how I didn’t back you up and stuff when our little affair became public, you know I couldn’t deny it. My rep was at stake. I like you, but everyone knows that the Puckzilla doesn’t do relationships and is after all the fine asses in Lima.” He says, and judging by the looks on the girls’ faces, maybe he should have kept that to himself.

“Then you better pray Dr. Berry and Mr. Berry will keep their mouths shut, huh?” Santana says almost in a sing-song voice. At first, she was feeling slightly guilty, but after watching him take a cheap shot at Britt, rip apart Rachel when only a few hours ago he was claiming to be the diva’s friend and vowing to protect her from whatever and watching him justify his actions with Quinn, any
sympathy she felt flew out the window.

“That’s not fair. You can’t blame me for what others do or say.” Puck whines.

“All of this could have been avoided had you just pulled your head out of your ass long enough to see that Rachel moving to New York isn’t a bad thing.” Quinn says quietly.

“The hell it isn’t. What happens to Glee? We’re gonna lose our best singer and you’re fine with that? How can you claim to be her friend when you’re letting her take the coward’s way out?” Puck counters, getting angry again.

“If it means it helps her future, then we lose our best singer. Besides, before her, none of us cared about Glee. And don’t you dare call her a coward. She wasn’t the one bragging about bagging the Head Cheerio and the president of the Celibacy Club the first chance she got just to save or bring up her rep.” Quinn says in the same eerie calm tone of voice.

“No, she was just the one to tell your oh so perfect boyfriend who’s been sporting a boner for her fine Jew ass so she could bag him instead. How does it feel to know that the quarterback of the varsity football team would rather be with the school’s loser rather than the school’s most popular chick and the town’s ice princess? You’re not the only one who can start rumours. It didn’t take much to turn you into the school slut, now did it?” Puck says not knowing when to shut up.

It takes everything in Quinn not to kill him on the spot. Even Santana knows to restrain the cheerleading captain in order to prevent the girl from committing homicide. Thankfully, Quinn manages to control her temper.

“You’re right, but that’s all because of who I had the misfortune to sleep with. I’d slap you again, but I swear it’s like you enjoy it a little too much. If you want to see a loser, take a good look in the mirror. It’s pathetic the way you’re trying to manipulate me by pitting me against my best friend. No wonder Santana dumped you for being a Lima Loser. I have you by the balls and you know it. Rachel is off limits. Until she’s ready to say something, you’ll keep your mouth shut. It’s pathetic the way you’re trying to manipulate me by pitting me against my best friend. No wonder Santana dumped you for being a Lima Loser. I have you by the balls and you know it. Rachel is off limits. Until she’s ready to say something, you’ll keep your mouth shut. I don’t care if you go back to ignoring her, but bully her, and you’ll be sorry. That little e-mail with the fake lab results is only the very tip of the iceberg. You know very well rumours work both ways. What do you think will happen to your reputation if everyone found out that the only way you managed to sleep with me was to get me drunk because I wouldn’t touch you with a ten-foot pole while sober, and how I wasn’t the only girl you got that way. Sure, some of the pigs will think nothing of it, but most girls with a little self respect won’t be caught dead near you.” Quinn says in a nearly bored tone.

“You weren’t drunk. You had only two wine coolers. You could have easily said no.” Puck says, swallowing hard.

“More than enough to impair my judgement. Still, they’re called rumours for a reason, aren’t they? I’ll attack you where it hurts most, and for you, it means you’ll only get intimate with your hand or an inflatable doll.” Quinn says.

“Fine. I’ll keep quiet, but once Berry is gone, you better watch your back.” Puck threatens. All four know it’s nothing but an empty threat. There’s nothing he can do because all it’d take is for one person to see that fake lab report and he might as well get himself castrated for real.

“I’m glad you see things my way.” Quinn says. She then turns on her heels so she’s facing Santana and Brittany. “Shall we go, ladies?” She adds with a flourish as she turns and walks to her car.

“Remember, Pucky. Whether or not you become Jewfro 2.0 is all in your hands. Your parties only
draw a crowd because Cheerios support them. Once we stop showing up everyone else will follow. No jock will show up to parties where the hottest and most popular girls won’t attend. If Quinn deems you a loser, it’s only a matter of time before the rest will follow like the good little sheep they are. Not many have fallen from grace the way she did only to return to the top with a fucking vengeance.” Santana says as she links pinkies with Brittany and both girls follow their captain.

Puck slams the door shut in frustration. He has no clue how Quinn got a hold of that fake lab report, but he knows that as long as the blonde has it in her possession, he knows he has no choice but to ask ‘how high’ each time Quinn feels like yelling ‘jump’. Everyone knows no one crosses Quinn Fabray. Unfortunately, he knows that the only one who might be able to call off the Head Cheerio is the girl he verbally attacked just a few hours ago. Why can’t they see that a few slushies to the face and being called a few nasty names here and there isn’t the end of the world? Women are such drama queens. If anything, they should be mad at Rachel for lying to them all this time.

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“Damn, Q. Do you even feel a little bit bad for blackmailing Puck like that?” Santana asks once they’re inside the car.

“Of course I do. But I can’t risk him ruining things for Rachel just because his feelings got hurt.” Quinn answers as she starts the drive back to Santana’s place.

“I’m not trying to be insensitive, but help me out a bit here. Why are you so adamant in protecting her secret? It’s not like it’ll remain secret for long, and what’s the worst that could happen?” Santana asks.

Brittany sighs. Of course the Latina wouldn’t truly get it. While they have all experienced some type of bullying and prejudice since joining Glee, it’s never been close to what Rachel has gone through. They have their reputations as Cheerios to protect them. She’s about to say something to chastise Santana, but stops when she sees Quinn’s head shake in the negative.

“I owe it to Rachel because of all the shit I’ve put her through. It’s that simple. Whether or not I think her reasons are valid is irrelevant. They’re important to her so they’re important to me by default. I also happen to agree with her. The Lima Losers in the making would torment her even more, and I can’t let that happen.” Quinn answers.

“Fair enough. God knows I’d be doing the same for Britt. Do you think we could join you for lunch tomorrow? Maybe we could start over for real.” Santana asks.

“I’m sure Rach will be fine with it. You’ve already exceeded all her expectations when you didn’t go ape-shit. Just, you know, don’t push.” Quinn says as she pulls into the Lópezes’ driveway.

“Anyway, I gotta head out. I still need to go home and shit.” She adds, omitting the fact that all she’ll do when she gets ‘home’ would be to pack a few things to take back to the Berrys.

“Yeah, see you tomorrow. God. I can’t believe that with no competitions or games looming in the horizon, Coach still has us in full practice schedule. That woman is certifiable.” Santana grumbles as she opens her door.

“See you tomorrow Q.” Brittany says as she’s stepping out from the back seat.

“Bright and early as usual. At least we’re in better shape than ninety percent of Lima.” Quinn calls out as she waves to the girls before backing out and driving away.

The rest of the evening is spent cuddling and talking with Andy.
Quinn can’t help but tease both brunettes that overreacting seems to be another family trait, along with questionable taste in clothes once Andy explains in full details what happened to her phone. They only get off the phone once Nigel arrives at Andy’s place and the reporter promises to call Rachel to let her know what’s going on with the Miranda front.

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Andy considers going in to work. It figures that the one day she has no access to her phone for a few hours is the day just about every source she knows decides it’s urgent they talk. In the end, she decides against it. She needs to call Nigel and smooth things over and to try and figure out what to expect from her former coworkers or on the street on her way home where anyone could overhear her end of the conversation. She is tempted to call Rachel but a quick glance at the time tells her the diva is still in class. She’ll have to wait until the girl is done with Glee. She is thankful that the salesclerk at the AT&T store managed to import all her contacts from her old SIM card without any issues, or that she was smart enough to make sure her contacts were saved in her old phone’s SIM card. At least she doesn’t have to hunt around for those numbers and she can return all her calls at home.

Andy quickly returns every work-related phone call first. She schedules a few face-to-face meetings for the upcoming days and smooths over a few ruffled feathers when she explains she didn’t return their phone calls sooner because she had a mishap with her smartphone. Eventually, she calls Nigel and invites him to dinner (take-out since she can’t cook to save her life) and talk.

Andy calls Rachel while she waits for Nigel. She nearly flies to Ohio once she is told about Puck’s reaction once he found out about Rachel’s plans. It’s only Quinn reassuring her and confirming that she handled things and Puck will not only keep quiet, but the boy will also leave Rachel alone that she calms down. At first, Quinn refuses to tell them why and how she is so certain. When pressed for more details, the blonde eventually admits to the blackmail that she once again calls a warning. Andy doesn’t know whether to laugh, cry, be angry, be shocked, or be proud that her favourite cousin has found someone who is willing to do almost anything for her. It’s only the reassurance that there is no way anyone could get in trouble, unless some other master hacker is involved (unlikely because really, why would anyone want to break into Lima General’s network?) that again, calms her down. Andy goes as far as to say that a secret only remains so when very few people know. She asks Quinn how she can be sure Santana or Brittany won’t say anything about the girl’s hacking abilities.

Quinn easily says that no one would ever believe she’s capable of doing that without proof, something her friends can’t do without implicating themselves as well. She reassures Andy and Rachel that up until she explained the hows, they would have never believed Quinn is a master hacker. Andy only gets off the phone when her buzzer goes off indicating either Nigel’s arrival or dinner being delivered. She can’t wait for Rachel to get there so she doesn’t have to survive on take out, cold cereal, canned soup, and sandwiches all the time.

“Hey. Food should be here any minute now.” Andy greets when she opens her front door.

“Food is here actually.” Nigel says as he hands over the paper bag with Thai take-out to Andy. “I ran into the delivery guy and I managed to convince him that he won’t get in trouble since I was on my way to meet you for dinner.” He adds once he notices Andy’s questioning look.

“Thanks Nige. Here, this should cover dinner and tip.” Andy says as she tries to hand Nigel what she was planning on giving the delivery man.

“Dinner’s on me. Just tell me what happened with Miranda earlier. The woman returned to the office with a mood that would rival a tsunami. I don’t think there was a single detail she didn’t criticise. I swear people were ready to offer a virgin sacrifice to the publishing gods in order to appease the
woman. Dragon Lady didn’t even come close to describing her. After today Miranda’s new nickname has become ‘the right hand of Satan while ruling the ninth circle of hell.’ Thank goodness no one was fired.” Nigel says in one breath.

“My God Nige, that rant was worthy of Rachel. There’s not much to tell…” Andy says as she explains what she could recall of her earlier encounter with her former boss.

“Miranda never attacked you and the phone thing was truly accidental?” Nigel can’t help but ask.

“She never did. It was a freak accident. But judging by your question, what you told me about Emily’s reaction, and what I could see of Marissa’s reaction I can understand why Miranda insisted on replacing it.” Andy replies rolling her eyes. “Think about it a little, Nige. As much as Miranda cares about her image, do you honestly think she’d be capable of doing something as crude and careless as grabbing and destroying someone’s phone? That’d be the equivalent of giving the paparazzi an invitation to spend the day with her while she’s at home. Not to mention that could get her arrested for assault. It’s absolutely preposterous.” She adds.

“You do have a point.” Nigel concedes. “So Miranda still has no idea Rachel is your cousin or that it’s a sure thing she’s starting at Dalton this September? How can you be sure Dalton’s faculty or administration staff won’t say a thing to her?” He asks once he’s done telling Andy what little he knows from his end.

“Dalton’s staff can’t. By law, they’re not allowed to say anything about a student to anyone who isn’t a parent or legal guardian. All Miranda knows is what I told her; that I was looking into Dalton for a friend who might be moving to New York. Problem is I doubt she buys that if she went back to the school. Shit. She won’t give up until I can convince her all my stories and articles have nothing to do with Dalton or any other school.” Andy replies.

“Good luck. No one tells Miranda she’s wrong, even when she is. Easiest way would be to tell her the truth. You know it’s only a matter of time before she finds out that your cousin is going to the same school as her children. Especially when one of the twins is in the show choir Rachel wishes to join. Maybe you should just fess up to her.” Nigel suggests.

“And risk painting a target on Rachel’s back? No way. You say Miranda won’t retaliate using children, but how can I take that chance when the woman has no qualms blacklisting people for mistakes outside of their control? Or how she went and betrayed you the way she did with the James Holt deal?” Andy asks.

“Oh Andy, I hope you didn’t walk out on Miranda because of me. I couldn’t say anything then, but that was all part of the plan to make things believable. Do you honestly think that Miranda wouldn’t have found out ahead of time what Irv was planning on doing? She might have a lot of enemies, but the woman also has a very tight-knit group of very loyal people in the industry that would follow her to end of the world and back. Had she played dumb and allowed Irv to think he was successful in ousting her, other publications would have snapped her in a heartbeat, and all the top designers would have followed her. She made sure to stay because the day she leaves Runway will be by choice and not because of someone like Irv, which at the moment she was very tempted to do. But, she knew Jacqueline and Christian would have gutted the senior staff and replaced all of us with their handpicked choices. She might criticise us, but she also knows we’re the best at what we do. As much as she could have brought some of us over with her to whatever publication she might have chosen, a lot of people would have been either fired or demoted. As ruthless as the woman is, she takes care of those who are loyal to her. She needed that little charade to show Irv and others with similar ideas that they can’t just hope to sneak such plans on her.” Nigel says quietly.

“Why didn’t you say anything sooner?” Andy asks shocked.
“At the time I couldn’t. Not even Emily knows all the details, even after all these years. After you quit, you made it very clear that whatever had to deal with you and Miranda was off limits in our talks. I was only acquiescing to your wishes. As much as I’m still dying to find out why you left so suddenly, and you know what a gossip I can be, I have and will always try to respect your privacy.” Nigel answers honestly.

“It’s not that I don’t trust you. Miranda herself doesn’t know. I feel like I owe her the explanation before I can tell anyone else. For now all I’ll say is that my perception of what I thought she did to you played a role in my decision to quit, but it was by no means the only or even the main reason.” Andy admits. “Believe me when I say that I’ve wanted to call and apologise.” She adds.

“Then why haven’t you?” Nigel asks, though he knows that Andy would have had to deal with Emily first; and he knows the Brit still has a chip the size of Jupiter on her shoulder when it comes to Andy.

“I never thought she’d ever agree to see me. Not after the way I left. I know I lucked out and I didn’t want to risk my new job by angering her further. I know what I did was extremely unprofessional and to this day, I thank whatever deity that has been looking after me. God knows the woman was well within her right to blacklist me all the way to Andromeda.” Andy admits.

“Well, with Rachel starting at Dalton soon, maybe it’s time for you two to clear the air. Besides, it sounds like it’s something you need to do.” Nigel pushes.

“Like she’ll actually listen to an apology from a former junior assistant that’s been overdue for nearly four years. I’m still surprised she hasn’t torpedoed my career to bits yet. I get it that our target readers are completely different, but even then, the publishing world is very small.” Andy counters.

“Andy, don’t sell yourself short. After I talked some sense into you, you proved your worth in ways that impressed her so much that she promoted you to Emily’s position within months. When you quit, it left a huge void because no one could measure up to you. Not even Emily. At least she wasn’t back then. It’s an unspoken rule that no one mentions your name because the few times it happened, Miranda went on a warpath.” Nigel says with a shake of his head.

“That’s probably because I was hot-headed enough to defy her in such a childish way so hearing my name only reminds her of that.” Andy says with a self-deprecating smile.

“That’s definitely not it. I have no idea what it is about you, but everything that has to deal with you has been different from day one. Miranda personally interviewed you. Even after you so blatantly admitted to having no clue who she was and your complete lack of knowledge of the fashion world combined with your atrocious fashion sense, she still hired you. You’re the only junior assistant that Miranda ever bothered calling by her real name. She still calls everyone Emily. You can see why we thought World War III started the moment we realised she had ran into you, especially since she had Marissa replace your phone. We thought she was doing damage control after an outburst. She has always acted out of character with you.” Nigel shares after some thought.

Andy is stunned into silence with the latest revelations, something that’s nearly impossible to do.

“There’s more to your fears for Rachel or even your career. You had the perfect opportunity to talk to her earlier, but you chose not to. What’s going on Six?” Nigel asks when it’s clear Andy won’t be saying much any time soon.

Andy takes a deep breath. “It’s a combination of pride, fear, and self-preservation. I’ve done a few human interest stories and one of them was about substance abuse and how it affected not just the addict, but those around them as well.” She says.
“I know. That was one of your best pieces to date, but what that does have to do with anything?” Nigel asks interrupting.

“I’m getting to it. During my interviews with recovering addicts and their families and friends, they all told me the toughest parts were steps eight and nine. Every single one of them told me that it wasn’t asking for forgiveness or even admitting that one has to make amends. They told me the toughest part was when someone didn’t accept the apology. It was one of the biggest setbacks because it gave a lot of recovering addicts that excuse to fall off the wagon. While the theory is that asking for forgiveness should be enough, as humans, a lot of us need to hear that we have been forgiven. My point is, I don’t know how I’ll react if I were to pour my heart out and apologise to Miranda only to have her dismiss it as nothing, because it validates every single time she has treated me as nothing more than pond scum.

“Rachel wasn’t the only one who had to deal with bullies growing up. Granted, my situation wasn’t nearly as bad as hers, but it took me a while to find myself and work on having a positive image of myself. Even though the entire situation was and is of my own doing, I’m still afraid of what her dismissal will do to my self-image. I don’t need to remind you how her words and everyone else’s words affected me during my first few weeks at Runway. We know her words won’t be nice and fluffy. As far as I’ve come, I really don’t think I can take her less when she’s being the Dragon Lady.” Andy admits aloud for the first time what has stopped her from seeking Miranda and doing the right thing.

Nigel takes a few moments to gather his thoughts. He takes in the expectant look on Andy’s face, and he can’t help but think of the shy, young woman who started out as the junior assistant to one of the most powerful women in New York City, so eager so please and so eager to prove herself.

“You’ve forgotten one very important truth here, Six. No matter what you think or anyone else thinks, Miranda has already forgiven you, otherwise, you would’ve been lucky to get a job working as a janitor scrubbing toilets for The Enquirer. No one knows why or how you managed to walk away unscathed.” Nigel points out. “I suggest clearing the air before Rachel moves here, so that inevitable meeting between the two of you in front of D and the twins won’t be as awkward, and those girls won’t get caught in the crossfire.” He adds.

“I’m not so sure about being forgiven, since it is Miranda we’re talking about. That woman has turned holding a grudge into an art form. But, you’re right about Rachel and the twins. If and when we cross paths in anything Dalton related, it’d be a shame to have them in the middle of whatever is going on between Miranda and me. I guess it’s time I do what should have been done years ago. I know I’m not the same awkward teenager from Cincinnati with a full academic scholarship for Northwestern or the same wide-eyed, idealistic girl fresh out of college with a chip on her shoulder and a point to prove. I also know she’s justified to say whatever she needs to me because of how I handled things.” Andy says determined.

“Does that mean I should warn Emily that you’re going to be calling to make an appointment to see Miranda and make sure she doesn’t hang up on you?” Nigel asks.

“Don’t be silly. Like I would ever make an appointment to see Miranda during work hours for something personal. When the next opportunity presents itself, I’ll take it and apologise. If that doesn’t happen, then I may bite the bullet and go to her place. That is, if she’ll hear me out.” Andy says.

“You do realise that if Miranda is dead set you’re working on some Dalton exposé, she’ll hound you until you talk, right?” Nigel asks the obvious. “It’s not a matter of if, but a matter of when she’ll contact you.” He adds.
“I know. Miranda won’t go through the proper channels because she won’t want to draw attention to herself by contacting anyone from the press willingly. And even if you were to drop her my direct line, my reaction alone would be enough to alert the rest of the reporters around me. That should buy me some time until she figures out a way to do so inconspicuously.” Andy muses. “Does she know we still keep in touch? Well, after the favour you did for Rachel and Quinn, I guess the question is who else knows we keep in touch and how long until it reaches Miranda’s ears.” She adds.

“Out of everyone that you know that still works there, only Serena and Roy know, and that’s because you’ve kept in touch with them as well. Like me, they’ve been very discreet. No one wanted to be the reason for Miranda to completely lose it. We were all sure she was going to blacklist you, and when that didn’t happen, we didn’t want to take chances. For you and for us.” Nigel answers truthfully.

“Thank you. I always knew staying in touch with me was basically career suicide, so I appreciate the risks you’ve taken for me.” Andy says touched. “How hasn’t Miranda figured anything out yet?” She adds.

“Why would she all of a sudden think we’ve been keeping in touch when the subject hasn’t been broached in years?” Nigel asks.

“Uh, I thought she’d be suspicious when all of a sudden samples from The Closet disappeared out of thin air.” Andy states the obvious.

“The Closet isn’t a black hole. If we didn’t purge it regularly, we’d have to continuously add space to it. Besides, have you forgotten that all samples are standard size two and four?” Nigel points out.

“Rachel is a size two, Nige.” Andy counters.

“Yes, but she also falls into the petite category, which we rarely get samples of. I didn’t have to alter a single item because I called in a few favours to procure the samples for our little songbird.” Nigel admits.

“And Miranda wasn’t curious why all of a sudden you were calling in favours like that?” Andy asks surprised.

“Miranda doesn’t know. They were personal favours. They had nothing to do with Runway, and so long as my personal life doesn’t affect the magazine in a negative way, I’m left alone. Miranda gives the impression she micromanages everything, but that only holds true for work.” Nigel replies.

“How is it that no one has said anything to Miranda about both of Rachel’s visit to Runway?” Andy asks with a shake of her head. She remembers all visitors need security clearance and they need to sign in and out of the premises.

“Stupid question Six, but I guess old age affects some of us more than others. How much free time did you have while working there?” Nigel asks rolling his eyes.

“Well, old age must definitely be affecting your memory then. I never had free time unless it was late into the evening and only if I was lucky no emergency came up.” Andy answers rolling her eyes as well.

“Then what makes you think the rest of the minions would have enough free time to notice? When Rachel had her makeover, Miranda was busy making sure she’d have an uninterrupted week with her daughters for Christmas at least. When I helped Rachel and Quinn, it was during the time they were set to compete against Dalton. Miranda was hell bent in making sure her weekend was free, so
work was even crazier. At the time, we were also considering doing a spread on an up-and-coming designer who favours petite women, so Rachel’s and even Quinn’s presence at Runway looked like something for that idea. I made sure the petite models we were planning on using for that spread, had it run, showed up at the same time Rachel and Quinn did.” Nigel says with a sly smile.

“So basically your guess is as good as mine as to when or how Miranda will contact me.” Andy says, though it sounds more like a statement than like the question it was intended to be.

“Basically. I’m surprised it’s taken you this long to have a meltdown over Rachel’s gift for Quinn.” Nigel says with a chuckle.

“Very funny.” Andy says slapping the side of his arm.

“Watch it woman. I bruise easily.” Nigel says rubbing his arm.

“It was barely a tap, you big baby. Keep this up and you’ll be giving Rachel a run for her money in the drama queen department.” Andy states.

“When you finally talk to Miranda and apologise, will you be telling her about the real reason why you were at Dalton today?” Nigel asks as he helps Andy clear out the empty take-out containers.

“I don’t know. I’ve already lied about it once, and I don’t know how that will play out for Rachel. I don’t want her caught in the middle and if what you’re saying about things being different and unpredictable when it comes to me, then I don’t know if I can take the chance of having her use Rachel to get to me.” Andy admits.

“Miranda has never attacked or used children to get back at someone before.” Nigel says once again, feeling the need to defend his employer.

“I know, but you also said that when it comes to me, acting out of character is nothing new. Unless you can guarantee that to me without a shadow of a doubt, it’s too much for me to risk. Rachel is leaving her parents in order to start fresh with me. She comes first. She’s one of the reasons why I’ll apologise to Miranda the next chance I get as opposed to putting it off indefinitely the way I’ve been doing. But if Miranda doesn’t accept my apology I’m not going to be the one making it easier on her to get back at me by attacking me where it’ll hurt me the most.” Andy says.

“It won’t come to that, but I see your point. I’ve known that woman for the last twenty years or so, and I still can’t predict her moods any better than that of any stranger off the street. You also need to keep in mind that your relationship with Rachel will only stay secret for so long. Anyway, as lovely as dinner was, I must take my leave, what with tomorrow being a workday and all. I’ll keep you posted if there are any changes in Miranda’s behaviour in the coming days.” Nigel says as getting up to grab his light coat.

“Yes, but worst case scenario, perhaps by the time she finds out Rachel is related to me, and how much she means to me, Miranda won’t be as angry and she won’t act out against Rachel. Thanks for the company and the talk. I’ll definitely keep you posted if anything changes on my end.” Andy says as she walks him to the front door.

Andy thinks about the events of the day and her conversation with Nigel. Even she has to admit that there is something to what the man said about Miranda’s behaviour. Now if she could figure out a way to predict the outcome of her encounter with her former boss, or how she’ll react when she finds out that Rachel, who more than likely will be in Glee with one of the twins, is her cousin. Of course, it’ll probably be easier for her to predict when the next hurricane will hit just by sniffing the air.
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