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# CHIAMAKA

## TUESDAY

In my soon-to-be four years at Niveus, I've encountered many secrets, whisperings and rumours. While some of them have been about me, they were certainly never enough to ruin my reputation. The worst gossip was always about some other poor soul, who would either drop out from the weight of having to face their mistakes every day, or have a mental breakdown, leave school for a week, and come back with a new nose or handbag. And if I've learned anything during my time here, it's perfecting the art of making a rumour work in your favour – and coming out unscathed.

So it comes as a surprise when I walk through the double doors – later than usual because my straighteners were acting up – and everyone stares at me like I've got something to be ashamed of.

My stomach flips as I walk towards Ruby, who is by my locker, scrolling through her phone.

“Hi, Ruby.”

She looks at me, a smile slowly forming, her ginger hair wrapped around her head in a braided crown.

“Hey, Chi.” There’s a playfulness in her eyes, like the look a wolf gets when it’s hunting for prey.

I open my locker and push my bag inside. “Is there a reason, other than eternal jealousy, for all the stares this morning?” I joke, trying to seem unbothered. I pretend to search for something so that I don’t have to look at her. “It’s like I shaved my eyebrows off or something.”

Her head cocks to the side. “It’s probably just about the Jamie thing.”

I close my locker and look her dead in her cold green eyes.

“What Jamie thing?” I ask. It could be anything—

Her smile widens. “Everyone’s saying he rejected you yesterday at lunch?”

Oh.

“Well, you heard wrong, Rubes,” I say, giving her a tight smile.

Her red-stained lips make an O shape.

“It must be people telling fibs,” she says with a shrug.

My eyebrows furrow together. “Who?” I ask, because she clearly knows more than she’s letting on.

“Well, you didn’t hear this from me but –” she leans in – “Ava’s been telling people you thought he’d ask you out even though everyone knows he’s dating Belle now. Of course, I told people that it’s just a rumour...”

Ava listened to me talk about Jamie while knowing all along he was dating Belle? I should have known better than to talk to anyone about anything personal. I feel really out of

the loop, like there's so much going on that I should know about but don't. This past summer I was so caught up with Yale prep, I must've missed this. I must've missed everything.

"Did you know he was dating Belle?" I ask.

Ruby's smile fades a little. "Just found out."

I nod. Ruby's always been a terrible liar.

"Thank you, Ruby. I can always count on you," I say, thinking of ways to get back at Ava.

"You know I'll always have your back, Chi."

These girls are as loyal as scorpions. As I glance up, I see Ava walking towards us. She looks as white as a sheet, fear written all over her features. Sometimes the lingering threat of plotting to get someone back is better than actually carrying anything out. I smile at her and wave.

"Hi, Chi—" Ava starts, but I cut her off.

"Tell Sam I say hi," I sneer, before marching down the hallway towards Jamie's locker.

Ava has problems trusting her boyfriend Sam to keep his dick in his pants. Not only that, she's always been wary of the fact that Sam and I hooked up during freshman year, way before they started dating. I told her it was meaningless, but I know me bringing up Sam will eat away at her. I might even text him, knowing she'll be checking his phone all day now. It's not nice, but she tried to make me look desperate in front of everyone. So it's only fair.

"Hey, Jamie." I reach his locker as he turns around, revealing Belle behind him. They're holding hands.

"Hey, Chi."

My eyes linger on her. Her beauty is like a punch to the gut. I've seen her in some of my classes before, but never really *looked* at her...

I blink, crossing her out and ignoring the fact that she's here, with him.

"Why do people think I got rejected by you?" I throw in a playful smile, letting everyone listening in around us know I don't care and that I definitely wasn't rejected by *anyone*.

Jamie looks a bit confused, but I'm hoping he reads my mind through the best-friend telepathy channel and plays along. He's good at burying secrets, so what's one more to add to the pile?

"That anonymous texter, Aces, they...said you were," Belle answers.

*Aces? The person who sent those messages about Devon and Scotty?*

I stare at Belle again. Blonde hair held back by a blue headband that coordinates with our uniform, clear bright skin, pink lips. I hate how perfect she is, and how she's apparently the One.

"Oh...well it's a lie – isn't it, Jamie?"

"Yeah," Jamie confirms, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

"I'm sure it's just some lowlives spreading stories," Belle adds with a smile. I mentally roll my eyes at her. I don't need her input.

I wonder who this anonymous person – or people – is, sending messages to everyone. If they're smart, they won't say anything else about me.

“Hi, Chi,” a girl says, holding out a tall Starbucks cup. “Here’s your cinnamon latte.” It’s the sophomore from yesterday again.

“Thank you, Miranda,” I say, bringing the drink up to my lips. She opens her mouth then closes it like a fish. I almost feel bad for not letting her know that all of this – the kissing-up, getting me coffee before school – is worthless. If you want to be known, you have to claw your own way up, not get people cold lattes every morning.

But who am I to turn down a cup of coffee? Especially after the stressful morning I’ve had.

The sophomore leaves just as the first warning bell sounds. Jamie leans in and kisses Belle. I look away; even if it makes me look like I *do* like him, I don’t care.

“I’ll see you later?” Jamie says to Belle.

“See you,” she says softly, before leaving his side.

I force a smile, nudging him. “Someone’s in like.”

“I’m so much in like!” he shouts. I shush him, and he zips his mouth but grins.

“Let’s go to class, *boy in like*.”

I’ve always been great at playing the role of best friend.

I pull on my clothes, I give him a smile, I leave his bedroom, his house and I come to school the next day and pretend with him. That was always my role. The best friend who pretends.

But this year I will get everything I want, and Belle will soon be a thing of the past. I just need a chance to show Jamie how wrong she is for him.

I take my phone out and scroll down my list of contacts, landing on Sam. I tap out a message, something about his new haircut suiting him.

Within seconds I get a response.

With a grin, I walk through the hallway with my head held high.

Like I said, I always get my way.



“Sweet and sour liquorice or sugar mushrooms?” Jamie asks, holding up the two packets.

It’s after school and Jamie and I are in the candy store a few minutes’ drive from Niveus grounds, where we always go on Tuesdays, before making a stop at the 24-hour Waffle Palace across the street. It’s like yesterday at the benches never happened.

“Sugar mushrooms look weird...”

“And liquorice?”

“Liquorice is begging God for diabetes,” I say without thinking.

He puts the liquorice down and silently moves towards another section of candies.

“Didn’t mean it like that,” I say.

“Yeah, I know.” He pauses to survey what seem to be tiny candy pizzas.

I bite my lip, feeling bad. It’s been a few months since his diagnosis, and I always forget to stop myself from saying insensitive things. He was really depressed when his doctor

told him, thinking it meant no candy ever again – which was of course the thing that bothered him most. When he realized it didn't mean he had to stop it altogether, he went out and got this tacky tattoo of candy wrapped in red foil on his ankle.

Tuesdays have become the day when he allows himself to indulge a little.

“Don't feel bad or anything, I'm fine,” he says, the smile returning to his face. “If you want to feel bad, feel bad that they've run out of candy canes.”

“*What a shame,*” I say, which he playfully swipes my head for.

I can't stand candy canes.

“I think I'm gonna get some liquorice and one of those tiny pizzas.” He shows me his options like they are as important as college choices – which, knowing Jamie and his love of candy, it wouldn't be a surprise if they were.

“You do you,” I say, just wanting to get out of here. The days of me craving candy all the time ended in sophomore year, but this tradition makes Jamie so happy, and I like it when he's happy.

I glance around the shop. It's mostly filled with parents and their kids and elderly people. I look up at the walls, bursting with jars of candies. Liquorice of all colours, glistening like jewels from the sugar that coats them, and others that appear dull in comparison. There are cola bottles, big and small, real and fake; egg-shaped candies, lollipops with bright wrappers.

“Let’s pay,” I say.

We walk up to the counter and Jamie places the packets on the surface in front of the shopkeeper who, rather than concerning himself with Jamie’s candy and the twenty-dollar bill, stares at me, then my uniform and then my face again.

His lips curl as he shifts to grab something – his phone, placing it on the counter next to Jamie’s unpurchased candy.

“What did you take?” he asks, and at first, I think I’ve misheard him.

“Sorry?”

“What did you take?” he repeats, pointing his index finger at me.

I glance behind me. Nobody’s there.

He is talking to me.

“I didn’t take anything—”

“I saw you!” he yells, which startles me. “What did you take?”

“I took nothing,” I say, raising my voice too.

There’s a pause, and then he’s moving from behind the counter. My legs shake a little, ready for flight.

“Show me your pockets!” he shouts.

*How dare he treat me like I’m a thief!*

“I did not steal your fucking candy. If I wanted some, I would just buy it.”

Jamie pulls at my arm and I turn to stare at him. His eyes look doubtful. My heart pulses faster, I can hear the sound of it in my ears.



“Just show him your pockets, Chi.”

I swallow, shifting to look at the shopkeeper.

He moves forward, roughly reaching into my coat pocket.

“See—” I start, but I’m silenced by a crinkling sound and a packet of liquorice in his upturned hand.

“I’m calling the cops,” he says, shaking his head as he makes his way back to the other side of the counter.

My eyes water.

“I didn’t take it. I don’t know how it got there,” I say weakly, my voice breaking in a pathetic way I wish Jamie didn’t have to hear. How did it get in there?

The guy presses nine.

“I didn’t take it,” I repeat.

*One.*

“I’ll pay for it all, okay?” I hear Jamie say, pushing his twenty across the counter.

The man dials one again.

“Please, you can keep all the change,” Jamie persists.

The guy pauses, looking between Jamie and me, before putting the phone down, and grabbing the twenty from the counter. The shop is silent now, the bystanders watching the scene unfold. My face feels hot as I watch the shopkeeper examine the bill.

“Thank you, sir,” Jamie says.

The shopkeeper looks at me, and points again. “I’m tired of you people thinking you can get away with this shit. Don’t come back here, you hear me?”

I nod, and rush out of the shop, followed by the sound of

the twinkly nursery-rhyme ringing as I open the door. Jamie pulls my shoulder as I run down the stone steps, and I turn to look at him, blinking away any tears that want to fall. What just happened?

“Let’s go home,” he tells me with a sigh. His face crumples as he shoves the candy into his pockets. “I’ll just go to Waffle Palace another day with Belle.”

I feel a blow to my chest.

“Okay,” I answer.

“Okay,” he replies.

I don’t know why I say it again after saying it so many times in the store, but I feel compelled to. I didn’t like the look on his face when the shopkeeper accused me.

“I didn’t take the liquorice.”

Jamie says nothing, just nods without making eye contact then walks ahead with his phone in his hand and his head down, typing into it.

Why is he acting like I did something wrong?

I take one look back at the candy store. The shopkeeper’s still watching me through the glass window. Shadowy figures move around in the shop, faces I don’t recognize. Someone must’ve put the liquorice in my pocket. I glance back up at Jamie who walks on slowly.

But who? *And why?*