
CHAPTER ONE

Camp Ghostlight was more high school than high school. Like high school in a movie with a limited number of extras. With a cap of thirty campers a summer, it was easy to tell who was popular, who was a social pariah, and who'd been hit hard by puberty since last year. At my actual high school, there were plenty of people I'd never speak to, whose names I would never know. But at camp, we were always together. Our classes were a daily rotation of blocking rehearsal, dance rehearsal, and singing rehearsal. We ate all of our meals together. Even people I wasn't close to, I knew something about.

At the very least, we were all the same type of person: theater kid.

And being theater kids, there were some unspoken rules we adhered to. The first was that:

1. Hugs were mandatory, even if two people hated each other. Maybe most especially if they hated each other, so no one got a whiff of one's true feelings.

It was fitting, then, that my first hug of my last summer at Camp Ghostlight wasn't from any of my actual friends. I had barely rolled my luggage through the door of the residence hall—half an hour early for dorm check-in—before I was attacked by two people I absolutely couldn't stand: Annaleigh, whose real name is Anna Li but who went by a mononym at camp inspired by Broadway star Annaleigh Ashford. And her friend Laken, who was a year younger than me.

Arguably, Laken and Annaleigh were a different type of theater kid than I was. They were ensemble.

Which brings me to the second unspoken rule of being a theater kid.

2. The caste system mirrored the cast list. Leads were at the top and ensemble on the bottom.

At Ghostlight, there was very little fraternization between the two groups. The kind of part you played defined who you spent the most time with. I'd seen literal siblings ignore each other for an entire summer when one was cast in a named part and the other was shunted into ensemble. It sounds harsh and it is. But I've heard the same thing about people who play sports or compete in Academic Decathlon. *Popularity* and *talent* are synonymous in a meritocracy.

I had been a lead at camp for five summers. But I really did

try not to be a jerk about it. There'd been leads in past summers who wouldn't even learn the ensemble kids' names. Or pretended not to. My best friend, Kai, only ever referred to Annaleigh and Laken both as "Anna And/Or Laken." Even though, if you looked at them, they were distinctly two people. Annaleigh was short, sour, and Chinese American. Laken was tall and white with a face dominated by eyebrows.

I didn't dislike either of them because they weren't leads. Shows need an ensemble to work and they did just fine filling out the cast list. No, I disliked them because they were the biggest shit-stirring gossips I had the misfortune to know. Not getting enough attention onstage meant they both demanded more than their fair share offstage. If there was any drama at camp, it would be traced back to these two. They'd make sure of it.

My first acting exercise of the summer was to plaster a big, fat smile on my face and open my arms to hug them both. (See: rule one.)

All three of us said some variation of "*Oh my god, hi,*" like it was so totally random that we were running into each other at the only place we'd ever been together before. I didn't know where either of them lived or how far they traveled to get here. To me, they only existed right here, on campus at Rockville College, three weeks a year.

I pulled out of the hug to write my name halfway down the sign-in sheet, disappointed to find that none of my friends were here yet. Didn't they know that early was on time and on time was late? Sure, Kai had to fly in now that her parents had moved her to the other side of the state, and Mars and Rosie were probably dragging in a steamer trunk full of Costco-sized snacks and dorm

decorations. But still, they were abandoning me on our very last first day of camp to be pinched and plucked by Anna And/Or Laken.

“Is that really Faye Abernathy?” Annaleigh asked with a wry drawl. We might have followed each other on socials, but it was only for appearances. I had her muted. And it must have been mutual since she was giving me a hairy eyeball, cataloging the difference a year had made. My hair was new. My braces were off. My boobs were a little bigger. When I examined her in return, I could tell she’d switched from glasses to contacts and hadn’t grown an inch.

“I can’t believe you changed your hair,” Laken said to me, invading my personal space. In the last year, she had plucked her unibrow and taken to wearing lipstick slightly too dark for her pale skin. The toe of her shoe overlapped mine like I was a croquet ball she wanted to whack. She twirled one of my curls between her fingers, testing its weight. I choked down the urge to smack her hand.

After my cousins accused me of hiding my heritage behind blond hair, I’d stopped bleaching and straightening my curls. For the first time since the sixth grade, I looked more like my dad than my mom. Which is to say that I looked more obviously Black and Puerto Rican than white. Sure, my skin was the same shade of pasty beige, but with dark curly hair, when people saw me, they didn’t just assume I was a white girl. Or *just* a white girl.

I’d never intended to pass for white on purpose. I’d dyed my hair for shows and kept up with it when I started getting typecast in parts that were classically blond. Alice in Wonderland. Glinda the Good Witch. Cinderella.

But no more. I was ready to break out of my pattern of nice-girl dullness. I'd had my glow up and I was ready to be seen as a hot girl. A real showstopper.

"I was going to dye my hair this year, too. But my stylist made me swear I'd never put bleach on it. Apparently it's really rare for someone to be naturally auburn," Laken announced, swishing her long hair over one shoulder. It looked plain ol' brown to me. "But you were, like, the perfect Betty Cooper before, Faye-Faye."

With a grimace, I dipped my head to gently extract my hair from her grasp. No one had ever called me Faye-Faye before, and I had zero interest in playing boring Betty Cooper. "I dyed it months ago. Before they even announced we were doing *Riverdale*—"

"I guess someone wants to be Veronica," Annaleigh said in an annoyingly astute singsong.

Laken let out a loud, braying laugh that echoed through the lobby.

"Shoo, vultures," said a cool voice behind me. "Don't be jealous because Faye looks hot with any hair color."

With a shriek of true joy, I turned and threw my arms around my best friend's neck. "Kai!"

"C'est moi!"

With a squeaky *swak*, Kai pressed her cheek hard against mine on one side, then the other. Despite an obsession with all things French, Kai wasn't European. She just carried herself like she was continental. Tall and model thin. Immaculate bob haircut. Red lipstick I'd think was permanent if I hadn't roomed with her for long enough to catch her applying her makeup at dawn. She

looked exactly the same as the last time I saw her, down to the fake mole penciled to the side of her right eye.

Kai Tufo: The alto to my soprano. My camp roommate for the last five summers and my best friend for just as long.

She kissed an immaculate lipstick print next to her signature on the sign-in sheet like she was Marilyn Monroe signing an autograph. Pushing past Laken and Annaleigh without a backward glance, Kai snagged my suitcase and rolled it alongside her own across the lobby.

“Perfect timing,” I told her. “As always.”

“I sensed you were being held hostage by the two-headed beast and I had to swoop in and save the day. You’re too nice for your own good.” She looked me over appraisingly. “Seriously, though. The hair looks great. I love it. Even if you didn’t tell me about it.”

“I put it in the group chat,” I said.

Kai breezed past this. She was unreliable via text, even more so since she started at a performing arts high school and her parents had oopsied a third kid. Sometimes it took a week to get a response from Kai; sometimes she’d text nonstop for six hours straight. You had to catch her in the right mood. Which, in general, was good advice for knowing Kai.

“It’s giving Anita in *West Side Story* or Nina from *In The Heights*. Should we start calling you *Ofelia* now?” She let out a quick, sharp laugh, her mouth open so wide that I could see her uvula vibrate. “I’m kidding, obviously. You don’t have to change your whole life around a haircut and a dye job.”

I opened my mouth but didn’t know what to say. I wouldn’t have minded if people called me *Ofelia*. I liked my full name—

even when people mispronounced it or spelled it like the tragic Shakespeare heroine. The only reason my parents started calling me Faye as a baby was because my great-grandmother Ofelia was alive.

But before I could argue that my name wasn't particularly funny, my theater-nerd brain got stuck on the fact that Kai had named two of the biggest roles for Latinas in Broadway history but left out the third: Veronica in *Riverdale*, the show we were here to do. And despite the fact that the part was originated by an Afro-Latina—like me—Veronica was written ambiguously enough to be played by an olive-skinned white girl—like Kai.

We had never competed over a part before. Our typecasts couldn't have been more opposite. Kai played anything big, loud, and brassy. I was always nice and princess-y. In all the years I'd been doing theater, I was always the ingenue. The good girl. Dull. Forgettable. Just like I was offstage.

With my new look, I wanted to change my typecast. I *had* to.

It was my last chance.

Veronica was a show-stopping part. The kind of part that would make everyone see that Faye Abernathy was more than high notes and fluttery eyelashes.

Unfortunately, in the last month since I sent off my self-tape, I hadn't found the courage to actually tell any of my friends that I'd checked the box next to Veronica's name on my audition form. Either our director, Boaz, would give me the part and I could act shocked. Or he'd give it to Kai and I could act like I wasn't heartbroken.

Either way, I'd be acting.

It was theater camp, after all.

The lobby doors banged open. With a shout, two bodies came hurtling at me and Kai. Our suitcases smashed into the wall as three more careened into them. Arms squeezed around my neck and screams deafened my ears. The four of us, knotted together into a tangle of adoration, jumped up and down with wild abandon, not caring who was watching or rolling their eyes at us.

I leaned back just enough to take in the faces I loved so dear.

Mars Huerta: A nonbinary triple threat with more tap and jazz experience than most of our past choreographers. With the luminous skin and high cheekbones of fairy royalty and glossy black hair cut short, except for a long flop that hung over one eye like a Fosse bowler hat.

Rosie Krebs: Blond, chubby, and short enough to fit inside her own suitcase, a trick she liked to pull off to endear herself to newcomers on our dorm floor. Her face showed every emotion with cartoonish plasticity. The exertion of sprinting at us had given her two bright pink spots on her cheeks that made her look even more cherubic than usual, like the biological daughter of Santa and Mrs. Claus.

Rosie, Mars, Kai, and me. Together again. The way we were supposed to be.

Years together at Ghostlight had made us as close as friends who saw one another every day, as bonded as infantrymen, as devoted as family. Putting up a full musical in three weeks was like being spun in a centrifuge together. It bonded the strongest together and separated out the waste.

It wasn't that I didn't like my school friends. But my Ghostlight friends were my truest friends. We belonged together. I would

rather have been with them than anywhere else on Earth. Being in person instead of stealing time via text or—even rarer—FaceTime was the difference between breathing through a straw and gulping fresh air directly into the diaphragm. It was an overwhelming, pure sunlight joy to reunite. *At last my heart is whole again!*

“Did you hear?” Rosie asked in a loud stage whisper.

“Hear what, *mon petit chou?*” Kai whispered back. “We literally just got here.”

“Boaz isn’t here,” Mars said.

“He’s late?” I frowned. “That’s weird.”

“Maybe there was a sale on cravats,” Kai hypothesized.

Rosie shook her head. Her hair was fluffy as feathers. I had long suspected it might be curly if she’d stop brushing it and avoiding conditioner. Maybe now that I’d figured out my curls, she’d let me experiment with hers. “No. He’s not coming. There’s a new director.”

“We saw her getting the tour from the artistic director,” Mars said.

“She was talking about casting,” Rosie said. She leaned in, eyes darting back and forth like she was considering saying something truly dangerous. Something that could incite a riot.

And then, she did.

“She’s going to make all of us audition again.”

“Oh,” added Mars. “And Boaz is dead.”