

# *Rouged to Bruised*

*A story by Noelle Thackeray*

October twenty-second. It was here. While others were obsessing over picking costumes and planning parties for the upcoming spooky holiday, I was only worried about one thing: the annual Phantom's Faves contest. The Phantom's Faves (a twist on the Phantom of the Opera Broadway play) was a local program that put on a play each year in October. But it wasn't just any play - high school students across the valley submitted their own, original, spooky-themed plays, and the judges picked a winner whose play would be shown at the local theater the week of Halloween. And the winner was announced... on October twenty-second. Otherwise known as *today*.

I had already submitted my play and gone in for the accompanying audition two weeks earlier. I was now awaiting the email saying... what? Congratulations, your play has been chosen? Or the dreaded *we regret to inform you...*

I didn't even know what I expected. I had thought my play was pretty good, but of course I did! It was my own. I could only read my play through my own eyes, blurred by the bias of having read the same words so many times, revising and adding and cutting and revising, that they didn't know what was good and what wasn't anymore.

It had now become a tick to check my phone for notifications. They hadn't said what time they were going to release the winner, so it could be at any moment. My finger constantly twitched to where my phone was slyly slid between the chair and my thigh (since we weren't supposed to have them out in class), tapping the screen only to find a notifications bar empty of anything since my Panera order from lunch.

I sighed and slid the phone back under my leg. I turned to the front and tried to focus on what was looking to be a lecture on math that I was 99% sure was four or five years ahead of what we were supposed to be doing (or at least what I knew).

I tried to buckle down and remember that I wasn't actually dying. But nevertheless, the class trudged on agonizingly, every 30 seconds marked by the tap of my finger to check for notifications (it went something like; none, none, none, none, none, none, none, none).

When the glorious trill of the bell finally rang, freeing us from our brick-and-whiteboard cages, I shot out of the classroom to B15 down the hall, where I collected my friends Annadee and Maxy to go to the after school playwright club.

Playwright club was great - it was a club of around fifteen people run by Miss Green, the theater teacher, and it was a mash of actors and writers (a lot of people were both). I wasn't even taking theater as a class, but Annadee (a theater girl through and through) had roped Maxy and I into the club since we both liked writing. I was reluctant at first, but I immediately realized how fun it was - we got to write our own plays and then the other actors performed them. It had been great practice for the Phantom's Faves.

"So how was math?" Maxy asked, like always.

"Like a bad dream," I replied, as always.

Annadee barreled in between us. "Have you gotten a notification yet?" she demanded urgently.

"Nope," I sighed. Annadee had entered Phantom's Faves too - and I knew she was going to win. She was a much better actor and writer than me, and we all knew it, but a tiny little part of me sparked with this ugly, jealous little flame that realized there was only one spot for first place, and if her play won, that meant mine didn't. It at least made me feel better that she hadn't gotten anything yet either.

Suddenly my phone pinged. I nearly dropped it as I ripped it from my pocket and tap-tap-tapped the screen to turn it on... only to find a notification from Crumbl advertising Benson Boone's Crumbl cookie back for a limited time (yes, I did sign up for notifications from Crumbl, don't judge me).

"Seriously?" I groaned, swiping the notification away (well, saving it for later) and shoving it back in my pocket.

We continued on to the Little Theater with the exhausted silence that comes after suffering through an hour and a half of math, and in Annadee and Maxy's case, chemistry.

We got to the Little Theater and Miss Green looked over at us from her desk.

"Did you girls get any emails?" she asked excitedly, wiggling her eyebrows.

"No," Annadee and I sighed in unison, flopping into a few of the velvety theater seats at the back of the classroom. Miss Green did not share in our dejection. She instead clapped her hands together, her stacks of bracelets on her wrists rattling, and said, "Well, I'm just so excited to see one of my own student's plays in the Murray Theater next week!"

Annadee and I both smiled unconvincing smiles at Miss Green's undefeatable optimism and went back to sagging dejectedly into our chairs. While we waited for the rest of the people to show up, I pulled out my math homework and tried to do it but mostly just stared blankly at the complicated equations.

"What time is it? Shouldn't we have started by now?" Maxy asked after ten minutes, yawning. I pulled out my phone to check the time - and there it was. *You have 1 new email.*

My heart bounced over a beat, and then another one. My fingers trembled as I clicked on the notification and opened the email. *This was it.* It was from the Phantom's Faves program coordinator. I braced myself for the worst, closing one eye as if reading the news through just one eye would make it less disappointing. But turns out I could have read it with both eyes open.

*Congratulations, Miss Benson! Your play, "Rouged to Bruised" has been chosen as this year's Phantom's Fave! In the form below, please specify your costume and lighting needs as well as set and sound system requirements. Rehearsals for the play will start this Friday at 5:30 pm. We look forward to working with you!*

Excitement rose in my throat like the bubbles in a shaken bottle of soda. I won! I couldn't believe this.

Maxy, peeking over my shoulder, saw the email and gasped. "You got it!" she cried, grabbing my shoulders and shaking me. Annadee came over too and grinned. "Yesss Everly! That is so cool! You totally deserve it. I am so excited to see this play in the theater, finally!" she exclaimed.

I couldn't keep the smile off my face. "Thanks, Annadee," I said, feeling a twinge of guilt that I had gotten it and she hadn't. Her play was really good - I still thought it was better than mine. But she seemed genuinely happy, which I appreciated.

I read the email again. The Phantom's Fave! My play! I was officially a real playwright. Friday could not come soon enough.

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I was overwhelmingly excited when I arrived at the Murray theater on Friday for the first rehearsal. I was literally almost completely in charge of the whole play! And I was super excited about my play - it was the story of how clowns became associated with Halloween, following the life of the first horror clown - Bong Bong, a clown at a local circus in the 1950s who began on his twisted path after he made a child cry when he accidentally popped his balloon poodle - and found he liked the sweet sound of tears more than the stunted, ugly noise of laughter. I was especially excited about the special effects - at the beginning of the play, when Bong Bong was still an innocent clown, two happy bells sounded every time before he appeared. *Bong bong!* But as the play went on and he grew more and more horrifying and gruesome (hence the title, *Rouged to Bruised*) the two bells got deeper and more foreboding. BONG. BONG.

I pulled open the theater door, the wonderfully tarnished brass handle cold against my hand. Once I was inside, I felt immediately in an artistic mood. A theater just does that to you. The rows of red velvet seats, all turned towards the stage, attentively watching. The majestic, gaping ceiling with swirling pillars and decorative carvings, framing the elaborate chandelier whose expensive crystal light made the theater look even more lavish than it already was. The tiny lights lining the aisles, framing the red carpet as if everyone that walked down it was on a real red carpet, worthy of being noticed, being photographed. And of course the stage itself. It was just a floor of wood, but it told its own story with its series of marks and imperfections. Scuff marks from the turns and leaps of the ballet dancers in *Giselle*, *Swan Lake*, *Romeo and Juliet*. Lines and scratches from the impressive sets of the operas, moving on and off and in and out of the curtains. Sticky residue and corners of tape, ripped up and stuck down and ripped up again to mark the spots where props and actors came and went in their plays.

There were already four people sitting in the front row of the seats with very official-looking clipboards and pens and serious words. There were a few people standing on the stage and crossing here and there, pointing and talking into their headsets. I made my way down the aisle and nervously stepped in front of the table that was set before the three director-y looking people. Two of them smiled when they saw me and stood up to introduce themselves.

"Hi, Everly! I'm June, the program coordinator for Phantom's Faves," the first lady said. She was simply dressed and looked to be in her mid 30s, the classic PTA mom. The other person was a man in his 40s. "I'm George Bran, the theater manager," he said, shaking my hand. June pointed to the other two sitting at the table, who were immersed in something on a big screen and control panel in front of them.

"That guy there is Ethan, he does all the tech and everything," Ethan raised an unenthusiastic hand, "and that lovely lady is Mattie. She's the assistant theater director." No surprise there. Mattie screamed theater - she was college age, with big dangly earrings, pink

eyeshadow, and crazy, curly black hair. "Hi Everly!" she said, waving. "I'm just here to help you with anything theater-related, if you need any tips or anything. But I read your play and girl!!! I don't think you will be needing any help from me!"

"Oh, thanks!" I said, smiling, a little taken aback by how fast she talked but appreciative of the compliment. Someone actually liked my play!

Then Mattie and June took and sat me down to go over all the technical details.

And there were a lot.

I am not kidding, a lot.

It took nearly an hour just to go through the lighting for the whole show, and then two more for cues, props, curtains, and soundtrack. Half of the details were things I had never even thought of before!

By the end, my brain was fried with how complicated putting on a play actually was. I finally left at around 9:45, nearly an hour after we were supposed to end.

And the next night, I left at 10:00. And the next night, 10:30.

Finally, on Tuesday, we were ready for our first dress rehearsal. The rigorous rehearsals had exhausted me but also given me a strange sort of energy, fueled by the indescribable excitement of watching my own words and story from my imagination come to life.

Annadee and Maxy and a few other kids from my school were there as well, since the cast was completely student-staffed (there weren't that many people needed, as it was a relatively small-scale play). I was glad that even though Annadee's play hadn't won, she could still be a part of the show.

We shared two dressing rooms, the boys in one and girls in the other. We got to the theater at 5:30 like usual and went down to the dressing rooms. With the clown and horror themes of the play, more extensive makeup was needed than usual, so Mattie brought in her friend that did makeup for the local Castle of Chaos haunted house. Annadee, Maxy, and I were all clowns (I was Bong Bong) and so we all sat at the makeup tables to get our makeup done.

Mattie's friend was good. She did Annadee and Maxy first, and I was impressed. They were the perfect classical clowns, just like their characters, but with a little something unnerving to them - their smiles a little too wide, their cheeks too high. The perfect inkling of the horror to come.

And then she did my makeup. When I opened my eyes after she finished, I stumbled back. My heart had sped up inside my rib cage, as if I was actually under the threat of a real horror-movie clown. My face was deathly pale, sucked of all color, my eyes seemingly dark and shadowed. She had somehow made my cheekbones look sharp and high, with sunken looking cheeks. And my lips were the dark, haunting color of dried blood, some of it even dripping down the sides.

"It's perfect," I said.

"I thought the whole 'clowns are scary' thing was pretty stupid, but now I can see it," Annadee said, clutching Maxy closer as if I was about to jump out and scare them.

"Yeah..." Maxy said, in awe. "That is crazy good."

"Aww, thanks guys! I'm glad you like it," the makeup girl said, standing back to admire her work with them. "You do look pretty sick," she nodded.

I smiled at myself in the mirror and stared at myself in awe as a maniacal, creepy grin stared back. I shook my head. "That is so cool," I said, unable to come up with anything better.

We were broken out of our reverie by a crackly announcement over the PA system telling everyone there were five minutes until we started rehearsal. "Well, I guess we better get ready," I said, and we all dispersed to get into costume.

The rehearsal went so incredibly smooth, I was scared we had used up all of our good acting before the actual show. I ran out to sit with the other directors to watch the scenes that I wasn't in, and everything was flawless. I couldn't believe something from my messy imagination could be brought to life in a real story onstage, so engaging and exciting.

Everyone stayed on the stage for notes at the end, and then we all went back to the dressing rooms. Annadee, Maxy, and I had to take off our makeup, but each of us paused as we lifted the wipe to our faces, not wanting to erase something so magnificent, but also not wanting to go back to being normal people. It was intoxicating to become someone else, if just for a few hours. It was a fresh, new perspective to view the world from, and you could be creative with your character's backstory, connecting their past to their personality and actions now.

With faces red and raw from rubbing off the caking masks of paint, we finally trudged out of the dressing room together. I could feel the nervous excitement sparking between us like electricity. Tomorrow was it - opening night!

We piled into Maxy's mom's Suburban and promptly slumped against the windows in silence for the whole ten-minute drive home. It was a good kind of silence, though - the exhausted kind where it felt so good to just. be. still.

"Well, I'll see you guys tomorrow," I said when we pulled up to my house, dragging myself away from the edge of sleep and getting out of the car.

"Yep!" Annadee said with a little shoulder bounce.

"Bye," Maxy muttered, half-asleep and too tired to offer much more.

I made my way up the driveway and banged through the back door into the kitchen. I dropped my stuff on the floor and collapsed at the kitchen table where my wonderful mother had set out dinner. I scarfed it down, talking through mouthfuls of food to my mom and little brother who was supposed to be asleep about rehearsal, then I showered, brushed my teeth, and went to bed. All such normal activities - when nothing at all felt normal. My own play was going to be performed on a real stage tomorrow - how could that exist at the same time as doing something as ordinary as brushing my teeth?

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The next day went by painfully slowly, each tick of the clock more like a minute than a second, and each minute more like an hour. Every time I passed by my fellow actors in the hall, we exchanged giddy little smiles. It felt like days had passed before we finally met together in the theater dressing rooms at 6:00.

It felt more or less the same as dress rehearsal - we had our makeup done (still freaky to look at), got into costume, and ran to and fro down the halls in varying states of dress to find headpieces, fix our microphones, or tell another person something very important (whether a note from the stage manager or a very juicy piece of gossip).

But at the same time, it didn't feel like a dress rehearsal at all. Yesterday we were just a bunch of teenagers playing dress-up on an empty stage. But today, we were actors, entertainers, *stars*. The rows of velvet chairs wouldn't be our only audience like yesterday. They would be filled with real people with real opinions and tastes and likes and dislikes. The thought

of it was looming threateningly - what if they didn't like my play? But it was also exhilarating - I was so excited to show people what I had to offer, the story I had come up with.

I have always thought those moments in the books and the movies are so corny - you know, the kid peeks through the curtain and sees a full audience and reels back, biting their nails - but it's true. Five minutes before curtain call, I stood at the edge of the stage, pressing my eye to the tiny slit between the curtain and wall, chewing on my nail. I was thrilled to see the rows were mostly full - I couldn't believe people would actually want to come to this thing! Granted, a good number of the audience was supportive parents. I saw my mom and dad taking pictures with the stage behind them - what a bunch of dorks. Gotta love them.

I was startled from my nervous spying by a voice next to my ear.

"You know, the last play they showed in here before they closed it down was a play about a clown too."

I whipped around to see the theater custodian standing right behind me. I didn't know his name, but had seen him around during rehearsals. I sighed a little in relief, but still took a step back anyways.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, don't you remember how the theater suddenly closed in October 1999? This year is the first year they've opened it back up."

I knew that, but I didn't understand what he was talking about. He also moved his mouth rather strangely when he talked, as it seemed to droop with the crooked line of his teeth, which was rather distracting. "Yes, I remember. So what did you mean about the clown play?"

"Oh, well, that was the last play shown here. It was about a clown, a Halloween special, just like this one. They closed the theater down the day after."

I cocked my head. Crap, was my play not original? I didn't want a similar clown play twenty-six years earlier mucking up my reputation. "Why?" I asked.

"Well, this play was supposed to be top stuff, ya know, projected to win a bunch of awards and everythin'. But it was a flop - the critiques came out the next morning in the paper and ripped it to shreds - the second night, the show hardly filled the first couple rows. The main actor that played the clown was pretty darn angry. He demanded for the critics to come back for a private show the next night, to give him a second chance. Most of em' waved him off like the crazy he was, but a few agreed. They came back the next night - and no one ever saw them again."

"You see, that's why the theater closed. They never found the bodies. After a scandal like that, they couldn't reopen their doors for ages, not until everybody had forgotten about it and they could pretend they were just renovating. Renovatin', hah! More like scrubbin' the blood off the walls."

I stumbled back a bit in horror. "That sounds terrible! Are you sure that really happened?"

The custodian shrugged. "Alls I'm saying is they never heard from those critics again. And that's not even the worst part. Some of the old staff 'round here still believes that the actor is still lurking around here, full of hatred at the theater on account of it being responsible for his downfall and all. Says he's gone take it out on the next actor that gets a standing ovation in this building."

I laughed. "That's a good Halloween story," I said.

The custodian seemed annoyed that I laughed. He lowered his eyebrows and said. "I dunno, girl, I'd watch out if I were you. Especially seeing how you're playing a clown, just like he was. Some curses just don't stop, no matter how many years it's been."

I opened my mouth to just say sure, because what are you supposed to say to something like that? But the stage manager called out, "Places!" at that exact moment.

"I'm sorry, I've got to go," I said, hurrying off to my spot and trying to shake the strange encounter off of me. The story left me with a tingle of shivers that ran down my spine, even though I knew it wasn't true. Poor guy was probably just lonely, I thought. I watched him tapping his broom as he tried to strike up a conversation with the stage manager, who turned on him with a spew of angry words that seemed to consist mostly of "I am a professional" and "trying to do my job!". I turned back to the stage and took a deep breath. The opening music started to play. This was it.

I walked out onto the stage and assumed my position behind the balloon animal cart where I started. The curtain rose. In the darkness, the audience was just a smudge of colors, not even enough light to see their faces. I began to twist a balloon into a poodle like I was supposed to, making clown faces and gestures as actors crossed back and forth across the stage like they were walking around at a fair. At first, I was a little shaky and wasn't performing as big as I normally did, but when I popped the balloon (on purpose) and the audience laughed, like a wave that rose together and fanned out onto the stage, I felt much more confident. I continued on, not just going through the script but *performing*.

At intermission, I had a quick snack before I had to rush back to the dressing rooms so the cosmetics girl could change my makeup, adding sunken shadows and dripping blood to show Bong Bong's transition from the innocent-enough clown of the first act to the terrifying, twisted, horror clown that grinned at bloodshed and cackled at cruelty.

The second act of the play was my favorite. I loved to assume a character so different from my own real personality, so cruel and cold that it wasn't even human. The final drop of the curtain came too soon, the fabric hitting the floor with a heavy exhale to match my own. I scrambled up from where I was laying on the floor (the ending scene was when a courageous and clever kid finally gave Bong Bong his last bong with one of those giant carnival hammers and he dropped to the ground) and hurried to hold hands with the other actors for our bow.

When the curtain opened, I did my best Bong Bong grin to whistles and applause (the whistles were most likely my own dad). The colors of the audience began to bob as a few parents stood up, then other people, then more, and then more. A standing ovation. For my own play. My smile grew so big it nearly obscured my vision.

When the curtain finally dropped, it was to squeals of happiness from the cast, hugging and cheering. There was no doubt the play had been a success. Annadee and Maxy pressed in on me, their praise overlapping as the huddle of actors began to move downstairs to the dressing rooms, carrying us with it.

I was still so pumped with adrenaline I didn't really know what was going on. We began to take off our costumes but before we could, there were people taking pictures, and then more people, and then our parents were suddenly swarming in to take pictures too. By the time the backstage had cleared out, Annadee and Maxy and all the others were gone, and it was just me.

"I'll be right out, I just have to take my makeup off," I shouted to my parents from the dressing room. "All right, we'll just be outside," I heard my mom say, and I heard the swing of a door and a soft babble of voices from outside before it latched shut.

I began to unbutton my costume slowly, still trying to savor this moment. But I began to move more quickly once I realized I truly was alone. A strange click broke the stark silence, stopping my heart briefly as I peeked outside the dressing room. It was just the automatic lights turning off in the hallway. Nevertheless, I moved quickly, shimmying out of my costume and fumbling to put it on the rack.

I sat down to take off my makeup and my heart jolted again as I met my own gaze in the mirror. Still, after two nights of wearing it, my makeup scared me. It was so real and unnatural at the same time. The perfect factor for fear. Especially with only the mirror lights to illuminate the shadowy dressing room.

I leaned forward to grab a makeup wipe but noticed something weird. Something about my eyes looked off in the mirror. Like they were moving around really quickly, not staring right at the mirror. I leaned back and then leaned closer, lifting my hands to my cheeks.

But my hands didn't appear in the reflection. I frowned. I tapped my fingers against my cheeks. Once. Twice. Still not there. I frowned again. But the face in the mirror didn't frown.

It grinned. A big, wide, bloody grin. And then I felt a hand around my neck. My heart stopped. It was.. wet. I lifted my hand, with its white clown glove, to where I felt the hand. I felt fingers. I pulled away, glancing at my hand before I whipped around - the white was stained with red.