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To my friends, old and new

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RADHIKA SANGHANI

THE
SUMMER
MY WISHES
CAME TRUE



USBORNE



CHAPTER ONE

The First Day of the Summer Holidays - Friday

Ayesha grunted loudly as she strained for the bright yellow suitcase on the top of her wardrobe. It was too high to reach. But Ayesha refused to be defeated. She shoved a pile of freshly washed clothes off her chair, then dragged it over to the wardrobe. Tentatively, she climbed onto the chair as it wobbled beneath her. This time, her fingers easily grasped the suitcase handle. She'd got it! Now she just had to make it back down... Ayesha was in the process of figuring out how to do exactly that when she was interrupted by a burst of laughter from the doorway.

Her older brother stood there, cackling. "*What* are you doing? You look ridiculous."

"Packing for summer camp," she retorted. "Obviously."

"Camp doesn't start for two weeks," said Jay, who was so tall he had to duck down to get through Ayesha's doorway. "You need to chill."

“And *you* need to help me,” said Ayesha, waiting expectantly as her brother walked towards her. But instead of helping her with the suitcase, Jay picked up a packet of crisps from Ayesha’s desk. “Hey, put those down, they’re for me and Nikki to eat on the way to camp!”

“The snack cupboard’s empty,” said Jay, walking away with the crisps. “So I’m going to need these.”

“Give those back!” cried Ayesha as her brother left the room. She tried to jump down after him, but she moved too quickly and the chair crashed to the ground, taking Ayesha and the giant yellow suitcase with it.

“Owwww,” groaned Ayesha, her voice muffled by the – thankfully empty – suitcase lying on top of her. Yet again, her giant fifteen-year-old brother had ruined everything. She contemplated running after him, but as star of the school basketball team, Jay would love nothing more than outrunning her. Ayesha wasn’t a big fan of running, but she *was* a fan of packing. Especially when it was for summer camp.

This was her very first time going to camp, but Ayesha knew she’d be a natural. She’d been planning for it ever since Jay had come back from Camp Willow two summers ago with a burned tongue from bonfire-roasted marshmallows and endless stories about dive-bombing into the lake, winning the basketball tournament and stealing kitchen supplies to play pranks on his room-mates. All with zero parental supervision (the camp leaders didn’t count).

Ayesha had been forced to wait two whole years till her parents deemed her old enough to go. But now that she was finally thirteen and Year Eight was over, she was *so* ready. Unlike Jay, she already knew to blow on hot marshmallows before eating them, and there was no way she'd waste her time at camp doing boring things like playing basketball. She'd be busy swimming in the sunshine, dancing all night at the camp welcome party, watching the legendary camp musical, and stealing kitchen supplies to actually *eat*. Summer camp was going to be the highlight of Ayesha Gupta's entire existence to date, and she knew that for a fact. Because she was going with her best friend in the whole world: Nikki Meyers.

Ayesha and Nikki's friendship had begun before they were even born. They'd both heard the story so many times that they could recite it off by heart. Ayesha's mum and Nikki's mum both went into labour on the same June day and gave birth next to each other in the same ward. The only difference was that Nikki's mum had to wait a few hours before her daughter slid out, while Ayesha's mum had to wait a solid twenty-four. She still went pale whenever she spoke about it.

From that moment on, Nikki and Ayesha spent all their time together. They were so close that they were practically sisters with their birthdays only one day apart. It didn't even matter that they looked different – Ayesha was brown-skinned with wavy light-brown hair and matching eyes, while Nikki was pale with straight dark-blond hair and blue eyes – because

they always went shopping together to make sure their outfits coordinated. And most importantly, they both always wore their gold friendship bracelets with charms that made a heart when you put them together, saying *BEST FRIENDS 4EVER*. They'd bought them from the expensive jewellery shop in town after saving up five whole months' worth of pocket money. That was how much their friendship meant to them.

They'd always been there for each other, through life events big and small. When Nikki's parents had divorced in Year Six, Ayesha had been the one she'd sobbed on. And last year, when Nikki's dad met Seville – an American woman with scarily white teeth and an overly friendly accent that distracted everyone from just how unfriendly she really was – Ayesha had spent hours listening to Nikki rant about her new stepmum. It had been Ayesha who'd come up with the perfect nickname for Seville: Ze Villain.

Ayesha supported Nikki in absolutely everything. She watched musicals with her at every sleepover because it was Nikki's dream to star in one, and she listened to her describe all her West End auditions in detail, even though she'd never won a part. Her dream of being in a musical was one of the reasons Nikki was going to Camp Willow – it had an amazing musical theatre programme that she was desperate to join.

In turn, Nikki was always there for Ayesha. She'd buy Ayesha manga for her birthdays even though she hated comics, she'd keep her company whenever her parents forced her to watch Jay's boring basketball games, and she always did Ayesha's hair

and nails before a party. When Ayesha's pet rabbit, Jolene, died, completely shattering her heart, Nikki was there every step of the way. She organized the whole funeral, created a photo collage of Jolene's best moments and came up with the idea to implement an all-white dress code for the funeral in honour of Jolene's snow-white fur.

Nikki was Ayesha's best friend in the whole world and Ayesha had no idea what she'd ever do without her.

"Ayesha? Are you...inside your suitcase?!"

Ayesha stuck a hand out from beneath the suitcase, waving. "Help," she called out to her best friend, her voice muffled.

Nikki ran over, her friendship bracelet jingling as she lifted the suitcase up to reveal a very dishevelled Ayesha.

"Jay," explained Ayesha, summing up everything with one word.

Nikki sighed in understanding as she slid down next to Ayesha. "It's so annoying he has to be at camp too. Hopefully we'll hardly see him."

"Definitely – he'll be busy with basketball."

"And we'll be busy with the musical!" said Nikki, her eyes shining.

Ayesha bit her lip. This was the one thing she was worried about. Nikki would obviously be super involved in the musical – that was her dream, after all – but Ayesha wasn't musical. At all. She couldn't sing, dance or act, and had no desire to. Performing was not her thing. But it was Nikki's. And Ayesha

was nervous that if Nikki did the musical and she didn't, they'd end up spending so long apart that she'd hardly see her best friend. She couldn't think of anything worse!

Then she remembered the Camp Willow brochure, with its long list of activities, not just the musical, and she relaxed.

"We'll also be busy swimming in the lake," she reminded Nikki. "And going to bonfires, and the dance, and doing art, and playing rounders." Her face lit up as it did every single time she thought of what life would be like at Camp Willow. "Oh, I can't *wait*!"

Nikki beamed. "They're going to be the best two weeks ever. I just hate that first I have to spend two weeks without you with Ze Villain."

"It's so unfair," agreed Ayesha. "But at least your dad will be there too. And you'll get to see New York. I'm so jealous – you can walk down the streets with the skyscrapers, pretending you're in a movie."

"And go shopping and watch Broadway shows!" added Nikki. "I know it will be fun. I just wish you were coming with me."

"Me too." Ayesha sighed. "I'll be stuck here. Who will I get frappés with? And secretly binge movies we're not meant to watch?"

"You could hang out with other people from school," suggested Nikki. "Like Katie and Meera?"

Ayesha shrugged non-committally. Katie and Meera were nice but they were more Nikki's friends than hers. As much as

Ayesha liked them, she'd never be brave enough to hang out with them alone. Nikki was the confident one – Ayesha was shy. She needed Nikki to bring out her confident side. And the truth was that she'd never really felt the need to make other friends when she had Nikki. What was the point? They did everything together, and it wasn't like she'd ever find a better friend than Nikki.

“Maybe,” she said eventually. “But we’ll still speak every day, right? I want to know *everything* about New York.”

“Obviously!” Nikki jumped to her feet. “But right now, we need to plan what we’re taking to camp.”

Ayesha instantly turned to the piles of clothes in her wardrobe. “Okay, so I’ve had some thoughts. We could bring the new T-shirts we got in the sale, some shorts, our jeans, obviously. *And* we need nice dresses for the welcome dance.”

“You should wear your lilac one – that really suits you – and I’ll wear my pastel blue. Lilac and blue go really well together,” said Nikki authoritatively.

“I was thinking the exact same,” cried Ayesha happily. “We’re so in sync!”

She and Nikki smiled at their reflections in the mirror. They were wearing matching strappy tops in different shades of blue, with their friendship bracelets dangling on their right wrists. Ayesha knew she was going to really miss Nikki while she was away, but having two whole weeks together at Camp Willow more than made up for it. She couldn't wait to go to summer camp with her best friend ever.



CHAPTER TWO

Two Weeks Later - Friday

Ayesha stood nervously by her bulging yellow suitcase, looking around the growing crowd of camp-goers and parents. Nikki wasn't there yet. But the bus was. And it was going to leave in precisely ten minutes.

She glanced down at her phone to see if Nikki had messaged back, but Ayesha's screen simply showed a selfie of her and Nikki (Nikki had the exact same photo as her screensaver) with no new notifications. Maybe Nikki's flight had been delayed? That would be a nightmare! But...there were two ticks next to her message, which meant Nikki had seen it. She must have landed.

Ayesha frowned. It didn't make sense. But *nothing* made sense lately. She and Nikki had spoken every single day at the start of Nikki's trip, just like they'd planned. Nikki had made Ayesha howl with laughter with her stories about Ze Villain

trying to show them her “cultural roots”, while Ayesha told Nikki all about the amazing cakes she’d been baking with her dad. They sent each other messages non-stop for the first few days until...nothing.

Nikki had suddenly gone quiet when Ayesha asked if she should pack a torch and goggles for camp. She hadn’t even replied when Ayesha asked for the latest update on Ze Villain and whether her relatives were just as annoying as her. It was only when Ayesha had asked *Are you alive???* that Nikki finally wrote back.

Sooo sorry for disappearing, but things have been super busy. You’ll understand when I fill you in. Can’t wait to tell you everything!!

Ayesha had been relieved and continued messaging Nikki like normal, but her friend barely responded. She had just thumbs-upped Ayesha’s updates until Ayesha felt so embarrassed that she’d stopped messaging. The last time they’d “spoken” – Ayesha had sent Nikki a photo of her packed suitcase, and Nikki had thumbs-upped it – was five days ago. Ayesha had broken the silence this morning to send Nikki a welcome home message. And then a *Where are you???* *Bus leaving soon!*

Nikki hadn’t replied to either. Not even with a thumbs up. Ayesha was confused. This was *not* like her best friend. What was wrong?

“She’ll be here,” said Ayesha’s mum, squeezing her shoulder. “Her mum messaged to say she’s on her way with her dad and

Seville.” That did not fill Ayesha with confidence – Ze Villain couldn’t be trusted.

“Why don’t you go and say hi to some other people?” asked her mum. “Like Jay’s doing.”

Jay was standing in the middle of a group of older teenagers, doing tricks with a basketball as they all cheered loudly. Ayesha rolled her eyes – her brother was addicted to attention.

“He knows them already,” she explained. “From the last two times he went to camp. When *I* wasn’t allowed to go.”

Her mum smiled. “Well, you’re allowed now. So why don’t you go and make some new friends? It’s never too early.”

Ayesha scanned the crowd, suddenly feeling overcome with shyness. She’d be able to speak to new people when Nikki was by her side, but doing it on her own was way too scary. Besides, it wasn’t like she could just go up to someone and start talking to them. Her mum didn’t get it.

“I’ll just stay here with you. I don’t know anyone.”

“What about that tall girl? Isn’t she in your year?”

Ayesha turned to see Serena Ajamu get out of a sleek silver car in a yellow dress, her brown curls cascading behind her. She looked incredible – as always. Her dress contrasted against her glowing dark skin, the sun shone on her cheekbones, and her eyes were practically golden in the light. Jay and his friends all fell silent. There was no other way to react to Serena. She was an actual model, which meant she was so beautiful and cool that everyone went quiet in her presence. Including

Ayesha. She couldn't believe that Serena Ajamu was coming to Camp Willow – she'd presumed she'd be spending her summer doing far more glamorous things, like hanging out on yachts or catwalks. Not sleeping in a cabin in the woods.

“Why don't you say hi?” suggested her mum.

Ayesha's mouth dropped open. “I can't just say hi to Serena Ajamu! She wouldn't be friends with someone like me. She'll be friends with...girls like those.” She gestured to two girls who were dressed to impress with perfect make-up, manicured nails and bracelets dangling all the way up their arms. Their giggles faded into hushed whispers as they stared at Serena in awe.

“Don't be so silly,” Ayesha's mum reprimanded her. “You can't make assumptions based on how people dress. Oh, look, there's George and his mum. Hi, Sandra, over here!”

Automatically, Ayesha looked for Nikki. Her best friend would love to speak to Sandra, a former professional singer who taught the most sought-after singing classes in their town. Nikki had even attended her classes for a few weeks – the best weeks of her life – until she'd had to quit because they clashed with the school play. But Nikki *still* wasn't there.

“Hey, Ayesha.” George raised a hand in greeting while his other hand remained in the pocket of his khaki hoodie. They were in the same year at school, but in different forms, so Ayesha had only ever spoken to him a handful of times when their mums were chatting. But she'd known who he was for

years – everyone did. Not just because of his mum, but because he was a tech genius.

Back in Year Six, he'd famously saved the school website from hackers, and his name was always being called out in assembly for winning tech awards. He didn't hang out with the popular kids, but everyone seemed to like him. Except Nikki. Ayesha wasn't sure why. George was always friendly and never got involved in any of the drama at school. Ayesha privately wondered if Nikki was jealous of him for having a famous singer for a mum, but all Nikki ever said was that George was weird. In her opinion, he smelled like sweetcorn and his hair was too long.

"Hey, George," said Ayesha, as she subtly tried to sniff for sweetcorn. All she could smell was the fresh scent of laundry powder from his clothes. His hair was admittedly long – it reached his shoulders – but it was also silky, thick and chestnut-brown. Ayesha could see why he didn't cut it.

"First time at camp?" he asked.

She nodded. "What about you?"

"I went last year. It was really cool. But the friends I made then have gone to tech camp this year, and I decided to come back to Camp Willow. So, I guess I won't know too many people this time."

Ayesha's eyebrows raised in surprise. She didn't know George had already been to camp. She was about to ask him more – clearly Camp Willow was as amazing as she thought if

George was ditching tech camp with his friends for it – when she heard her name.

“Ayesshaaaaa!”

Ayesha would recognize that voice anywhere. She whirled around to hug her best friend. “Nikki, you made it!”

“Of course!” Nikki beamed, and Ayesha realized that she looked different. *Really* different. Her dark-blond hair was smattered with bright-blond highlights and she was wearing a new crop top with baggy trousers (also new) with (new) bracelets all the way up her arms and two (new) piercings in her ears.

Ayesha gasped as she took in all the newness. “Oh my God. You look...amazing.”

Nikki twirled on the spot. “Thanks. Seville took me to her salon to get my hair done. And she took me shopping. She bought me whatever I wanted!”

Ayesha’s stomach twisted as she absorbed Nikki’s words. She’d called her stepmum Seville. And she had new hair. And new clothes. Ayesha didn’t have anything new at all – and there was no way her mum would let her get more piercings until she was fifteen.

“See you later then,” said George with a salute, bringing his hand to his forehead and interrupting Ayesha’s thoughts. She waved distractedly as he walked away.

Nikki raised an eyebrow. “You were speaking to *George*?”

“Sandra’s speaking to my mum,” explained Ayesha. “She’s still there if you want to say hi?”

Nikki shook her head quickly. “No way. I mean, I don’t want to be an annoying fangirl.”

“Okay,” said Ayesha. “We should probably get our seats on the bus anyway. It’s going to leave soon.”

“I’ll see you there in a sec,” promised Nikki. “I just need to say bye to my dad and Seville. She has some snacks for us.”

“Oh, but I brought some for us too...” Ayesha trailed off as Nikki raced over to her dad and Ze Villain, who was wearing a particularly villainous crisp white shirt and sandals with straps lacing all the way up her shins.

“I told you Nikki would turn up,” Ayesha’s mum said, putting an arm around her. “And I’m glad George will be there too. He seems like a lovely boy.”

“He smells like sweetcorn,” said Ayesha. “Apparently.”

Her mum frowned. “Don’t be rude, Ayesha. That’s not like you.”

Ayesha blushed, about to protest that she didn’t even think that, when the bus beeped its horn.

“Oh, it’s time!” Her mum wrapped her arms around her. “I’m going to miss you so much. Jay – come over here.” Jay reluctantly let their mum envelop him into her hug. “Have an amazing time, both of you. Look after each other, okay? Call me if you need anything. Do you have enough warm clothes? Jay, have you got your toothbrush? Ayesha, did you pack your fleece?”

“I’ll just put toothpaste on my finger,” said Jay. “I’m kidding.

Of course I have a toothbrush. Though I think I forgot to bring socks...”

“And I grew out of my fleece two years ago,” said Ayesha. “But I’ll be fine.”

“Oh, I hope so,” said their mum. “My babies, all grown up and on their way to camp.”

“Ew, Mum, stop it,” said Jay, shaking his head and grabbing his bag. “Later.”

“Bye, Mum,” said Ayesha, giving her one last hug before she walked away. “See you in two weeks’ time!”

“So, how was New York?!” burst out Ayesha the second she and Nikki sat down. “I can’t believe it’s been so long since we’ve properly spoken.”

“Oh my God, I know, sorry, I was super busy,” apologized Nikki. “Seville threw me this massive party to introduce me to her family and there was so much to do. But it ended up being amazing.”

Ayesha blinked. “Oh, wow. What were her family like? Were their teeth as white as hers? Were their accents as annoying?”

A slight frown creased Nikki’s forehead. “No. That’s how everyone speaks there. And they all get their teeth whitened – I might even get mine done.” Ayesha’s eyes widened in alarm, but before she could say anything, Nikki grabbed her arm.

“Anyway. I don’t know why we’re talking about teeth, when I haven’t even told you about the *biggest* thing that happened.”

“Your piercings! Did they hurt?”

Nikki shook her head impatiently. “Not my ears. Ayesha...” She took a deep breath. “I kissed a boy.”

“What?” cried Ayesha, her jaw dropping. She had NOT expected this. She and Nikki had spent countless sleepovers imagining what their first kisses would be like. Neither of them felt ready to kiss anyone, so they were going to wait till they were in Year Nine or Ten and had boyfriends. Ayesha’s kiss was going to be at sunset while Nikki’s would be in the rain. And they were both going to call each other the second it happened. “I...don’t understand. Who is he? Was it raining?”

“I have no idea – we were inside. But it was amazing.” Nikki sighed dreamily. “We met at the party Seville threw for me. His mum is her sister, and he’s the year above. He’s called Zak, without a ‘c’, isn’t that original?”

Ayesha stared at her, aghast. “You kissed Ze Villain’s nephew?!” She wanted to ask why Nikki hadn’t called her the second it happened, but she felt embarrassed to care so much when Nikki clearly hadn’t. She must have forgotten in the excitement of it all. “When...did it happen?”

“The first time was last week, but we’ve kissed loads since then,” said Nikki proudly. “He’s my boyfriend now. Oh, and can you call her Seville? She’s actually really nice and the nickname feels a bit immature now.”

Ayesha's eyes widened again. This was a lot. Nikki had an actual boyfriend. In these two weeks, she'd had her first kiss – and her second and third and fourth from the sounds of it – while Ayesha had never even liked someone! She suddenly felt very small. Nikki had done so many grown-up things while she was away – getting a boyfriend, highlights and new piercings – while Ayesha was the same as always.

It was also weird that Nikki didn't want to call her stepmum Ze Villain any more. She used to think the nickname was hilarious and Ayesha was a genius for coming up with it. But now she thought it was "immature". Did that mean she thought *Ayesha* was immature?

"Look," said Nikki, pulling out her phone to show Ayesha her new screensaver. It was a selfie of Nikki, with her brand-new highlights, and a tanned boy with short hair and very white teeth. "Isn't he cute? What do you think?"

Ayesha was thinking that *she* used to be Nikki's screensaver and she couldn't believe that Zak and his alien teeth had usurped her. But she couldn't say that. So she forced herself to smile. "Definitely. Does he live in New York?"

Nikki nodded. "We're long-distance. But he's going to come visit at Christmas. And I'll go over next summer."

"Long-distance sounds so grown-up," said Ayesha faintly. "I can't believe you have a *boyfriend*."

Nikki grinned. "I know, me neither. And I definitely feel more grown-up – I think having my first kiss has changed me."

Ayesha absorbed these words with unease. She was happy for Nikki – having a long-distance boyfriend sounded amazing – but she didn’t know why her best friend had to change. She was perfect as she was. And they had plenty of time to grow up; Year Nine hadn’t even started yet.

Nikki’s eyes sparkled. “Maybe *you’ll* have your first kiss soon too. They do have sunsets at Camp Willow...”

They burst into giggles and Ayesha let herself relax. Nikki still remembered how she wanted her first kiss; she couldn’t have changed that much. She glanced down at her friendship bracelet, feeling comforted by its presence. She scanned Nikki’s arm for hers, but she couldn’t see it in the mass of bracelets.

“Nikki, where’s your bracelet?” she asked, her voice tinged with worry.

“Oh, it didn’t match my outfit so it’s in my bag. As if I’d come to camp without it!”

Ayesha didn’t know what to say. This was the first time that Nikki had ever taken her bracelet off. They’d specifically bought the kind you could shower in. This – along with Nikki’s silence over the last two weeks – was starting to make Ayesha feel sick. Things between her and Nikki felt weird, and she couldn’t believe her best friend had a real boyfriend.

“Let’s eat the canelés that Seville bought,” said Nikki, rummaging around in her new black leather handbag. “Have you tried them before? They’re these super delicious French pastries that look like mini castles.”

Ayesha shook her head, trying not to think of the crisps and chocolates she'd specifically asked her mum to buy so they could share them on the bus. Her snacks felt silly in comparison to Nikki's fancy French treats.

"I asked Seville for salted caramel because it's your favourite," said Nikki. "Here, try it."

Ayesha reached for the mini castle and bit into it, feeling better as the warm goo filled her mouth. It was way more delicious than the snacks she'd brought – plus, Nikki had specifically picked her favourite flavour. She might not be wearing her bracelet but she was obviously still her best friend.

"I love it," she declared, forgetting her worries. "I hope they have these at camp."

"Me too," said Nikki, as they both looked down at the box of six canelés. "Because I don't think these are going to last the journey!"



CHAPTER THREE

Friday

WELCOME TO CAMP WILLOW!

The giant banner greeted them as soon as they stepped off the bus. Ayesha looked around in delight. Camp Willow was exactly how Jay had described, but even better because he wasn't great at adjectives. The sun was sparkling on the lake, the branches of the famous willow tree that gave the camp its name were swaying in the breeze, and Ayesha could see the outlines of the wooden cabins framing a giant domed building in the distance.

"Okay, listen up, everyone," called out Jessica, the camp leader who was assigned to the girls. "It's time to find out what rooms you're in."

A shiver of excitement ran up Ayesha's spine. She knew she'd be with Nikki, because they'd requested it on their sign-up forms, but she had no idea who'd be joining them.

“There are four people to each cabin,” explained Jessica, her brown hair bouncing in a ponytail as she adjusted her bright pink plastic glasses. “You can fight over who gets which spot in the bunk beds. And for those of you who’d like an official camp tour, please remember to *stay behind* once I’ve announced your cabins. Otherwise, you’re welcome to self-explore.”

There was a ripple of excitement, but before anyone could start discussing who they hoped to room with, Jessica clapped her hands loudly.

“Silence, please. In Cabin One, we have Serena, Marlow, Lucie and Elisa.” The girls who’d been chosen to be with Serena all went quiet when they saw who their room-mate was.

“It’s her!” whispered Lucie loudly. “The famous model.”

Serena pretended she hadn’t heard and smiled at her new room-mates. They stared at her with a mixture of awe and fear. Ayesha was relieved she wasn’t one of them. There was no way she’d be able to enjoy camp if she was sharing a cabin with Serena – she was far too cool to be normal around.

“In Cabin Two, we have Nikki, Ayesha, Cami and Roxy,” continued Jessica.

Ayesha and Nikki scanned the crowd, eagerly looking for their room-mates. Two girls stepped forward, arms linked. Ayesha gasped in recognition as she took in their crop tops and manicured nails – they were the girls she’d thought would be ideal friends for Serena.

"It's pronounced Cam-ee," said the petite girl with blond wavy hair. "It's French. Like me."

"I'm Roxy," said the taller girl with straight red hair. "From London."

"I'm Ayesha," she said, smiling hopefully. "Nice to meet you!"

"And I'm Nikki." As Nikki stepped forward, Cami's and Roxy's faces lit up.

"Oh my God, you have the Lulu bag!" cried Roxy. "I've been saving up for it for weeks."

"Are we wearing the same top?" asked Cami in her soft, sophisticated accent. "It's cute, isn't it?"

Ayesha's smile faltered as she realized that Nikki was dressed just like their new room-mates. She and Cami were wearing the same black crop top, and she was pretty sure that Roxy had the same sandals as Nikki in red. Though there was no way she was going to point that out. Not when she was the only one wearing boring jeans and a T-shirt.

"I got it in New York," said Nikki. "The shops there were incredible."

"That's so cool," cried Roxy. "Did you go to a Knicks game? That's my dream."

Cami frowned. "It is?"

"Uh, yeah, because...basketball players are seriously cute!"

"My boyfriend plays basketball," said Nikki proudly. "He's from New York."

Roxy gasped in awe. "I'm so jealous."

“New York is my favourite city – after Paris, of course,” said Cami.

“I hear New York has the best doughnuts,” said Ayesha, hoping this would get her back into the conversation.

It didn’t. Cami and Roxy blinked at her blankly, then turned back to Nikki.

“So, what else did you buy in New York?” asked Cami. “Did you get an outfit for the welcome dance tomorrow?”

“I have seven possible dresses,” confessed Nikki. Ayesha looked up in alarm. She’d only brought her lilac one, thinking Nikki would wear her pastel blue, just like they’d planned. “I didn’t know what the vibe was so Seville – that’s my stepmum – said it was best to bring a selection.”

“That’s more than me,” said Roxy, impressed. “I only brought four.”

“We’ll help you choose,” said Cami confidently. “We’ve been to camp before.”

“You have?” blurted out Ayesha. “What was it like? Were the snacks good?”

Cami raised an eyebrow. “The first thing you want to know about is the snacks?”

Ayesha laughed awkwardly, wishing she’d asked something more interesting about the cabins or the activities, until Nikki made a face at her to stop. Ayesha broke off mid-laugh. She knew she was being weird but it was only because their room-mates were so much cooler than she’d been expecting. She was lucky

Nikki was there to help her.

“Why don’t we go find our cabin and unpack so we can show each other our outfits?” suggested Roxy.

“We can have a mini fashion show,” exclaimed Cami.

“I’d love that,” cried Nikki.

“But...what about the welcome tour?” asked Ayesha.

Cami wrinkled her nose. “Nobody goes on that.”

“We can explore later,” Nikki assured her. “Don’t you want to see the cabin?”

Ayesha very much wanted to see the cabin. She’d been imagining it in her dreams for weeks. But she couldn’t think of anything worse than doing a fashion show with Cami and Roxy. Not when they were dressed like models and Nikki was dressed exactly like them. Ayesha wished she’d known Nikki was going to get so many new clothes for camp – she would have begged her mum to buy her some too. But Nikki hadn’t said a thing.

“I’m going to go on the tour,” said Ayesha, hoping that by the time she made it to the cabin, the fashion show would be over. “You know me, I like to be prepared!”

“Okay. See you later,” said Nikki, walking off with Cami and Roxy. “Bye!”

Ayesha was left by herself feeling unexpectedly lonely. This was not how she’d expected to feel at camp. She looked around at everyone else chatting in groups, making new friends. The only other person standing alone was Serena, but she was on her

phone, probably having an important conversation with her agent or another famous model. Ayesha felt even worse. Her first hour at camp wasn't meant to be like this. If only she'd given off a better first impression to their new room-mates, but she'd been thrown off by how confident they were – and how much Nikki seemed to have in common with them.

But then Ayesha saw the sun shining on the lake and remembered where she was. This was *Camp Willow*. She'd wanted to come here for two whole years. She couldn't let one cringe room-mate introduction ruin things for her. She stood up straight, pulled a baseball cap out of her rucksack and planted it firmly on top of her head. She had a welcome tour to go on.

"Welcome, girls," said Jessica, smiling brightly at Ayesha and Serena. Just the two of them. Because nobody else had signed up for the tour.

Ayesha stared resolutely at the ground. She couldn't believe this was happening. She was sharing a cabin with two intimidatingly cool girls, and now she was alone on a welcome tour with the *most* intimidatingly cool girl ever.

"Thanks," said Serena, smiling at Ayesha. "Hi!"

Ayesha waved, too nervous to speak.

"Right," said Jessica. "We'll start at the auditorium because that's my domain. I hope you both like musical theatre?"

Serena's eyes lit up. "I love it!"

"So does Nikki," said Ayesha hesitantly. "My best friend."

"Won-der-ful," sang Jessica, in a bright clear voice, and both girls gasped in admiration. She beamed. "Thank you – I do love to sing. So, that's the dining hall, and activity rooms," she said, pointing at two large blocks. "Then we have the girls' cabins and boys' cabins down there – I'll show you them later."

Serena turned to Ayesha as they walked behind Jessica. "I think we're in the same year at school?"

Ayesha nodded. It was safest not to speak – that way she'd avoid humiliating herself like she had with her room-mates.

"I'm guessing it's your first time at camp too?"

Ayesha nodded and Serena's face fell. Ayesha realized her silence was becoming rude. If only Nikki was there to help her – she'd know exactly what to say! Ayesha forced herself to say *something*. "So, um...what made you want to come to camp?"

Serena brightened. "Oh, I've dreamed of coming for years. I want to swim, and do all the activities, and have midnight feasts!"

"Me too!" cried Ayesha without thinking. Everything Serena was describing was precisely why she'd been so excited for camp herself. "My parents won't let me go to boarding school, so camp is my only chance for midnight feasts. Sleepovers don't count."

"Do you...have sleepovers often?"

"All the time. With Nikki. That's why we came to camp

together – it’s going to be like a permanent sleepover.”

“You’re so lucky being here with your best friend,” said Serena wistfully.

Ayesha stood up taller. It was true – she was. Even though Serena would obviously become the most popular person at camp in no time, she didn’t have a best friend with her. They were probably too busy posing on catwalks. But Ayesha was here with Nikki. So what if she was with their new room-mates right now? Their friendship was thirteen years and twenty-one days old. Cami and Roxy had nothing on that.

“Thanks. I’m sure you’ll make loads of friends soon,” said Ayesha generously. “Your room-mates look really nice.”

Serena gave her a small smile. “I hope so.”

“Here’s the auditorium,” said Jessica proudly, showing the girls a giant circular domed building with big glass windows. She pushed open the doors, gesturing for them to follow. “You’ll be back here this afternoon for the official welcome talk.”

Serena and Ayesha gasped as they entered the building.

“This is amazing,” cried Ayesha, taking in the semicircular stage, wooden pillars, and rows of benches going all the way up into the back. “Nikki’s going to *die*.”

“I hope I get to perform in the musical,” said Serena, looking at the microphone with longing. “I’d love to sing here.”

Ayesha already knew that Serena was an incredible singer. The whole world did. She’d sung in a Gucci ad that year and

her voice was so amazing that the video had gone viral in hours. But Ayesha couldn't mention that or she'd sound like a stalker, so she stayed silent.

"That's our tech booth up at the back," said Jessica, pointing to a small room at the top of the auditorium. "With all our lighting, special effects and sound. We pride ourselves on having state-of-the-art technology here."

"It's so professional," said Serena admiringly.

"I love it," breathed out Ayesha. "And I don't even do musical theatre."

Jessica laughed. "Wait till we're done with you. Camp Willow has a funny way of changing people in ways they never see coming!"



CHAPTER FOUR

Friday

Camp was officially under way. Everyone was seated in the auditorium, looking up at the stage, where Jessica and Danny, the other camp leader, clapped their hands for attention. Ayesha – sitting next to Nikki, who was by Cami and Roxy – straightened with a thrill.

“We are delighted to have you all here at Camp Willow,” said Jessica. “We think it’s going to be bigger AND better than last year!”

Everyone cheered loudly and Ayesha’s heart raced in excitement as she joined in.

Danny – who had tight curls of black hair and a sparkly diamond earring in his left ear – spoke into the microphone. “So, those of you who have been before know that we always have a theme for camp.” Ayesha’s ears pricked up. She didn’t know that! It was yet another detail that Jay had missed out.