

Dear Readers,

Writing this second book has definitely taken longer than I planned. Life seems to keep getting in my way. I promise that I am working hard to finish soon. In the meantime I hope you will enjoy the first draft of Chapter One.

“Korea Rising” is my working title and if all goes well the cover will be done in July. Thank you for all of the kind words and support.

Love,

Piper Jean

1

JI-HEE

I'd done this all before, packed in just hours and left without so much as a goodbye. This time I was trading my posh boarding school in London for some an equally prestigious school in Los Angeles. But the best part was I'd be living with Grandfather. It wasn't home, but I didn't care much where I ended up as long as it was far from my mother and far my traitorous brother, Gun.

South Korea could only be memories now.

I leaned back into the comfort of the first class seat ready to sleep, but a flight attendant stopped and kneeled down next to me.

“Excuse me, Miss Lee.” She smiled politely and nodded towards the back of the plane. I turned, and the curtains that separated our comforts in first-class from economy parted to reveal a stooped woman, frail with age. Her gray hair was pulled back from withered skin into a soft bun at the base of her thin neck. Gnarled hands shook where she clung to the arm of the attendant on her right. The man to her left supported some of her weight with an arm around her waist. She muttered a few words in my native language and I sat up straighter. She was Korean like me.

“Is everything okay?” I asked the flight attendant.

She answered in a soft voice. “The elderly woman over there is not feeling well. She might just be afraid of flying, but we would like to move her out of economy to first class and make her more comfortable. You have an open seat. She nodded to the empty spot next to where I sat in the aisle. Can you stand for just a moment so we can situate her?”

I stood. “Of course. If it’s easier she can have the aisle,” I pointed to my seat. “I’m okay with either.”

“If you don’t mind then please slide to the window and we will help her to sit. Thank you for cooperating.”

I grabbed my black leather bag and tucked it under the window seat. Then sat down to put my seatbelt back on. I’d never flown economy class before, but I felt bad for the poor woman as they gently eased her into the aisle seat. After she was seated, the man placed her blue leather purse, in her lap. I noticed the Channel logo and the quilted stitching that was their signature

look. This particular bag was limited edition with only a dozen or so made. For a moment, I wondered why someone who could afford couture would have been booked in economy class.

“Is this more comfortable, Madame?” The man spoke to her in English, but with a slight French accent.

She nodded and answered him in what my London teacher would call passable English. “I’m okay, so sorry to frighten everyone. I will be fine here.”

He straightened and adjusted his uniform that had been rumpled when he helped her sit. “Let us know if you need anything else.” He pointed up to the call button which I was pretty sure she wouldn’t be able to reach before walking away.

The woman coughed weakly, and her chin rested forward on her chest.

I took my unopened water bottle from the cup holder. “Halmonie, would you like some water.” I spoke in Korean and used the title for Grandmother, as was customary in our country as a sign of respect.

She turned to me, and a hand fluttered to her throat. “Oh, yes, dear. That would help me, I think.” I opened the bottle, but as she reached forward to take it, her hand trembled.

“I can help.” I moved closer and held the open water to her lips with a slight tilt. I’d helped my own grandfather after his gallbladder surgery so knew just the right angle for not spilling all over.

She sipped her first mouthful and then began gulping while I steadied the bottle. She drank over half before she leaned back into her chair with a sigh. “I’m feeling much better already,” she said. “Tell me your name, dear. I feel so rude barging into your space like this. The flight is almost over. You’d think I could have waited until we landed before making a fuss.”

I laughed. “This is no trouble, Halmonie.” Truth be told, the long flight had been lonely and seeing someone from my home country felt comforting somehow. “My name is Lee Ji-hee.”

Halmonie nodded. “I thought I recognized you. Not many of the girls in society are as lovely as you, Ji-hee.”

“Have we met?” I asked surprised.

“Not formally, but your mother is Lee Nari and your father is Lee Young-soo, correct? You also have an older brother, Lee Gun, and if I remember right, your family owns JANE talent agency.

I nodded, trying to place if I’d ever seen her at an event. It wasn’t unusual for Halmonie to know all about my family if she belonged to the affluent class. My family was wealthy too, maybe not as disgustingly rich as the rest of them. We were more like the guppies in a pond of over fed Koi. But the elite pond of South Korea is very small. Most families knew each other. The strange part was that I didn’t know her.

“And can I have your name, Halmonie?” I spoke with respect. She was my elder, but she ignored my question, making me wonder if her hearing was poor.

“Although I’ve not met Gun or yourself, I always see your parents at the Kang’s annual spring party. And, of course, Nari is always present for the ASD fundraising gala. Most of us wouldn’t miss that one.

It could have been my imagination, but her lip seemed to curl up when she spoke of my parents.

I faltered, but she patted my hand and softened her gaze. “If you had been there, I would have come and introduced myself. You are a favored child, Ji-hee.”

I was far from favored, but her saying this meant the gossips hadn't sunk their teeth into why I was in London for the last two years. And I hoped they never would. Boarding-School-Banishment wasn't something I wanted to flaunt. I wondered what Halmonie would think of me if she knew that I'd come dangerously close to ruining our family name. No, I definitely wasn't a favored child, at least not in my family. I smiled and nodded with politeness. "You are kind, Halmonie."

She tilted her head. "But why, dear, are you not heading back to Seoul? Is California your final destination or are you connecting?"

I'd been shocked when Grandfather called telling me I was changing schools. An hour and forty-five minutes later a driver picked me up from St. Henri's school and drove me straight to Heathrow. "My grandfather moved to California and wants me to live with him. I'm transferring to a school there, Marklem Academy."

Halmonie tapped her lip. "I've never heard of that school. Is it international?"

I frowned, thinking. I'd only spoken to Grandfather briefly on the phone. After that it'd been such a rush to pack. Looking up the school hadn't crossed my mind. I cleared my throat. "I haven't toured it yet, but my grandfather seems to think its perfect for me."

"Why not attend Daeshim Academy? Didn't your brother, Gun, graduate from there a few years ago?"

I shifted in my seat. I couldn't tell her Mother wouldn't welcome me home. "Daeshim wasn't a good fit for me." I gave a small laugh. "And, my grandfather is pretty insistent that I attend school in the states. So . . ."

Halmonie watched me closely, her eyes taking in my nervous laughter with a knowing

look, but then she nodded. “Daeshim Academy isn’t perfect, and sometimes having some distance from your family is easier.”

She’d hit the nail so spot on with that one. I refused to let myself miss Seoul and lived with the constant fear that my mother was going to deem my banishment long enough and summon me home. When she first shipped me off I desperately missed home. I’d spent months drudging through schoolwork in London and barely surviving. But over time that desperation hardened. I no longer wanted to go home, especially not if it meant facing Gun. My older brother had been my idol right up until he helped ruin my life. He might not have been the one to bury me, but Gun definitely passed out shovels.

“What about your brother, then? Is he attending University in the States?”

I shifted in my seat. “I don’t know, actually.”

Halmonie raised her eyebrows at this.

I hadn’t spoken to Gun in two years.

“Maybe you feel your brother has forgotten about you while you were gone.” She patted my hand. “He hasn’t, child.”

She was right. He still sent me a weekly email, which I never read. I’d blocked him on my phone, deleted all my social media, and refused packages he mailed for birthdays. So maybe he hadn’t forgotten me, but I would never speak to him again.

Our last day together had been an average day at school right up until the point where he yanked me out of class early and drove me home.

Gun slammed his backpack down on the kitchen counter with a yell. “What were you thinking, Ji-hee? Someone took pictures of you with Chul.”

I sunk down into a chair at the table. I'd never seen my brother so angry. "You told me to make friends and he's the most popular boy at Daeshim."

Gun paced back and forth fisting his hands at his side. "Are you really that stupid. We are the nobodies at that school."

"Chul doesn't care about that," I said.

Gun scoffed. "Our family owns one yacht. Most kids there own islands. It's expected that you know your place, and then you go after the one boy Min has liked her whole life. Her family has more money than all the rest of them combined, and you ask out Chul right in front of her." He slammed a fist on the table and yelled. "Did you think nothing would happen?"

"Nothing did," I squeaked. "We went dress shopping. That was it."

Gun took a deep breath and closed his eyes. I wanted to cry. Gun never yelled at me. But worse than that, I could see he was terrified. I knew my brother. He was guarding fear, hiding it under anger.

When he spoke next it was with complete calm, but his words still echoed in my dark moments, wormed their way to the front of my mind and played on repeat.

"Someone took pictures of you undressing in the dressing room along with pictures of you modeling dresses in front of Chul. It looks like you gave him a private show."

My breath caught in my throat. "What do you mean? I would never—"

Gun's mouth formed a hard line. "It looks bad, Ji-hee. Do you have any idea what this will do to the company if those pictures get out?"

I'd cried myself to sleep, so afraid to go to school the next day. But the next day never came. Gun and Mother made sure I was on a plane to London eight hours later.

My face must have betrayed emotion because Halmonie reached out to smooth my hair from my forehead. Her soft touch and approving eyes left an ache somewhere around the spot I'd buried my heart. For the last two years no one had even patted me on the head and now her kindness reminded me how alone I really was. I hid behind a laugh. "Sorry, I haven't showered since yesterday. I'm sure I look a fright."

Halmonie tsked. "You are too young to look anything but fresh." She lowered her voice until I barely caught her last words. "All will go well, child."

The plane tilted, then began dropping in altitude. My ears ached with pressure before popping; we would land soon. I twisted in my seat and opened the window cover to see the lights of Los Angeles flickering below, a kaleidoscope of promise that California would be different.

As the plane slowed, I shook my memories off, pushed them back to remote corners of my mind where they belonged. I checked Halmonies' seat belt and offered her more water. A wave of eager energy rolled through the cabin as passengers, more than ready to deplane, shifted around us.

"Halmonie, do you need help with your luggage?" I asked. "My grandfather is picking me up. We can drive you as well."

"No, dear. My assistant gets a special pass and is waiting for me at the gate. She always brings a wheelchair. Just keep me company through the doldrums of customs. You'd think they'd let an old lady like me skip it."

I smiled. "I'll stay with you, Halmonie." I spoke as the plane jolted. Wheels touched down and my own stomach did flip-flops. I hadn't seen Grandfather in two years, and now, I was going to live with him. No more cafeteria food, no more bunkbeds, or roommates that snored. By

this time tomorrow we would be eating his favorite ox bone soup and watching Kdramas together.

When we cleared customs I shuffled along the crowded airport, careful to stay close behind Halmonie and her assistant. We'd already stopped twice for drinks and the restroom. We waited at baggage claim and the conveyor belt for our flight was mostly empty. A few of the final passengers were grabbing bags. I could see my oversized navy suitcase waiting for rescue. I hefted it off and pulled up the handle to roll it forward. Other than my single bag, the only luggage left on the belt was what looked like a full set of Louis Vuitton's signature luggage. Halmonie's assistant began off-loading the heaviest suitcases and I helped by grabbing the smaller ones. She had eight in total that towered on the cart. I eyed it with worry.

Halmonie reached for me from her wheelchair. I took her hand and squatted down to eye-level. "This is going to be a happy year for you." She grinned. "You are the best of the bunch in our world."

"Thank you," I said. The warmth from her compliment seemed to buzz over my skin with a blessing, like a guarantee that would one day come true. "I hope I see you again," I said.

Halmonie laughed with a shrug. "Who knows? The universe is strange." She winked at me and then straightened in her seat. I stood and gave her a bow before her assistant began to push Halmonie with one hand and pull the cart with the other. I watched until they turned a corner and then pulled out my phone. I called Grandfather, and as it rang I scanned the airport. I could go outside and wait for him at pickup, but why hadn't he texted already.

I stilled when my eye caught something that shouldn't be there. I blinked. That wasn't possible, but the beautiful man, walking next to an even more beautiful, woman continued in my

direction.

The phone rang, unrelenting in my ear.

I stared at the couple, the set of his shoulders, the line of his jaw. That couldn't be him. But then our eyes locked and he smiled.

I froze.

Before I could run or hide or *die*, Chul waved at me.

That part of my brain that tells your heart to beat and your lungs to expand stopped working. The only part of me still functioning were my eyes, which had become fixed and wide. Chul and his new wife stopped in front of me. I gawked, stupefied as Chul's arm wrapped around an hourglass waist. Grandfather answered and his voice echoed in my ear just as my heart resumed beating and my lungs expanded for air. "Hello, Ji-hee." His leathery voice sounded far off. "Ji-hee?"

I gripped my phone, my breath coming in short, urgent gasps. I knew Chul had gotten married after graduation. I'd heard when everyone else had. And while I wished them well, even hoped my parents sent a nice gift, I never wanted to see him again. Like ever.

I harbored this horrific fear that Chul knew about the pictures. That maybe he had been implicated too. I wouldn't put it past Gun to lose his cool and corner Chul, demanding to know what happened. He could have blamed him. Or the worst case senecio, maybe Chul had seen the pictures. It was bad enough that I left school without explanation but if he knew why . . . I squeezed my hands tighter around the phone. There was only so much humiliation a girl could take.

"Is that your grandfather?" Chul asked. "Tell him we're here so he can stop worrying."

“Why are *you* here?” I asked.

Chul frowned. “Didn’t he tell you?”

I shook my head.

His wife stepped closer, and a look of concern passed over her eyes.

“Ji-hee are you there?” Grandfather’s voice rose and echoed in my ear. I turned from them and walked a few steps away.

“I’m here. I can here you,” I said.

“Did Chul and Sydney meet you yet?”

“Yes.”

“Well,” he said. “Are you surprised?”

“Very.”

He chuckled. “I knew you would love it. I remembered you said he was one of your friends at school that—”

I cut Grandfather off. “Where are you? Are you close?”

Grandfather didn’t speak for a heartbeat too long letting an ominous quiet creep through the line. The air, alive and nervy, crackled around me. Finally, he spoke. “I can’t come.”

A surge of disappointment crashed into me. “What do you mean you can’t come?” Heat and pain pressed against my chest. Grandfather had been my last shred of home. I swayed on my feet. I’d worked so hard to smother down hope, lies I told myself, things I swore I didn’t want anymore.

But it was more than wants now.

My wants had turned to need. I needed family and friends. I needed to be missed.

“Is it too late to apply for room and board at Marklem Academy?” My voice cracked. “I’m sure they have extra rooms for emergencies.” I swallowed the lump in my throat and squeezed my eyes shut, then spoke with a steady voice. “Chul doesn’t need to give me a ride. I’ll say hello and then take an Uber.”

“Marklem doesn’t exist,” Grandfather said flatly.

“What did you say?”

Grandfather’s voice took on an edge of anger. “I made up a school for your mother. She wants everything perfect, so I made up a flawless school and she agreed.”

I stood in stunned silence, my mind trying to wrap around such a lie. “Why am I here, then?”

Grandfather breathed hard into the phone. “Your mother may want you out of her hair but no more boarding schools. At your age I went a public school with a lunchroom, and soccer teams, and meaner than tar teachers. It was a great education. If you can’t be in Korea, then I’m giving you that.”

I kept my voice calm. “You can’t attend public school in the States without a guardian, or at the very least, a residence.”

“Why do you think Chul is there? He and his wife agreed to let you live with them for the school year.”

My mouth dropped open. “Chul?”

“No more moping alone in England. You start your first day at Bishop High tomorrow morning.”

I tried to speak but only a strangled sound came out.

“Well, say something,” Grandfather said.

“Send me back to London,” I croaked. “Beg Mother if you have too.”

Grandfather sighed and this time his voice softened, almost to pity. “Your mother will find out eventually, but I can’t leave you exiled to rot away alone any longer. When my daughter finally realizes what’s going on, she’ll go there in person and do what she should have done from the beginning instead of shipping you off. You belong in Korea.

I fought back tears. Grandfather meant well but Korea was no longer my home.