

Beauty and the Beyotch

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Joni

My heart was beating so hard, you'd think I'd been dumped at the prom. But no, I was standing at the entrance to my high school auditorium, trying to talk myself into walking inside for the first Theater Club meeting of the year.

It was not my normal scene. Not that I had a normal scene, unless you counted the library. Or my bedroom.

I used to hang out at my best friend Amanda's house, but she moved away in July. That's how I ended up being a senior with no friends—no real friends anyway. Amanda and I had been the Two Musketeers since kindergarten. With Amanda gone, my mom had pressured me to join Theater, like she had in high school. "You have such a pretty voice. It will be perfect for you," she'd said. "And you'll make new friends. Get out of your shell."

I like my shell very much, thank you. But I hadn't said that to her. I'd said "okay," so here I was. Walking naked through the cafeteria sounded like a better idea.

Go in. Stop being stupid. You've known these kids all your life. But I'd never put myself out there like this, where I'd eventually have to audition for a part, alone on a stage with everyone staring at me. Being one singer among many was much more my speed. I'd never understand why Mom had loved starring in her school musicals.

"You coming, Joni?" Mr. Hudson, the club advisor, called from the front.

He'd been my English teacher sophomore year, and I liked him, but I didn't appreciate his attention now. Dozens of heads swiveled my way, and my face grew hot as I hurried down the aisle. I found a seat near some girls who'd been participating in Theater since middle school. Their names and photos had been splashed on social media before the openings of shows like *Mamma Mia!* and *The Addams Family*. Glancing around, I realized that everyone here had participated in school performances for years—or at least it seemed that way. I hoped they'd welcome a newbie.

Mr. Hudson clapped. “Let’s get started. I’m thrilled you’re all interested in our spring musical, and I know you’re eager to learn what it will be. So, without further ado, this year’s show will be”—he drummed his hands on the wooden table in front of him—“*Beauty and the Beast!*”

Murmurs of approval rose throughout the crowd and from me too. I’d always liked that movie, the animated version especially. It had lots of parts for girls. I hoped I could get a small one, something that would let me sing but still blend in. I could feel relaxed and make Mom happy at the same time.

Mr. Hudson described the jobs involved, including those behind the scenes. Tryouts would be in two weeks. That would be enough time to master a song and, hopefully, to muster my courage. Mr. Hudson ended the meeting, and my nerves tingled as I tapped the audition details into my phone’s calendar.

“Welcome to Theater.”

A shadow loomed over me, and I looked up to the cheery face of Meryl Cooper, her wavy ginger hair tucked behind her ears. We’d had some classes together over the years. Chatted occasionally. Still, I was surprised she’d sought me out.

“Thanks.” I forced myself to smile as I stood. Not that I wasn’t happy to talk to her, but I had—someone once told me—resting bitch face. It could give the wrong impression, so I’d learned in the last few years to purposely smile during conversations.

“I didn’t know you were into musicals,” Meryl said.

Me neither. “I like to sing, so I thought ... couldn’t hurt to audition.”

“Couldn’t hurt?” Meryl laughed. “You were amazing in middle school chorus. Are you hoping to be Belle?”

My eyes bugged. “The starring role? Uh, no.” Sweat tickled my shoulder blades at the thought of being the center of that much attention. “What about you?”

“I’ve been on the props team since we were freshmen. This year I’m in charge.”

“Cool.”

“Meryl, come on,” Elaine Naiman called from the door.

“I’ve gotta go,” Meryl said. “Do you want to join us for lunch tomorrow?” She nodded toward Elaine and some other girls. “We usually walk to Taco Bell.”

Since school began last month, I’d been eating lunch alone in the cafeteria while I read or did homework. I liked doing that. It was comfortable. But I’d promised Mom I’d try to stretch

myself, so I told Meryl, “Sure. That sounds fun.”

“Great. Meet us in the lobby, and we’ll walk over together. See ya.”

As Meryl headed off, I could practically hear my mom saying, *See, you’ve already made a new friend. This is going to be good for you, Joni.*

I smiled for real this time, hoping she was right.

Meryl

“What were you doing talking to Joni Jackson?” Elaine asked as we walked with our friend Tessa to Elaine’s car, a birthday gift from her parents last month. Its custom teal paint—Elaine’s favorite color—gleamed in the bright October sun. “She’s so stuck-up.”

“No she’s not,” I said. “She’s nice. Just shy, I think. I’ve never seen anyone look that nervous at a Theater meeting.”

“No kidding,” Tessa said. “She was like that woman in *Scary Movie*, with her mouth hanging open while she screamed.” Tessa mimicked the scene from the film we’d watched countless times. Tessa looked pretty scary herself with her long chestnut hair bedraggled around her face. Gym class hadn’t been kind to her today.

“She did not look like that,” I said.

“She totally did,” Tessa said.

“Totally,” Elaine said. “It’s like that time in fourth grade when she thought she’d eaten something with honey. Aaaaaahhhh!” Elaine held her palms to her hollowed cheeks, mouth open, reminding me of that creepy painting *The Scream*.

Tessa burst out laughing, and I couldn’t help joining in. Elaine flipped her long brown hair back, reveling in our reaction.

“Honey?” I asked.

“Some allergy.” Tessa flapped her hand like it was no big deal. “God forbid she should itch a little.”

“Or worse,” Elaine said with a laugh as we reached her car and she popped the locks. “Anyway, what was she doing there? She’s not planning to audition is she?”

“Yeah, she is.” I slid into the front passenger seat, enjoying the new-car smell.

“She better not try to steal my part.” Elaine dug her perfect red nails into the black leather steering wheel.

Elaine had been in every school production since sixth grade. She had the lead in the musical our last year in middle school, and she'd been gearing up for the same honor this year, now that we were seniors. She was a good actress and singer, and she always worked hard, so she'd do a great job in the role. But she acted so entitled. It was a side of her I didn't much like. Still, I didn't want her to be upset, especially for no reason.

"She's not gonna be Belle," I said. "Whoever heard of a blond Belle with a pixie haircut? Plus, she doesn't want the lead. I told you, she's shy." When Elaine said "mmmm" in a disbelieving tone, I added, "Besides, who could be a better Belle than you?"

At this, Elaine grinned. "You got that right."

Then she gunned it out of the parking lot while I held on for my life. No one liked taking risks more than Elaine.

Joni

I smoothed my shirt as I neared the lobby at lunchtime the next day, hoping it hadn't wrinkled. *You're overthinking things. Kids don't care about stuff like that.* I just wanted them to like me. Back in third grade when Elaine moved to town, right down the street from Amanda, she'd hung out with us a few times, playing Barbies and board games. Then she'd stopped. No explanation. If she'd found me boring then, what might she think now?

"Hi," I called out to Meryl, pasting on a smile.

"Hey," she said.

Meryl was standing with Elaine, Tessa, and two other girls I barely knew. Lunch with five other people. The larger the group, the more I tended to clam up.

You can do this.

"You all know Joni, right?" Meryl said. "I asked her to have lunch with us."

They all smiled, even Elaine. The butterflies in my stomach eased up as we strolled off campus.

Fifteen minutes later I squeezed into a long booth next to Meryl. My palm brushed the sticky table. *Yuck.* I shifted my black tray to cover that spot. Everyone else was already digging into burritos and quesadillas, with Tessa and Elaine complaining about a math test.

"Mr. Kwan is such a hard teacher." Tessa wiped cheese off her chin. "He never gives extra-credit questions. And half the time I have no idea what he's talking about."

I had to wonder if that problem was more about Tessa than Mr. Kwan. He taught my geometry class two years ago. He usually was clear and thorough.

“You have something to add, Joni?” Elaine said with an edge.

Ugh. Did I have my resting bitch face on again? “No.” They all were staring at me. *Say something.* “I’m pretty good at math.” I bit my lip, wishing I hadn’t sounded so braggy. “I could help you sometime, Tessa. If you want.”

“Sure,” she said. “Maybe.”

I reached for my Diet Pepsi, desperate to do anything other than talk.

“Here.” Meryl held out a straw as I sipped from my cup. “I grabbed some extras.”

“No thanks,” I said without thinking. “I don’t use plastic straws or lids. They’re bad for the environment.”

Meryl’s cheeks flushed.

“Not that you shouldn’t use them,” I said quickly. “If you want to.”

Why had I talked about straws and lids? Now they’d think I was braggy *and* condescending. I’d screwed this all up.

“Nope,” Meryl said. “You’re right. I should do my part.” She pulled the lid off her cup with the straw in it. A few drops of soda dribbled out as she set them on her tray. “That’s my last plastic straw and lid.”

Elaine picked up her drink. “Like using a straw will make any difference considering all the other garbage dumped in the ocean. When big corporations start caring, I will too. Until then ...” She stared at me as she took a long sip through her straw.

I didn’t remember Elaine being this hostile when she moved here. Of course, we were eight years old then. People change, though she always seemed pleasant and polite in French class. Maybe she was upset about Mr. Kwan’s test.

The conversation switched—thank God—to college applications and the extracurriculars the girls were piling on to improve their chances. I’d never been big on clubs, so I focused on my bowl of black beans, chicken, and rice with mild salsa on top—I really knew how to live it up.

“Where are you applying, Joni?” Meryl asked a few minutes later.

“The four big state schools. I want to stay close to home.”

“Not me,” Tessa said. “I can’t wait to get out of this town.”

“Me too,” Elaine said, squeezing spicy Fire sauce onto her soft taco. “My application to UCLA’s

theater program is already in, and I will die if I don't get accepted."

"I heard it's supercompetitive," I said.

"You think I can't get in?" Elaine said with a WTF look.

Could the earth please swallow me up now? I couldn't believe I'd said the wrong thing again.

"No. Of course you can get in. And it'll be a big deal when you do *because* it's so competitive."

Meryl laughed. "Don't worry, Joni. Elaine's just being our own drama queen. She'll fit in perfectly at UCLA."

"Ha ha," Elaine said. "So, Joni, I hear you're trying out for the musical."

I nodded, relieved that Elaine didn't seem upset anymore but wishing the focus was off me.

"Which part do you want?" she asked.

"Something small. Where I can sing."

"You don't want a big role to list on your college apps?"

"No. I'm sure I can get into a state school with my grades."

"What other extracurriculars do you have?" she asked.

Jeez. What was with the interrogation? "I volunteer at the library."

"That's it? You need something else to beef up your applications. You should work on props. You need an assistant props manager, right?" She pointed at Meryl. "A job with a title would help Joni stand out with the admissions boards."

I glanced at Meryl, who was staring at Elaine with tight lips. "I'll help with props if you need it," I said. "But I really want to sing." *My mom really wants me to sing.*

"Then that's what you should do." Meryl flashed a smile at me. "It's getting late. Time to head back."

We all dumped our trash and recyclables and returned to school. As my next class began, I realized that despite Elaine being pushy and my saying the wrong thing umpteen times, I had enjoyed eating lunch with people. Maybe these new friends were exactly what I needed.

Meryl

As soon as we dropped Tessa off after school, Elaine turned to me, scowling. "Care to explain why you invited that beyotch to have lunch with us today?"

Beyotch? I swallowed a snarky reply. “Because she’s nice, and I don’t think she has anyone to eat with. Remember when I stayed at school during lunch to study? She was sitting alone in the cafeteria both times.”

Shaking her head, Elaine pulled onto the road. “You’re too much of a mother hen, always trying to make people feel better.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

Elaine muttered under her breath.

“What?” I demanded.

“Nothing.”

Yeah, right. “I don’t know what your problem with Joni is, but I wish you’d give her a chance. She’s not trying to steal your part in the show.”

Elaine drove in silence for the next few blocks, and I was glad. When she got snotty it made me look forward to next year, when we’d probably be going to different schools. Soon we pulled up outside my house.

“I’m sorry for being all ...” Elaine shrugged. “I’m just stressed from college apps.”

“There’s a lot of that going around. So, you’re cool with Joni?”

A loud sigh escaped her lips. “Fine. I’ll give her a chance. If you like her, maybe I will too.”

“I’m happy to hear that,” I said, leaving the car, “because I made lunch with us an open invitation. Text you later.”

Joni

It was two days before *Beauty and the Beast* tryouts, and I was a wreck. I’d barely touched my dinner. All I could think about was the musical. I’d picked the song I would audition with. Knew the lyrics in my sleep. Had practiced singing it in different keys to make sure I’d sound my best. But the thought of performing solo in front of everyone ... *Maybe I should work with Meryl on props.*

I texted her for moral support. Twenty minutes later she came over. As we sat on my bed, I poured out my worries, rubbing my yellow-flowered comforter nervously.

“I’m sure you’re gonna be amazing,” Meryl said. “But if you’re that anxious about singing before an audience, start with me.”

“You want me to sing? Now?”

“No time like the present.”

She was right. If I couldn't sing in front of Meryl, in the safety of my bedroom, I'd never do it on stage in front of everybody. “My laptop's downstairs. Let me get it to play the song.”

“No need.” She slid her phone from her pocket. “I bet I can find a karaoke version online.” And in ten seconds, she did. I mostly used my phone for texting, but Meryl used hers for everything.

When the melody began, my eyes drifted shut and I started singing. At first my throat was tight, but soon I forgot about being nervous and lost myself in the music. Before I knew it, I was done. I opened my eyes. “So?”

Meryl was grinning. “You did great.”

“I didn't do great.”

“You were shaky at the beginning, but once you got past that, you were fantastic. You have a beautiful voice. You simply have to believe in yourself.”

“Really?”

“Really. But one other thing?”

Oh God. “What?”

“You've gotta keep your eyes open. If you're gonna be Belle dancing with the Beast, you'll have to see where you're going so you don't fall off the stage.”

Laughter exploded out of me, as sharp and surprising as a bursting balloon, and my tension melted away. “I am not going to be Belle. I want a small part.”

“Like that's gonna happen. You're gonna kill the audition. You're better than Elaine, but don't tell her I said that.”

My heart fluttered. The thought of being Belle scared the heck out of me, but it was exciting too. “You really think I could get the lead?”

“I do. Let's try it once more.”

Her phone beeped. She picked it up, quickly texted something, and restarted the karaoke.

I began singing, this time with my eyes wide open. Meryl's phone beeped again. She let it sit, and her attention made me feel more confident. When I finished, my voice strong, I felt like I could fly.

“Knock knock.” My mom always said it instead of doing it.

“Come in,” I said.

“You sounded wonderful, sweetheart,” Mom said. “That song is perfect for you.”

“Thanks.” I’d always figured she said things like that because she was my mom. But maybe ... maybe it was true. Maybe my voice was better than I’d thought.

“You’re going to knock ’em dead.” Mom glanced at Meryl with a smile. “Who’s this?”

Meryl looked up from her phone. I introduced her.

“Joni’s mentioned you,” Mom said. “I’m glad to put a face to the name.”

“Pleased to meet you too, Mrs. Jackson,” Meryl said, then turned to me, holding up her phone. “Sorry. I have something I need to do. I’ll see you at school tomorrow?”

“Sure.”

She hugged me after grabbing her purse. “And your mom’s right. You’re gonna be great.”

Meryl hurried downstairs, and Mom said, “I like that girl.”

“Me too. I think I’ve lucked out having her as a friend.”

Meryl

I parked my dad’s car by Elaine’s house and slowly approached the front door, dreading going inside. Elaine had sounded pissed in her texts when she’d learned I was at Joni’s. I’d spent the last week privately defending Joni to Elaine and the rest of the girls. They called her “boring.” “A snob.” “Too quiet.” Elaine said Joni often looked “mean.” It was all so petty. At least Joni didn’t know how they felt. Still, I couldn’t believe Elaine was so insecure that she couldn’t let that sweet girl be friends with us.

If Joni can be brave enough to sing in public, you can be strong enough to tell Elaine to back off.

Mustering my courage, I rang the bell. A few minutes later, I sat on a plump couch in Elaine’s family room, listening to her practice her audition song. *Talk about déjà vu.*

When she finished, she sat and looked at me expectantly.

“Brava. You were great.” And she was. Not as great as Joni, but Elaine hadn’t asked me that, thank goodness.

“Right?” Elaine said. “I nailed the chorus.” She poured herself another cup of tea from a small cast-iron kettle and emptied a packet of honey powder into it, part of her throat-soothing audition-prep regimen.

“Is this what you demanded I come over for?” I asked. “You know you’re a fabulous singer. And you’re never nervous about auditions.”

Elaine scowled. “Maybe I wanted my best friend giving *me* support instead of my competitor.”

Frak. She needed me to reassure her, to say she was a shoo-in to be Belle, that Joni didn’t want the part. But I couldn’t, because now Joni might want it—due to my encouragement. I did feel a little bad about that, but if Elaine wanted to be an actress, she’d better get used to competition.

“You know,” I said, “Mrs. Potts wouldn’t be a bad role. You’d have a couple of solos at least.”

“A teapot? You expect me to be happy playing a teapot?”

“Well—”

“So you think that ho will steal the lead from me.”

I tried to tamp down my anger. Joni wasn’t a ho. And she wouldn’t steal the lead. She’d earn it.

“Something’s going on here unrelated to the musical,” I said. “What is it? What do you have against Joni?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Wow. “C’mon, Elaine. You may be a great actress, but I know you. You’re hiding something.”

Elaine stared at the dark wood floor. “Fine. I’ll tell you.” Her voice was low, without her usual confidence. “When I moved here in third grade, she and her friend Amanda were the first kids I met. Amanda used to live down the block. But they were complete bitches to me.” She raised her head, her lips quivering. “They iced me out, even though they knew I had no other friends yet. Why should I be friends with her now?”

My mouth sank open. “Seriously?” That didn’t sound like Joni at all.

“Would I lie to you?”

It took all my strength not to say yes. I’d caught Elaine in several lies over the years, including the one she told just a minute ago. I’d always let them slide because I didn’t have the greatest history with the truth. In the winter of sixth grade, I went into therapy because I lied *all the time*. And not little lies. I told whoppers. To my parents and teachers and friends—about myself and others. I couldn’t even explain why I did it. My therapist suggested I wanted to seem important, better than everyone else, which of course turned other kids off. It had taken a lot of work to

become an honest, more secure person. I lost several friends back then, but Elaine stuck by me. We'd been best friends ever since.

"Maybe you misunderstood," I said. "Joni's shy. She'll tell you herself that she sucks at small talk."

"She's a user. She didn't become friends with us until she wanted inside scoop on how to get a role in the show."

"That's not true. That first day at Theater, she looked like a turtle dying to crawl inside its shell. So I went over to talk—"

Elaine's face reddened. "What are you doing, Meryl?" she yelled, her voice more fiery than the hot sauce she loved at Taco Bell. "This is our senior year. We're supposed to be having the time of our lives. I'm telling you, I hate this girl! Stop pushing her on me."

My stomach clenched. I didn't want to choose between them. Joni was kind and fun and super nice. She'd never snub anyone. Elaine must have misunderstood what happened with Joni and Amanda. Even if she hadn't, people grow. Change. I did. But I couldn't remember ever seeing Elaine this upset. And it was my fault. I couldn't stand it.

"All right," I said. "What do you want me to do?"

"Tell her she can't sit with us anymore at lunch."

I reared back. "But that's so mean."

"Who's your best friend, her or me?"

"You are." I blinked away tears.

Elaine nodded, seemingly placated. "Then do it."

Meryl

I drove home and spent the next few hours trying to figure out how I could drop Joni without hurting her feelings. Of course, there was no way. Before I knew it, it was too late to call her. I tossed and turned all night. In the morning, I decided I wouldn't do it. I wouldn't do Elaine's dirty work, no matter how upset she was. Joni was my friend and that was that. We'd all go to lunch as usual, and Elaine would have to deal with it.

At lunchtime, I waited in the lobby for the girls. As soon as everyone but Joni got there—she always arrived last because her locker was on the other side of the building—Elaine said, "Let's go." Wind gusted inside as Tessa pushed open the door, and they all started walking. Elaine must have told them I'd agreed to blow Joni off.

“Hang on,” I said. “We have to wait—”

“Wait for what?” Elaine’s tone was sharp, but her face ...

For a moment I was back in the sixth grade, when my friend Brandy found out I’d told people that she’d cheated on a test. She’d silently stared me down, looking like a kicked puppy, like she couldn’t comprehend why I’d turned on her with such a horrendous lie. In that moment I would have done anything to save our friendship. I felt the same way now about Elaine, who looked like she was bracing herself, waiting to be punched in the gut.

So, to my shame, I shrugged. “Nothing.”

Elaine gave me a smug smile before she turned. And I followed them all out the door.

Joni

When I reached the lobby at lunchtime, none of the girls were there. Had I somehow arrived first? I waited until the bell rang, checking out posters for homecoming and the photography club, but no one showed up. *I must have missed them.* I hurried to Taco Bell alone, my light jacket no match for the unexpected brisk wind. After I got a chicken-and-rice bowl, a packet of salsa, and cup of Diet Pepsi—I was nothing if not consistent—I spotted them by the back and headed over. Meryl was sitting on one end of a booth, directly opposite from Elaine.

“Hi,” I called. “I must have missed you guys.”

I set my tray on the table edge, but Meryl didn’t scoot down, even though there was room on her side. She bit her lip and avoided my eyes.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

After giving Elaine a pained stare, Meryl looked at me and said, “You can’t sit with us.”

“What?”

“You can’t eat with us anymore.”

“Very funny. Move over.”

“No,” she said.

My heart raced. Was she serious? What was going on?

“C’mon,” I said with a chuckle, but she still didn’t slide over. “This isn’t funny.”

The other girls were staring coldly at me, all except for Elaine. She smirked as she reached for her drink with a big fat straw in it. I turned back to Meryl, totally confused.

Meryl slapped my cup, knocking it over. The cola drenched my meal and splashed my jeans. “Do I look like I’m joking?” Her voice was harsh. Nasty. Not like Meryl at all. “Go away.”

My eyes watered. I couldn’t believe it. I’d thought she was my friend. I’d thought they all were my friends, that I’d finally found a squad of my own. A place I belonged.

With my arms trembling, I grabbed my tray and walked off. Then I tossed everything into the garbage, not bothering to separate out the recyclables, and rushed outside. I’d barely reached the sidewalk before my first tears fell.

Meryl

I’d never hated myself more than in that moment. I’d done Elaine’s bidding and broken the heart of one of the kindest girls I’d ever known. She hadn’t deserved that, how cruel I’d been, yelling at her, knocking over her drink. Everyone in the restaurant had seen. People would be talking about it.

But the last part—with the soda—I’d had to do it. A few seconds before, I’d noticed Elaine slipping one of her honey powder packets from her purse and ripping it open. Instead of emptying it into her own cup, she’d palmed it, stretching her hand past her own drink and dumping the honey powder into Joni’s. Hurting Joni was hard enough. I couldn’t let her get hives too.

After Joni walked off, her shoulders shaking, I stared at Elaine. Had she always been this vicious? Or had she changed? Either way, I didn’t want anything to do with her anymore.

“I have to go,” I said.

I dumped my lunch, went outside, and looked around for Joni, but she was gone. I sat on a nearby bench, its slats creaking beneath me. As I breathed in the crisp fall air, I tried to figure out what to do. I had to make it up to Joni. To explain. But I could hardly make sense of things myself. Elaine was angry because Joni hadn’t been friendly to her nine years ago? In the third grade? Elaine must have misinterpreted what happened back then. But even if she hadn’t, it was ludicrous that she’d still be upset about it now.

Maybe that was it. Maybe it *was* too absurd to be true. Maybe Elaine was pretending to be upset about the past so she could push me to drop Joni, hoping Joni would be too hurt to audition tomorrow. I wouldn’t put it past Elaine. She knew I’d do anything to make her feel better. But if I was right, she should have been satisfied when I told Joni to bug off. So why’d she dump honey powder into Joni’s drink? It couldn’t have just been to give Joni hives. Elaine had looked far too pleased with herself.

Orange leaves skittered past my feet while I searched “honey allergy” on my phone. My heart skipped a beat. Honey could cause an itchy throat, which might have prevented Joni from auditioning. In a worst-case scenario, the allergy could have made Joni’s blood pressure drop.

She could have died.

My mind circled back to when Tessa mentioned Joni's allergy. "*God forbid she should itch.*" Then Elaine had said "or worse" before changing the subject.

OMG. If Elaine knew it could be worse, she must know all about the allergy, including that it might be lethal—and she'd dumped the honey powder into Joni's Pepsi anyway.

She'd tried to kill her.

I had to tell someone. But who would believe me? Elaine was such a good actress, she'd fooled everyone into thinking she was sugary sweet. Meanwhile I was the girl who lied. Sure, not anymore, but memories were long—as my short list of friends proved—and Elaine would share my history with anyone who didn't know it. It didn't matter that we'd been best friends for years. If I ratted her out, she'd be on me like a rabid dog, calling me a liar.

It had been awful living with the fallout of my lies in sixth grade. All the glares. The lost friendships. Even teachers had looked at me warily. I didn't want to go through that again. Besides, Elaine had stuck by me when things were bad. Didn't I owe her the same loyalty now? To remain her friend? To keep quiet about what she'd done to Joni and forgive her for manipulating me? To help her become a better person?

But what about Joni? She hadn't deserved to be yelled at and snubbed, in public no less. She'd done nothing wrong, and I'd humiliated her. I owed her kindness. I owed her the truth, especially considering how close she'd come to dying, even if she didn't know it.

I sat there huddled in my coat, my mind swirling faster than the leaves on the breeze, until one thought came to the forefront: why tell the truth if no one would believe me?

Meryl

An hour later, having left Spanish early to use the restroom, I waited outside Elaine's health class. I'd just sent a text when the bell rang and Elaine emerged. She saw me and snickered.

"That was some show you put on," she said as she walked up. "Nice job splashing the soda all over her."

Elaine truly was a great actress. She actually looked thrilled I'd done it, instead of angry that I'd ruined her plan.

"You might be happy," I said, "but I feel terrible."

"Why? Joni's horrible. She doesn't deserve to be our friend."

Furious, I clenched my hands, squeezing my phone as I leaned close to her. "I saw you dump the

honey powder in her cup. She could have died, Elaine.”

“So what? She wants to steal my part. To be Belle! Not that she will because she’s no beauty, and I’m a better actress and singer, but—”

“But why risk it?” My voice was colder than the Beast’s wintry world.

Elaine folded her arms across her chest. “That’s right. It never hurts to have insurance. Who cares if she gets sick? Or worse. She deserves it.” She paused. “I’ve got to go. Class is about to start. I’ll see you after school?”

I shook my head. “I have to stick around today.”

“Okay. Text you later.”

I nodded, heartbroken over the person she’d become—or perhaps had always been.

Meryl

When the final bell of the day rang, I went to the principal’s office and introduced myself to his secretary.

“Go on in,” she said.

I opened Mr. Perkins’s door, my hand shaking on the knob. I’d never been in here before. He was waiting for me, along with my mom, Joni, and a school security officer. I’d texted an apology to Joni right before I saw Elaine, promising to explain if she came here now. A call to my mom had taken care of the rest.

They all stared at me as I sat down on a nubby blue chair. With a trembling voice I told them everything. I had to do it, no matter what came next, even if no one believed me. That’s what I’d realized while walking back to school this afternoon, fighting the wind and my conscience at the same time. I couldn’t let Elaine use our past as a get-out-of-jail-free card. I had to be a good person. If I kept quiet, I’d not only be a liar once again but an accomplice too—not only to what Elaine had done but to what she would do. I had no doubt that if Joni got the lead, Elaine would try to kill her again. And Joni very well might get that part. No matter how hurt she was, she’d probably still audition tomorrow because it meant so much to her mom. I had to warn her.

“I’m so sorry,” I said when I finished.

The room was quiet for several long seconds, and I prayed Joni would be kinder to me than I deserved. Then she leaned over with a gentle smile and squeezed my hand. “I forgive you.”

“Really?”

“Of course. You saved me.”

While I fought off tears, Mr. Perkins drummed his stubby fingers on his desk. “What happened to the cup?” he said, his tone brusque. “The one with the honey in it?”

“I threw it away,” Joni said.

Mr. Perkins exhaled loudly and shook his head. “Then all we have is your word, Meryl.”

And we all knew what that was worth.

My mom opened her mouth, to defend me, I’m sure. But I jumped in. “No, Mr. Perkins. We have more.” I played the latest recording on my phone’s voice app—my conversation with Elaine that afternoon in the hallway.

My word might be worth nothing, but Elaine’s were priceless. As she’d said, it never hurt to have a little insurance.