

## HARMONY: A NOVEL

### PROLOGUE

When your name is Melody, everyone expects you to be musically gifted. Especially when your father is a magazine-profiled music teacher and your mother is a former Broadway performer. But the thing about me is that I have never been able to carry a tune in my whole life. That's right, 14 years with not one note on key. Honestly, I can't really hit anything "on key." I'm lousy at sports, can't draw except for maybe stick figures (on a good day), and can't do anything math-related to save my life. In the end, the only thing I'm good at is breathing and I have a mild case of asthma, so even that is hard sometimes.

I'm in the eighth grade at Green Forest Middle School because, of course, my father makes me go to the same school where he teaches. Now, everyone, including my dad, gets to see me fail miserably at absolutely everything. Lovely! He also made me go to the school with the meanest mean girl on the planet: Jessica Miller.

Jessica, also known as Jess, is the epitome of a "mean girl." She's beautiful, popular, and totally evil. She is also the most annoying person I've ever met. I mean, really, is it necessary to freak out every time you aren't wearing just the right shade of lip gloss to first period? There have been several times when I've wanted to shout, "Really, Jessica? Choosing between Coconut Dream and Strawberry Sizzle isn't the end of the world!" Oh, and one more thing: Jessica has the voice of an angel. My dad loves her. Who am I kidding, everyone loves her!

So, there you have it. Who would have guessed that giving your child the wrong name could completely ruin her life?

## CHAPTER 1

### THURSDAY

“The forty-seventh meeting of the BNC has officially begun!” shouts Joy.

It is 7:12 AM and, as usual, Joy is running our BNC meeting. Mr. Holden, the janitor, just unlocked the door to his closet for us and, after advising us to avoid the buckets of cleaning fluid in the back, gave us our privacy. Joy and I met Mr. Holden when we agreed to help him sweep the auditorium after a huge school assembly. Grateful for our assistance – or worn down by our constant pleading – Mr. Holden agreed to unlock the closet door whenever we wanted to hold our BNC meetings in peace.

Joy clears her throat, readying herself for her speech. On the outside, she embodies a Goth aesthetic. She wears her black hair in a ponytail, dark makeup, a black shirt with dark jeans, and faux leather combat boots with no ruffles or bows (she can’t stand ruffles and bows). On the inside, though, Joy is a total sweetheart and a major drama queen. The day we met – the first day of first grade – Joy had just moved to our neighborhood. I remember seeing her with her jet-black pigtails, a denim jacket, and tiny combat boots. I was sitting at a table with Joy, Jess, and a boy named Jason who was busy picking his nose. Darn assigned seating! Jess, of course, was being herself. That is to say, she was being totally evil.

“Melody, how long have you and Jason been dating?” she asked sweetly.

“Jason and I aren’t dating,” I said quickly, blushing.

“Why not? You two are perfect for each other! You’re both gross!” she said with a six-year-old’s version of a cackle.

I glanced at Jason, worried I might have embarrassed him with my instant rejection of the suggestion we were dating, but no; he had moved on from nose-picking to absentmindedly drawing on the table with permanent marker.

“You’re so mean!” I said, trying to defend him. Even if he *was* gross, it still didn’t mean Jess had the right to tease him. Or me.

“You’re standing up for him!” Jess doubled over in laughter and I started crying. I looked at Jason – no help there. He was still busy drawing cartoon zombies on the table, pausing every few seconds to continue picking his nose. Our teacher, Ms. O’Brian, was occupied with organizing the colored pencils that had been dumped on the floor by another student. So, no help there either. I started flat-out sobbing. Worst first day of school ever! Then, suddenly, I heard an unfamiliar voice.

“Is your name Jess?”

I looked up to see Joy glaring at Jess, who had ceased laughing to see who dared speak to her while torturing her victims.

“Yeah,” she said hesitantly. “Why?”

“I want to remember the name of the meanest person I’ve ever met! Say you’re sorry or I’m gonna tell the teacher.”

Both Jess and I gasped. No one had ever spoken to Jess like that before. I smiled at Joy. Jason showed his appreciation by continuing to ignore us. Jess scowled, mumbled something about having to go to the bathroom, and left.

“Thanks,” I said to Joy.

“You’re welcome. And scene,” she said, miming a clapperboard with her arms and staring dramatically into the distance.

It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship. We've been besties ever since.

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"Though we are few, we are mighty!" Joy continues, trying to keep her composure while eyeing my pink ruffled shirt. "And although there are evil forces at our school, like Jess the Mess," (our private nickname for Jessica), "we will power through them! We will never give up, even though our parents badly named us! We will stand tall and-"

"Okay, Joy, I think you made your point," I say with a grin. Looking a slight bit embarrassed, Joy clears her throat and gets back on topic.

"Anyway, today's agenda is currently being passed out by me." She pauses, reaches into her black studded satchel, and pulls out two pieces of neatly folded paper. I grab the paper by the edges and Joy grimaces.

"Please don't crinkle the paper," she begs. I shake my head and roll my eyes at Joy being her typical OCD-inclined self. She's so funny that way; whenever she comes over she practically cleans my whole house. My mom loves her.

I look at the agenda:

1. Say the BNC pledge/rules
2. Discuss ways to deal with Jess the Mess and her friends. MWAHAHAHA!

I chuckle, amazed by how effortlessly Joy integrates humor to everything she does. But, in spite of her comedic talents, she never smiles. I mean, of course she *smiles*, but always in a fake or mischievous way. I've never seen her truly grin. Of course, that is why she started the club – she is named Joy but, as she likes to say, "I wear black for a reason." I snap back into reality, leave my thoughts, and resume my place on the sheet.

3. Come up with ideas on how to get more members into the club.

I agree with that last one. Our last attempt to recruit a new member didn't go so well. It all started a few weeks ago. I was in history class and, as usual, completely baffled by the questions on the Revolutionary War that Ms. Henry expected us to complete. Then, my thought process – or lack thereof – was interrupted.

“Excuse me, are you Ms. Henry?” I glanced up to see a girl I didn't know with long, curly brown hair and thickly-lashed eyes.

“Yes, you've come to the right place,” Ms. Henry replied. “Are you our new student?” The girl nodded and gave a shy smile. “Well, welcome to Green Forest. I'm not trying to put you on the spot, but I think it would be wonderful if you would introduce yourself to the class. What do you say?” I groaned inwardly, not because I wasn't interested, but because I understood how awkward that must be for this poor girl; Mrs. Henry may not have been *trying* to put her on the spot, but she totally did. Recognizing that she couldn't really get out of it, the girl nodded reluctantly and turned to face us.

“Hi,” she began, “I'm Snow White,”

I perked up and looked to my left and right, but everyone seemed to have heard the same thing I did.

As if she could sense our confusion, Snow elaborated, “Yes, Snow White like *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*. My parents thought it would be sweet to name me after the princess since our last name is White. Clearly, they hadn't considered how embarrassing that would be for me when introducing myself to a room of people I've never met before. Or to anyone at all for that matter.”

The class chuckled. Snow seemed cool.

“Anyway, I just moved here from California for my mom’s new job. And...I’m excited to start school here.”

“Thank you Snow,” Mrs. Henry said, grinning. “Why don’t you take a seat next to Melody there and she’ll explain to you what we are doing.”

Snow approached me and sat down in the chair to my right. No one had wanted to sit there when we chose seats on the first day because all of my classmates had friends in class with them. I, as you probably assumed, did not. But maybe that was about to change.

“Hi, I’m Melody,” I said brightly.

“Nice to meet you. So how much work am I going to have to make up?” Snow asked biting her lip.

“Not too much, we’ve mostly been having class debates and discussions,” I explained. “But I can help you with all of that.”

“Thanks,” Snow said, smiling. “I’m glad that I’m sitting next to you.”

Sitting next to Snow every day in history, I learned a lot more about her. Between lectures on British tyranny and the Articles of Confederation, Snow revealed to me that not only does she hate snow and anything relating to winter (not a huge surprise considering she’s from California), but she also has a general disdain for fairytales.

“I’ve never met anyone who disliked fairytales! Didn’t you grow up reading The Brothers Grimm?” I asked incredulously when she told me that.

Snow laughed. “Yeah, I get that a lot. My parents read fairytales to me growing up, of course, but I just never really got into them. I mean, they’re often so formulaic and it bothered me that, like, nearly every female character in them has zero backbone. That’s partially why I

don't love my name. Snow White was such a damsel in distress, you know? But I guess another part of it is just my personal experience."

I cocked my head, silently asking her to explain. She nodded.

"Back in California, people used to tease me about my name and personality, and I just never felt like I fit in. And I guess I kind of took it out on poor Snow White."

After that conversation, there was no doubt in my mind that Snow would be the perfect addition to the BNC. But, unfortunately, someone else got to her first.

I was talking to Joy, whom I had introduced to Snow a few days after she arrived, and Snow in the hallway on the way to first period when She Who Must Not Be Named approached.

"Are you Snow?"

Joy and I exchanged a concerned look.

"Yep, that's me."

"I'm Jessica, but you can call me Jess. I heard you're new here. I'm president of the Welcoming Committee and since you just transferred here a few days ago, I thought I'd introduce myself."

"Nice to meet you," Snow said with a smile.

"So how are you adjusting? Do you like Green Forest so far?" Jess inquired.

"Oh, it's *much* better than my last school," Snow said nodding vigorously, her eyes wide.

"That's so great!" Jess exclaimed, clapping her hands together. Joy and I glanced at each other and rolled our eyes.

"Come with me, my friends are dying to meet you," Jess said, gesturing toward her posse hovering at the back of the hall.

“Oh, um, okay,” Snow said, and before we could warn her or arm her with pepper spray, she was abducted.

Afterwards, Joy and I started seeing less and less of our new friend. Our sporadic conversations turned into something like this:

Snow: “Hi Melody! Hi Joy! What’s up?”

Me: “Not much, you?”

Snow: “Oh, I’m...”

Jess: “Snow, over here! Come hang out with us.”

Snow: “Sorry guys, see you later!”

We knew it wouldn’t be long before Snow would completely convert to the dark side, so we understood that we had to work quickly. We decided to talk to Snow about our club.

“Hey, Snow!” I said, grinning.

“Hi, Melody, Joy, what’s up?”

Joy wiggled her eyebrows theatrically. “Actually, we wanted to talk to you about a club that we started...sort of like a secret society, sort of like a sorority, that we thought you might want to join. If, that is, you can handle the awesomeness!”

“What Joy means to say,” I said with an eye roll “is that we started a small club called the Badly Named Children Club, but we call it the BNC for short.”

“And because it sounds more secret and awesome to use an acronym!”

I glared at Joy. “Anyway, I can’t sing and I’m named Melody, and Joy is a bit less than joyful which is why we’re in it. And seeing as your name is Snow and you hate both fairytales and winter, we thought that...”



“Snow!” a voice called.

Darn it.

“What could you possibly be talking to *them* about?” Jess asked.

“They wanted to invite me into a club they started,” Snow explained.

“Oh, trust me, you don’t want to be in any club with them,” Jess said. “Let’s go.”

Snow remained frozen in place. She looked slightly conflicted, and glanced back and forth between us and Jess. I couldn’t help but feel hurt – how could she pick Jess over us? A few seconds later, Snow sighed resolutely and turned toward Joy and me. I relaxed, and silently chided myself for doubting her. But, to my surprise, rather than assuring us that she would love to join the BNC and politely declining Jess’ offer, she said, “I guess I’ll see you guys later then.” She flashed Joy and me an apologetic smile, and then turned away and went with Jess.

Jess smirked at us and guided Snow toward the crowd of popular girls gathered on the far end of the hall. And Joy and I watched as our new friend walked away from us.

So now, we are back at the start and Snow is an official “mean girl,” even though she is really anything but.

Joy interrupts my thoughts by crying, “All rise for the pledge of the BNC!”

“I pledge allegiance,” we begin, “to the BNC in a janitor’s closet in America. And to the members for which this club stands, we will remain one nation of poorly named kids with liberty and justice for all except us.”

“Please be seated on the nearest bucket!” Joy shouts.

I sit and listen to Joy as she continues the meeting.

“We will now review the rules of the BNC club: One, nobody is allowed to intentionally hurt, steal from, play pranks on or tease anyone, even Jess the Mess. We must stand for what is

right and kill the mean girls with kindness. Two, we must never become a mean person like Jess, Rachel, Ashley, or any other person in that group,” she says emphatically. “And three, we will remain as epic and awesome as humanly possible for badly named kids like us. And scene!” she said with her signature clapperboard move.

“Okay,” I say, “I would like to kick off this meeting by saying that I have interesting news about Jess.”

Joy’s eyes widen, and that mischievous grin I was telling you about earlier creeps over her face.

“Tell me more,” she says, stroking an imaginary beard.

“Well,” I reply, “This morning I was walking through the hallway to go to my locker and drop off my books just like I normally do. When I got there, Jess happened to be walking by and she was carrying a clipboard. She approached me with it and after a few minutes of rude jabber and dramatically flipping her unfairly shiny brown hair, she explained that she had the clipboard because she was trying to get signatures for an anti-bullying petition. Isn’t that ironic coming from her?”

Joy rolls her eyes.

“Typical of Jess to lie like that,” Joy scoffs.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“I saw Jess with that clipboard too, but it isn’t a petition for anti-bullying.”

The color drains from my face. “It’s not?”

“No! Can you imagine Jess creating a petition against herself?” Joy giggles. “No, this morning she volunteered to get students interested in performing in the school talent show at the annual Spring Fling fair. That clipboard had the sign-up sheet on it.”

I can't move. I can't talk. I can't think.

“Um...Melody? Are you okay?”

“Well...I may have signed both of our names on the sheet.”

Joy looks like she is about to pass out.

“Huh?” she says, no doubt praying that she heard me wrong.

“Apparently, we are in the talent show.”