

CHAPTER 1

ARE YOU THAT UNICORN?

Four Months Earlier . . .

One of my greatest talents in life is “air bowing.” It’s the orchestral equivalent of lip syncing, except it’s not a cool skill and never will be. There will never be a TV show called *Air-Bow Battle*.

The Fort Lee Magnet Symphony Orchestra is kicking off the Spring Performing Arts Showcase with a rousing rendition of “Spring” by Antonio Vivaldi (a bit on the nose, I know). I keep my bow hovering an inch above the strings while I sway my body back and forth, curling my upper lip as if I’m smelling something nasty, all to give the *impression* that my whole body is overcome with the swelling emotions of the music—even though I’m not actually making a sound. It’s better for everyone if I air-bow. If I can’t be heard.

If it were up to me, I’d blast my viola up into space. It was Umma’s idea, when I was five years old, for me to take it up. Since not that many kids choose the viola, she thought it would be easier for me to

stand out and get accepted to the prestigious youth orchestras, which would look great on college applications.

Well, the joke's on her. Ten years later, I'm in the very back of the viola section with my equally untalented stand partner, Chris DeBenedetti. And let's be very real: Violas are already the backup dancers of orchestras. We're essential, but no one's checking for us. The violins are the glamorous lead singers who get all the best parts, all the money notes. The cellos are the sexy, mysterious, brooding ones with the most Instagram followers.

Violas are the Michelle Williams of *Destiny's Child* of string instruments . . . except not iconic or best friends with Beyoncé.

It's only when we all stand up for our bow after the song is finished that I can see Umma and Abba in the audience. Abba is clapping frantically, giving a standing O, while Umma is taking tons of flash photos of me in my hideous orchestra uniform (a frilly white blouse and green ankle-length skirt). I smile miserably, getting blinded, until we can all sit back down to watch the chorale performances, which is what the audience actually came for.

Unlike every high school movie stereotype, the chorale is actually full of the coolest kids at Fort Lee Magnet. It's considered the "easiest" of the required arts electives, so it's packed with popular girls and jocks, including my older brother, Tommy.

The chorale has so many members that for this showcase, they've broken up into performance groups. For the opening number, Tommy and twenty of his bro friends strut onto the stage in neon tank tops, sweatbands, and high socks; the students in the audience, especially the girls, go nuts. The dudes give an ironic performance of the boy band classic "What Makes You Beautiful" by One Direction.

The dudes aren't good singers; they're making a joke out of it, shouting off-key while doing all the standard boy band moves, like tracing hearts in the air, pointing at girls in the audience, putting their hands on their chests, and winking. But they're so unselfconscious about looking stupid that I have to admit, it's legitimately pretty cool. Tommy and his friends from the baseball team stand out in front, Tommy in the center. I see my best friend, Imani, in the front row, literally swooning—she's always said my brother is her “primary thirst object,” which is too gross and cringey for words.

I don't know what it is about seeing Tommy and all those guys up there, but I'm suddenly balling up my hands into fists. A fantasy of breaking my viola against the floor flashes in my mind.

It's all so unfair. *I'm* the one who can sing—at least I think I can, since I only ever sing alone in my room. So why does Tommy get to jump around in silly clothes, getting cheered on by the whole school, while I'm hidden away in the back of the orchestra?

No matter how many times I've begged Umma to let me quit viola and focus on singing, she won't budge. The last time I brought it up, she shouted “*Bae-jjae-ra!*” which literally means *Cut my stomach open and let me bleed to death!* Super dramatic, but basically, it's the Korean equivalent of *Over my dead body!*

What's even more unfair is that I'm pretty sure I'm not allowed to do chorale *because* she knows I'd take it seriously, unlike Tommy. “Singing is something you can do on your own time,” she once told me. “Singing is not a dignified art. You have to bring the sound from inside of you with so much effort—everyone can see how hard you try.”

Umma's bias against singing is so weird—she's actually a good singer herself. Umma and Abba both went to a prestigious music college back

in Korea, which is how they met. Abba was studying to become a conductor, and Umma was studying vocal performance. But I also know neither of them finished, and they moved to America soon after they dropped out. Neither of them works in music now—they run a convenience store in Fort Lee—so I know Umma’s music dreams went wrong somewhere, but she’ll never talk about it. It’ll remain one of those Family Secrets, probably forever.

I put my viola on the floor—a big no-no according to Mrs. Kuznetsova, the orchestra conductor—and slump in my seat. Will there ever be a time when I’m the one singing and jumping around onstage, not worried what anyone thinks? Probably not until after high school, when I’m somewhere far from my family. In the meantime, I’ll just have to bide my time for a few more years, playing the role of the quiet Korean girl who takes all AP classes and gets good grades and plays a classical instrument and never complains.



After the showcase, Imani and Ethan come over. It’s a Friday night, and we’re doing what we love most: hanging out in my room, stuffing our faces, and watching YouTube vids.

It’s not like we’re total rejects, even though we *are* in all the Smart Kid classes together. It’s just that more than parties or football games, we prefer hanging around each other, reacting in extra ways to all the weird things we’re obsessed with: *RuPaul’s Drag Race* clips we rewatch over and over, *mukbang* videos, beauty vloggers we make fun of but secretly love. (“A little goes a long way,” Ethan likes to say, pretending to dab highlighter on his cheekbones. “And don’t forget your cupid’s bow!”)

After we watch a tiny *mukbanger* demolish eight packs of Nuclear Fire Noodles in under four minutes, Imani commandeers my computer. I know what she's about to pull up: SLK's performance of "Unicorn" from last week's *SNL*.

"I love, love, love SLK!" says Ethan as the host, Jennifer Lawrence, introduces them.

"Duh! What excuse for a human being wouldn't?" says Imani.

I shrug. "I guess they're all right."

"Okay, *this* excuse for a human being." Imani flashes me a shady look. "Dude, sometimes I think I'm more Korean than you are."

I mean, Imani *is* literally slurping kimchi straight out of the jar at this very moment. Not even I can eat kimchi like that—I like it with food, especially curry rice or black bean noodles, but it's too funky for me to eat it by itself.

"I mean, I'm super glad that an Asian group is so popular and on magazines covers and all," I say, "but their music seems a little . . . manufactured?"

"Girl, bye," says Imani, closing the jar of kimchi and moving back to my bed to hug my giant whale pillow, MulKogi. (*MulKogi* means *water-meat*, or *fish* in Korean). "Like American pop music *isn't* manufactured? Anyway, each of those SLK guys can really sing and rap—One.J wrote a ton of their biggest hits himself. And that choreography is *banging!*"

"Yeah, look at that, Candanista," says Ethan, totally transfixed. "One Direction used to just stand onstage and, like, *maybe* jump around—these guys *serve* it."

Okay, so I'm not sure why I'm lying to my best friends right now—I probably need to go to a therapist to get to the bottom of it—but I'm actually a *huge* SLK stan in secret. I've watched hours of their Korean

Music Show performances and their reality show, *SLK Adventures*, on YouTube. And ever since SLK made it big in America, I've started following other K-pop groups, especially the girl group QueenGirl, who are touring with Ariana Grande right now. Nothing would make Imani, the biggest K-pop stan I know, happier than being able to obsess over it with me. But for some reason, I'm self-conscious about it. Isn't it so *expected* for the Korean girl to be super into K-pop?

On-screen, the five boys of SLK move in perfect sync, even when they're doing literal backflips. Each guy rocks a different shade of brightly colored hair—they clearly spend just as much time on makeup and wardrobe as any girl group. In their own way, they're all really hot, especially One.J, the member who's always front and center. Everything about his face seems created in a lab to be as telegenic as humanly possible: his brooding eyes; his candy-colored lips; his chiseled, V-shaped jaw. Somehow, none of his moves seem rehearsed. When all the boys run their hands through their hair, it looks as though One.J is doing it spontaneously, just to feel himself, and the other four boys saw how awesome it looked and decided to copy him.

The *SNL* crowd totally loses it when the boys break into the Unicorn dance. "Unicorn" is an amazing bop, even though the chorus, the only part of the song that's in English, doesn't completely make sense: "Baby, now I believe in unicorn / You're the girl I been searching for / Searching under all the ra-ainbow / Baby, all I know / You're my one-in-billion unicorn."

By the end of the song, the three of us are dancing around, singing at the top of our lungs. Imani whips her hair back and forth, Ethan does a duck walk, and I move my body with no regard for rhythm or dignity.

"Okay, fine," I pant when the song is over. "This song is super catchy."

Right after the *SNL* performance, "Unicorn" starts back up again.

We're ready to shriek out the song all over again, but it's not the music video—it's an ad (so many ads, YouTube). The words "ARE YOU ONE IN BILLION?" flash across the screen. Then:

**S.A.Y. ENTERTAINMENT
THE COMPANY THAT BROUGHT YOU
THE NO. 1 GLOBAL SENSATION SLK
IS LOOKING FOR ITS FIRST-EVER GIRL GROUP**

Cut to a clip of the SLK boys mugging and smoldering directly at the camera, the light glinting off their shimmering cheekbones.

**WE'RE SEARCHING FOR THOSE GIRLS
WHO CAN SING, DANCE, AND RAP LIKE SLK.**

ARE YOU THAT UNICORN?

Each of the SLK boys says into the camera, seductively, "Are you my unicorn?" I get a warm, queasy feeling in my stomach when it's One.J's turn.

**GET DISCOVERED AT
THE S.A.Y. GLOBAL AUDITIONS.**

**ROYAL OAK THEATER
IN PALISADES PARK, NEW JERSEY.**

APRIL 19.

I bust out laughing. “Are they auditioning singers or looking for dates for the guys?”

Imani isn't laughing; she's staring at me. “You should audition, Candace.”

I don't dignify this with a response. “And Palisades Park? Is that a glitch? Why would a K-pop label recruit in *Jersey*?”

Ethan isn't laughing, either. “Well, Jersey *is* where the suburban Korean kids live.” He gestures to me as if to say, “Exhibit A.”

“You should audition,” Imani repeats, all serious.

“Ha, ha.” I roll my eyes. “Could you see *my parents* letting me quit school to be in a K-pop group? Besides, do I look like an idol to you?”

Imani runs her eyes over my busted bare feet, holey jeans, and over-size black hoodie. “No, not at all. But you've got something to work with under . . . all of that. Besides, do you even know how big this is?! S.A.Y.'s the most powerful entertainment company in K-pop right now because of SLK. A girl group version of SLK would be *lit!*”

“And you can *sang*,” says Ethan. “Even with ‘Unicorn’ just now, your vocals were low-key slaying.”

“Dude, I've always told you,” says Imani, “you have the voice of an angel. You need to share that with the world.”

Imani has said stuff like this to me before. It's a sweet compliment, for sure, but for some reason, my eyes get a little moist. Probably for the same reason I'm too embarrassed to admit how much I actually love K-pop.

I have no problem openly fangirling over my favorite American artists, like Ariana and Rihanna—but now that SLK has graced the cover of *Vanity Fair* and QueenGirl has performed with Cardi B at the VMAs, it's all become a little too real. Maybe kids like me *can* become

stars, too, if they've got the talent and can put themselves out there. Deep down, I think I could be talented enough. But brave enough to go for it? Definitely not.

I glance at the Barbie-pink guitar in the corner of my room. It was my dad's gift to me for my twelfth birthday, which he bought in that dad-ish way of thinking all girls love hot pink (and I kinda do). Abba taught me a few basic chords, and unlike the viola, I learned the guitar immediately, as if it were a long-lost part of my body—I think maybe it's because I've always thought of the guitar as a tool for singing. I watched YouTube tutorials on finger picking and learned how to play early Taylor Swift songs. Now my guitar is my prize possession, the first thing I'd grab in a fire.

I only ever play it in the privacy of my room, though. I sing tons of covers, plus a couple of my own original songs. I sometimes film myself, and I've even considered posting a couple videos to YouTube—me singing an acoustic version of “Here with Me” by Chvrches and Marshmello, and an in-my-feelings song I wrote called “Expectations vs. Reality”—but those videos are just files on my computer, sitting on my cluttered desktop among AP Lit papers and Bio lab write-ups.

“Hmm,” I say. “Maybe I'll think about it.”

“Dude,” says Imani, opening a bunch of new tabs on my computer, “I think you're seriously underestimating how amazing K-pop is. It's not just one kind of thing. Let me be your girl group tour guide.”

Imani shows us music videos—or “MV,” as they're always called in K-pop—featuring all sorts of girl groups, like QueenGirl, Blackpink, Twice, Red Velvet, Everglow, and Itzy. I've watched tons of SLK MVs, but I haven't paid much attention to the female groups. Not like this. The visuals and the choreography are all mind-blowing, and the girls

are all out-of-control beautiful, but there are all kinds of genres and influences, including hip-hop and reggae and EDM.

As she shows us all these videos, Imani explains the difference between **Girl Crush** versus **Cute Concepts** in K-pop girl groups.

She also explains the rules of K-pop like she's explaining the kingdoms of *Game of Thrones*. There are four main entertainment companies in K-pop: YG, JYP, SMTown, and S.A.Y., and they recruit all over the world—Korea mostly, but also Japan, China, Thailand, and the States, usually in Los Angeles. They're looking for talented kids, for sure, but talented kids who play a particular role that every K-pop band needs.

"So it's all a formula?" I ask.

"I mean, that's not *all* of it," says Imani, "but yeah, K-pop is kind of an idol factory. The companies hit up schools, auditions, malls, and, lately, YouTube and social media. If the kids they recruit aren't super talented when they're recruited, the companies will make sure they *become* super talented. There's this whole hard-core 'trainee' system they have to go through before they debut, usually for years. The vast majority of trainees *never* debut after spending their whole childhoods training. It's totally Hunger Games."

Umma pokes her head in. When Ethan's in my room, I'm not allowed to close the door, even though Umma knows there's nothing to worry about. "Are you kids having fun?"

"Yes, Mrs. Park!" Imani and Ethan pipe up.

"Imani is just tutoring us in Advanced Placement K-pop," cracks Ethan.

"I *will* be quizzing you both," Imani jokes.

"How fun," says Umma. I can see a smidge of disapproval in her

face. “Imani, your sister is here to take you and Ethan home. I’ll pack some kimchi to take with you.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Park!”



After Imani and Ethan leave, I can’t stop watching more girl group MVs. I never knew how many types of girls you could be as a K-pop idol—a cutesy girl, a rebel, a fashion queen, or all three in one. Why have I never thought of it as a possibility for myself?

Well, that’s a dumb question. There are so many obvious reasons I could never dream of being a K-pop idol. For one, my Korean is horrible; I never had to go to Korean language school on Saturdays like the Korean kids I know from church. Secondly, I definitely can’t dance. Like, I can’t even pump my fist *Jersey Shore*-style to a basic beat—it’s that serious.

And of course, my parents would shut down any talk of being a singer before they even started. Umma’s drilled it into Tommy’s and my heads that there are only three, maybe four, respectable fields we can go into as adults: medicine, law, business, or academia—in that order. Being a singer is far down the list, probably between murderer and drug dealer.

I finally click out of YouTube and grab my guitar, making sure my door is closed. I hit record on my laptop cam.

I know this video will just clutter my desktop like all the others, never to be uploaded. I still like to record, though, because—this is weird and super dark—I think if I ever got hit by a school bus or something, I’d want to leave these videos behind so people would know: *Candace could really sing. Candace had something to say all along.*

I play the opening chords of “Expectations vs. Reality.” I sing softly:

Expectation:

I don't do confrontation

I don't get invitations

I live in my imagination

Reality:

You think you know me

But there's a lot you don't see

Wait till I become who I'm meant to be

Okay, I know the lyrics are corny, and my rhymes might not be tight like *Hamilton*, but I'm baring my soul here.

I'm not the girl who speaks up

But one day I'll really blow up

One day you'll hear this song

And know that you were wrong

Cuz your expectation's not my reality

“Wow, how beautiful!”

I shriek and almost drop my guitar. Tommy's head is poking into my room. He's wiping away fake tears.

“Go away!” I scream, throwing MulKogi at him.

Tommy catches MulKogi easily. “No one understands Candace! Candace is so deep!”