

**SYDNEY**

Our plane shuddered and dipped, waking the baby that had finally stopped screaming. The elderly lady next to me jerked with a gasp and clutched at her arm rests.

“*Halmeoni*, are you okay?” I asked, using the Korean title for grandmother. She wasn’t *my* grandma, but she had been my seatmate for the fourteen-hour flight to Seoul. A formal title would be expected. She looked pale and even more nervous than when we had taken off.

“I’m fine, dear,” she said but slumped lower in the seat next to me. Her petite frame seemed to disappear in the silky ruffles of her dress.

I took her hand in alarm. It was cool and clammy. Was this just motion sickness or something worse? I waved at the flight attendant in first class with quick movements.

She walked to us, bent close to the older woman, and spoke gently. “*Halmeoni*, how can I help you? Would you like some water?” She pulled a bottle from the apron at her waist.

“My pills.” *Halmeoni* reached for the leather purse next to her on the seat. I took it and unzipped the main compartment. A silver case sat on top, and I opened it to a neat row of blue capsules. Her voice came out paper-thin. “Those are the ones.”

I pressed a single pill into her hand and watched as she brought it to her mouth. The flight attendant held the water to her lips and *Halmeoni* swallowed. She took a shaky breath. “I’m okay. Just give me a minute and the medicine will help.”

The flight attendant stood up, her poised demeanor reassuring me more than *Halmeoni*’s

still weak smile. “Press the call button if you need anything at all.”

Halmeoni gave a polite nod as the woman moved down the aisle, but leaned closer to whisper, “They’ll come running because they don’t want an old lady like me dying on their flight.”

I stared at her, heavy lines creasing my forehead. “No one wants that.” Least of all me, I thought. I was afraid of so many things, but death topped the list. Not my own, just a general dislike of the idea. My uncle Greg, who was the world’s worst psychiatrist, said I had crippling PTSD. He was wrong. And the word crippling was total overkill. My high school GPA remained Ivy worthy, and I’d held down a part-time job since I was twelve. It was true that I slept with the light on. And I’d rather bleed to death than step inside a hospital, but then I’d only been ten when I watched my mom almost die. Could anyone blame me if I was a little clingy after months of watching Mom fade, chemo-thin, while dodging social workers and getting myself to school on time? I’d like to see Uncle Greg live that childhood and walk away normal.

Halmeoni chuckled next to me. “No need to look so serious. I’m too stubborn to die.”

I tried to smile, but she still looked pale.

“Really, I feel fine now. Tell me your name, dear. We’ve sat together this whole flight, and I’ve been too rude, not talking to you. I didn’t realize you spoke Korean.”

“That’s okay. I should have introduced myself earlier. I’m Sydney Moore.”

“Well, Sydney. You don’t need to fuss over me. I’m more worried about you flying into Seoul all alone. You can’t be older than my grandson. How old are you, child?”

“Seventeen,” I said.

“I guess you’re old enough, but be careful of strangers. You’ll light up the airport with all that blonde hair and your blue eyes.” She tsked. “Such a pretty thing to fly alone.”

“I’ll be careful,” I said.

Halmeoni looked pleased and leaned closer. “Tell me your secret. How do you speak Korean so well? You must have been raised in South Korea. Maybe your parents are diplomats?”

Not in this life. I wondered what she would think if she knew my dad had died before I could walk, and Mom and I were dirt-poor. “Nothing so interesting,” I said. “My grandpa was military and stationed in South Korea when my mom was born. They stayed eight years and then when she was fourteen, she moved back with a host family, even finished high school there. After that she swore her kids would learn Korean.” I shrugged. “I guess it’s a little eccentric, but it wasn’t until I went to kindergarten that I learned English.”

“Well, you speak better than my grandson. His slang and K-pop words don’t make sense.”

I couldn’t hide my grin. “Thank you, Halmeoni.”

“Are you here as a tourist, then?”

“No.” I swallowed the hot lump in the back of my throat and blinked hard. I hadn’t cried when I left, and I wouldn’t do it now. “My godmother lives here and she’s been depressed, so I came to keep her company. She and my mom are best friends, so I couldn’t really say no.” I actually had said no, even pleaded and begged, but my mom wasn’t having it.

“You don’t seem happy. Do you not like your godmother?”

“Oh, she’s great. Her family was my mom’s host family when she came here for school. I just don’t like leaving my mom.”

Halmeoni frowned. “You’ve never left your home?”

I nodded my head, embarrassed. Uncle Greg would love hearing our conversation. His nickname for me was “Superglue.” I knew I wasn’t normal on this. No one my age wanted to

hang out with her mom on Friday night. I did.

“How long will you stay?”

“I’m not sure. My godmother bought just the one-way ticket, but I have to be back home in a few weeks to start school.”

“So your godmother is wealthy, and you are not. This is why you are flying first class and also why you don’t look like these other girls.” Halmeoni nodded like she’d solved some great mystery.

“Other girls?” It should have sounded rude, but Halmeoni said it like I was special for being different.

She waved her hand in a dismissive fashion. “You know, the ones with Princess Disease.”

I laughed. I’d never heard the term, but I knew a princess or two back home. I glanced down at my faded jeans— not designer faded but Goodwill faded. They were too big, cinched around my waist with a scarf and then rolled high at the hem. I’d paired my fashion-forward attire with a fitted white shirt, an extra from my mom’s housekeeping uniform. “I guess I don’t look rich if that’s what you mean?”

“I mean you look kind, Sydney. Your sunshine spirit will be sure to brighten your godmother’s life. She is lucky to get a visit from you.”

“I hope so. I’m good at cheering up my mom.”

She patted my hand in agreement and nodded, then pointed out the window. “Look.” I turned as the clouds parted with the afternoon sun. Seoul appeared below us, spread out in miniature. Tiny high rises and roads wove and intersected with more buildings and roads. The city was beautiful and the sky, a flawless blue. The kind of sky that comes when summer is

almost over, but you hope for one more perfect day. All good omens.

I sat back in my seat. It would be okay. I could do a few weeks without Mom. She'd been in full remission for almost six years, and I hadn't had a panic attack in two. Nothing to worry about. The only nagging thought was that she would be alone while I was gone. Unless you counted the visits from Uncle Greg, and I never counted him. Mom turned a blind eye, but Uncle Greg's counseling sessions made my life miserable. At least in Korea I wouldn't have to see him for a while.

"Is someone picking you up? Incheon is a large airport. If you want, I can have my driver take you home."

"My godmother is picking me up. I guess I should start calling her Suni, or Mrs. Kim. Or, I know you guys say names different here—the last name first—so Kim Suni."

Halmeoni's eyes got large. "Did you say Suni?"

I nodded.

"Is Kim Suni your godmother?"

"Yes. Do you know her?"

"I wish I did." Halmeoni sat up straighter and smoothed the silk of her skirt like the queen of England might stroll down the aisle at any moment. "I've seen her at charity events, but I've never sat at her table."

I wrinkled my brow. The leather bag nestled in Halmeoni's lap was clearly expensive, and the diamond ring on her manicured finger was far from small. I knew my godmother wasn't poor, but she wasn't stupid-rich either. At least my mom had never said she was.

Halmeoni patted my hand. "If we run into each other again, I hope you will introduce me to Madam Kim. You are a favored child."

Before I could respond, a heavy thud rolled through the cabin and my jet-lagged brain registered that we'd landed. I leaned closer to the window and watched the runway fly below us before we slowed and shuddered to a stop at our gate. The seat belt sign turned off, and weary passengers stood, some eager and some slow. Everyone wanted off the plane. Everyone but me.

I made myself stand. The sooner I could cheer up Suni, the sooner I could go home. Halmeoni gathered her purse, then stood slowly and wobbled a bit on her feet.

"Do you need help getting to customs?" I asked. My mom had explained how long it took to get to baggage claim, and I worried that Halmeoni wouldn't be able to walk that far.

"My personal assistant will be waiting with a wheelchair. But you are welcome to follow us."

"Okay," I said, happy not to be alone.

Halmeoni paused. "But I do wonder something. Are you familiar with the Kim's son? I read he was quite the leader in an article they did about his school. I believe he is a senior this year, so probably close to your age."

I blinked. Suni didn't have a son. I mean, I didn't think she did. I'd never asked or even wondered if she had children. I covered my unease with a polite smile. "What's his name?"

Halmeoni furrowed her brow. "I don't remember, but he was very handsome."

Stupid of me that I'd never asked detailed questions about Suni's life before. I took Halmeoni's hand to steady her, then chewed my lip as we moved down the aisle. Other than the gifts and occasional brief phone call, when I said thank you, I knew next to nothing about my godmother. I didn't even know if she was married. Or maybe this *very handsome son* was one of many children.

After shuffles and waiting, we were off the plane and a woman in a smart black pantsuit

waited for Halmeoni with a wheelchair. “Madam.” She spoke softly as she helped her employer sit. It took forever to clear customs, and then finally we were to baggage claim and the assistant began the scramble to retrieve luggage.

Halmeoni gave my hand a final squeeze. “This is goodbye, then.”

I didn’t see Suni anywhere, but I put on a brave face. “It was so nice to meet you,” I said.

Halmeoni stared past me. “I think this will be a good visit for you,” she said, pointing.

I turned and followed the line of her finger. A guy leaned against the wall across from the spinning carousel of suitcases. He stood out, tall and broad but with a face that said boy more than man. He wore his black hair longer in the front and short on the sides. Shadows played below cinnamon-dark eyes, giving him a mysterious, if not sleep-deprived, look. He glanced down at his phone and back up, scanning the crowd. Good thing *he* wasn’t my ride. His eyes met mine and stopped, then quickly jerked away. It didn’t mean anything. A lot of people had stared at me since getting off the plane.

I turned back to Halmeoni. “Do you know him?”

She gave me a funny smile. “It was so nice to meet you, dear.” And then her assistant was pushing her towards the glass doors along with a cart of suitcases.

I looked back to where the boy had stood, but he was gone. Instead, a middle-aged man stopped in front of me. He was dressed in a dark suit and tie with salt-and-pepper gray hair. He spoke, out of breath and in English. “Excuse me, miss. Are you Sydney Moore?”

I took a step back and answered him in English. “Um, and you are?” That’s when I noticed he held an electronic tablet with Sydney Moore scrawled across it. “Yes, I’m Sydney,” I said feeling slow and thick in the head. Lack of sleep and too much recycled air were catching up.

He gave me a quick stiff bow. “I’m Hyun, your driver. If you will direct me, I can collect your luggage and escort you to the car.”

The man spoke perfect English, but slowly. I wasn’t sure if the slow part was because English was hard for him, so I answered in Korean. “I only have one bag. It’s the blue one with duct tape on the wheel.” I could see it moving on the belt, as beat up and alone as I felt. “But where is Suni?” I asked, disappointed to not have been greeted by someone more familiar.

Hyun gave another stiff bow. “Madam Kim is working in Canada at the moment.”



**CHUL**

My mother's text came with no warning.

**Sydney Moore  
ICN International  
United 893  
3:12pm Sun Aug 6th**

**Please pick up Shannon  
Moore's daughter.  
Sydney will be  
attending Daeshim  
Academy with you for her  
senior year. They have her  
schedule in the office. Your  
father will be here another  
few weeks, but I'll find a  
way to fly home tonight and  
check on her before I go  
back for work.**

What was my mother trying to do now? It wasn't lost on me that both my parents were spending more time away from home than normal. I got the message. They were still mad. But why have me pick up this girl? Hyun would be better. She texted me again.

**Are you there, son?**

I texted back.

**I'm here, even though you  
never are.**

I tried putting in my headphones and maxing the volume with ARENA-Z, but she just kept on.

**The Canada deal is taking  
longer than we thought.  
You are responsible for  
getting her to school and  
watching over her. Make  
sure you sit together at  
lunch. I had the yellow  
guest room on the third  
floor prepared.**

I responded with a thumbs up emoji and then drove to the airport. I'd pick her up, but then she was on her own. I could barely handle my own problems without babysitting some girl who would be struggling all year. I doubted she even spoke Korean.

As far as I knew, Sydney was poor. I knew her dad had died when she was a baby, and her mom worked as a maid at a hotel. But if she needed a private school, why fly her all the way out here? My mother could pay for any prep school in the states.

I sighed and leaned against the wall. The airport was crowded, but I scanned the throng of tired passengers. My phone pinged, and I pulled it out of my jeans pocket. It was a photo from my mother.

When I was growing up, she'd talked a lot about Shannon's perfect daughter. I think somewhere around twelve-years-old I got sick of hearing about how wonderful Sydney was and tuned it all out. I never bothered to wonder what she looked like. But the universe, or karma, or

whatever you want to call it got the last laugh on this one, because Sydney really was perfect.

I couldn't help but stare— sun-kissed skin, easy smile, silky blonde hair, and all those curves. In the photo, she wore a blue swimsuit and had her arms wrapped tightly around her mom, the California coast blurred in the background.

So that's what this was. My mother was trying to play matchmaker. Why else would she send *me* a picture like *this*? Whatever my mother was up to couldn't be good, and if this girl was stupid enough to get involved, I wasn't. My finger hovered over the delete button and then, like an idiot, I pressed save. Not that it meant anything. I still wasn't getting anywhere near Sydney. A girl like that wouldn't just cut ties with her old life to come eat kimchi. My mother had to have promised her something.

So I did what I always do when I can't handle my parents. I called Hyun. It rang and he sent me to voicemail. Twice. I tried a third time. He picked up on the last ring.

“Yes, Chul?”

“I can't do this. Mother just texted me a picture, and I'm out.”

“How can you be *out* from a picture?”

“I should text it to you.”

“Please don't. Just man up and give the girl a ride. You own three cars.”

“It's not that.” I sighed, running my hands through my hair. “I just need to stay away from her. It's better if we never meet.”

“Why? No, don't tell me. I'm too old for this. It will be something angsty and dramatic that I can't listen to—”

I interrupted his rant. “Doesn't it seem odd that she would agree to come here for her senior year? What does Sydney want out of it? And more importantly, what does my mother

want?”

Hyun sighed. “Why are you being paranoid again? Your parents love you.”

“If they love me so much, why don’t they ever come home? My father acts like he can’t even be in the same room as me.”

“Your father isn’t the expressive type. That doesn’t mean he doesn’t care,” Hyun said.

“I know what he’s like, but it’s been worse since . . . you know, last year.”

“If you’re referring to the one incident, then you’re wrong.”

“See,” I snapped. “Even you can’t say it. I got arrested. They covered it up with money and connections, but that doesn’t mean I’m forgiven.”

Hyun went silent on the other end, then raised his voice, something he rarely did with me. “Your parents made it go away because you’re a good kid. You made one bad choice, and the only reason you got arrested was because that college jerk dumped the blame on you.”

I cleared my throat. I didn’t know Hyun thought of it that way. I doubted my parents did. Hyun was more willing to give me the benefit of the doubt. But like always, that had to be enough. “Okay, I’m sorry.”

“I don’t want to hear any more about getting arrested,” he said.

“Got it.”

Hyun sighed heavily. “Good.”

“But will you help me with Sydney?”

“Why is picking her up a problem? You normally don’t mind helping people.”

“She’s being paraded in front of me like bait. Everything Mother’s asking me to do is stuff she normally assigns to you. I’m sure she’s up to something, and you probably know what it is.”

“I don’t know any more about Sydney than you do, but I doubt she’s coming here to ruin your life. Your mother may be manipulative at times, but she’s trying to make your future better.”

I snorted. “You try being on the receiving end, and then see if you still feel the same way.”

Hyun laughed. “I’ve known Suni since before you were born. Do you think she hasn’t meddled in my life before?”

“Either way, I’m not getting anywhere near Sydney Moore. She lands in forty-five minutes. So unless you want some American girl wandering around Incheon alone, you’d better move it.” I hung up before he could argue and then walked to baggage claim. He’d come. I knew he would, but I’d stay long enough to see her in person.