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# I GUESS I LIVE HERE NOW

*Claire Ahn*

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## I GUESS I LIVE HERE NOW

*Claire Ahn*

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***Claire Ahn*** grew up in Seoul, Korea, and still considers it her home. She moved to New York to attend university and now lives in Long Island City with her husband, newborn daughter, and their dog, Dante. She writes about transcultural experiences and the traditions, values, and legacies that shape who we are. *I Guess I Live Here Now* is her debut novel.

You can visit Claire on Twitter and Instagram @cuhlaireahn.

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*For* 엄마, *for teaching me to dream.*  
사랑해요

# ONE

**N**ew Yorkers throw things away too easily. Sitting on the soccer field on 52nd Street and 11th Avenue, I'm painting patterns on a small wooden stool I snagged from the block my mom and I live on, a few avenues east of here, and the turf makes the underside of my thighs feel prickly. I'm wiping sweat from my forehead every few seconds so it doesn't drip onto the wet paint. My favorite oversized yellow sunflower-print dress is potentially ruined, with multiple smears of blue paint now dotting the hem.

"Boo!" Sophia pushes me lightly on the shoulders, causing me to almost knock my stool over.

I grip my stool in surprise. "Soph! You can't scare someone who's already so nervous."

"You'll live. Here," my best friend says, handing me a slice of pizza half falling off a paper plate. She looks especially cute today—her curly black hair tied up in massive space buns and dressed in a bright blue crop top with high-waisted white jeans. "I got the goods," she says mischievously.

I inhale the cheesy aroma of 99 Cent Express Pizza and gratefully take the plate from her. “Thanks,” I say, between bites. “Soph, I’m sweating.” I lift up my pizza-holding arm and fan my armpit with my free hand.

“You’re sweating because it’s the end of August,” she replies. “Cool stool. Another street find?”

I ignore her question because I can’t stop thinking about what we’re about to do. “Are you sure this is a good idea? What if we get caught? Can you go to jail for this?” The thought of my mom bailing me out raises goose bumps on my skin despite the beating sun. We have perfect records both in school and, well, criminally, as in zero offenses, and I’m not sure junior year is the time to taint them.

Soph massages my shoulder like she’s giving me a pep talk. “Mel, if you walk down Tenth Avenue, all you smell is weed. No one gives. It’ll be fine, trust me,” she says confidently. “We said we’d try to be a little bit more badass this year, right?”

“Yeah, like a sip of alcohol, Soph, not potentially getting thrown in jail,” I whisper so no undercover cops hear us.

Soph raises her eyebrows at me and shrugs. “If you’ve changed your mind, say the word and I won’t force you. But mind you, it was *your* idea to be ‘rebellious,’” she says in air quotes.

I sigh and look at her for a long time. “Fine, but not here.” I stand up, wrestling my stool into my tote bag.

As we walk an avenue west, toward 12th, I feel sweat dripping down my neck and tie my hair up in a big bun with my favorite scrunchie. “We’re going to be *juniors*.” I feel sentimental just stating that. In just two years, we’re going to be in colleges possibly outside of New York, although I can’t imagine living anywhere but here.

"I feel so old," Soph says. "Oh yeah, what were you saying about your parents yesterday? On the phone, something about your dad not coming this month. You hung up so quickly."

"Sorry, I freaked out thinking my mom might've heard me." I shrug. "Something feels off. My parents talk maybe once a month, if that, but these past two weeks, she's been on the phone with him almost every day. And she closes her door then comes out all tense afterward. Maybe it's all in my head, but I doubt it."

"I think I'm more impressed they can talk that often from opposite ends of the world."

I shrug. Maybe it's strange to other people, but I've never known another living situation. My dad lives in Seoul, and while I've only been there once, he visits us in New York City exactly three times a year—no more, no less. To me, Korea is what I see on TV during my mom's Korean-drama marathons: boys with over-the-top romantic gestures who really need to stop grabbing girls' arms, and girls who never sweat no matter how fast they run.

"Why don't you just ask?"

I chew on my lip in thought. "I don't know. Feels weird."

"Well, are you sad your dad didn't come this month?" she adds.

"No, not really. My mom said he's busy right now in Seoul. Maybe he'll come visit in September." When my dad comes, he's usually here for just one week, so after sixteen years, I still don't fully feel comfortable around him, the way I do with my mom; he's the most formal and stern person I know, the quintessential Strict Asian Parent, a real-life K-drama figure.

When we reach 12th Avenue, we find a secluded corner and

Sophia carefully draws a small white paper stick from her pocket. “You ready?” she asks me. She lifts it up to show me. “My cousin rolled it up for us already.”

My phone vibrates in the pocket of my tote bag and I jump about a foot, making my stool fall out.

“God, Mel, you need to calm down. You’re going to get us caught,” Soph chides me.

I open my phone and it’s my mom.

**UMMA**

taco bell for dinner tonight?

My thumbs nervously text back a thumbs-up emoji, and I put my phone away. My mom has her Scary Mother side but is usually a very chill person and my other best friend. Not every daughter has a mom that loves getting Taco Bell takeout as much as she does, and I know I’m lucky. I feel a twinge of guilt and give Soph a concerned look, which she reads instantly.

“You’re not backing out now, right?”

“No, I’m not.” We exchange grins and she pulls out a lighter—also from her cousin. I look at her trying to light the joint and stifle my laughter.

“Struggling there?”

She pulls a face at me. “Shut up, I need to focus.” Sweat beads on her forehead as she concentrates on the lighter, applying the flame very carefully to only the edge of the joint. “Then you have to rotate it around slowly, so it burns evenly.”

“Look who’s a pro.”

“My cousin taught me, and Google and YouTube. Apparently, if it’s burnt unevenly, might as well not even smoke it.” She

holds up her finished product. “Ta-da! A work of art,” Soph says, pointing to the tip of the burning joint.

“What happens if it burns unevenly?” I ask, leaning in to take a closer look.

“I dunno.”

At the ripe age of sixteen, we have yet to be interested in what our more precocious classmates have already indulged over the last school year: drinking, late-night partying, smoking, sex. But it’s time to catch up. Drugs first, apparently, thanks to Soph’s cousin’s connection.

“Okay,” she says steadily, bringing it to her lips. “Here goes.” I don’t realize I’m holding my breath until she bursts into a fit of coughs and I’m hitting her back rhythmically because I don’t know what else to do. Between coughs, she hands me the joint. “Your turn.”

“You barely smoked it!” I say accusingly.

“Well, I need a break. You try.”

“Wait, do you feel anything?”

“No, not yet. My cousin said it takes twenty minutes or so.”

“Well, you probably have to actually inhale it, not cough it all out.” I take a deep breath and repeat Sophia’s motions, daintily holding the joint between my fingers. I take my first hit and try to keep it down but also end up in a coughing fit. We’re ready to try for the second time, but before we can really start to enjoy our little act of rebellion, a voice calls out from behind us.

“You girls look a little young to be doing that.”

We whip our heads around and my body tenses immediately. I drop the joint and step on it as smoothly as I can, but I know the police officer’s already seen it. And smelled it.

I shake my head and put on the most innocent, casual smile

my facial muscles will allow me to form. My words tumble out in a mess that rivals the blue paint splatters on my dress. “Oh, we’re not. Koreans have very youthful genes. You should see my mom, she’s in her forties but could pass as my older sister. Or a young aunt. Or an older cousin. And my friend is Ethiopian.” I pause. “Good young genes there, too.”

Sophia nudges me. “Stop talking,” she says between clenched jaws.

“We’re twenty-three,” I add, my mouth unable to comply with this basic cue.

“Mel, for the love of—”

The police officer cuts her off. “IDs?”

Oh, God. I am *toast*. My mom will definitely not be my best friend today.

Less than twenty minutes later, we’re back on Ninth Avenue, and my building’s front door is taunting me as I wait with the officer for my mom to come downstairs after he spoke with her through the intercom.

“I have the key, you know,” I mutter, but he just stands there, impassive and cold like a statue.

When my mom sees me with the officer upon opening the door, her brows are furrowed with concern. Studying her more closely, I realize she looks tired, like she hasn’t been sleeping well. Then, as he explains why he brought me home, her concerned face changes, contorted with anger.

“I dropped off the other young girl, um, Sophia Taye,” he says, like he’s trying to remember her name, “and now I’m dropping this one off with you. It’s a warning,” he says, turning to me, “but don’t let it happen again.”

I stare at the ground while my mom nods multiple times

like she's grateful for the warning and nothing more. "Thank you, Officer." She closes the big brown door and says nothing while angrily stalking up the flights of stairs to our apartment. When we get inside, I keep a good distance from my mom, or as much of a distance as I can. Right now our tiny kitchen looks suffocating instead of cozy, and the apartment feels too small for the tension that's breaking through the low white ceiling. I stare past her at our sink, which is too narrow to fit more than a few pots at a time, wishing it could swallow me whole right now.

"*Lee Solmi*," she says angrily, whipping around to face me. "What were you thinking? Smoking *weed*?" Her face is red and her eyes are glaring coldly. It doesn't help that they're twice the size of mine. "Well?"

My voice comes out small. "It was just one small puff. I don't feel anything. It wasn't even a real drag because I barely smoked it. I promise I'm not high. I coughed it all out." I stare at the burnt orange wood floor. "It was for . . . future memories."

"Future memories?" She's looking at me like I just said something really stupid, which is probably true. It certainly feels stupid hearing her say it back to me.

"You know . . ." I say, shifting my body, "something we can laugh about in the future."

My mom presses her fingers to her forehead and shuts her eyes. I steal a glance at her while keeping my head bowed. She's wearing a faded green tie-dye tee. I remember the day we tie-dyed it together years ago, back when I was in elementary school. I hated how my green one turned out and cried about it, so she gave me her purple one. "Melody, you could have been arrested, you know that? And we're lucky the officer didn't fine

us. What are you thinking, to risk throwing away your future like that?"

I look again at her green tee and can't remember the last time we did something fun like tie-dyeing together. "I'm sorry," I mumble. "I didn't think it was that big of a deal."

I know that was the wrong thing to say because right after I say it, her face gets redder and I can see the outlines of her veins. Without a word, my mom goes into her room and shuts her door loudly. I feel a little bit at a loss of what to do or say because she's rarely this mad. Things blow over relatively fast in this household. I guess I could follow her and apologize profusely, but really, deep down, I don't think that what I've done warrants so much anger from her. I'm a top student, only second to Sophia in school, and I never get in trouble. It was *one* time and not even a real puff.

I go into my room and quietly close the door behind me. Four missed calls from Sophia.

"Soph?" I say when she picks up.

"Is your mom mad?"

I nod even though she can't see me. "With the rage of a thousand wronged girlfriends."

Sophia lets out a sigh. "I guess we deserve it. My dad grounded me for a month from all screens, except my phone, for one hour a day. I'm sorry, Mel. I really didn't think we'd get caught."

"It's not your fault. Those youthful genes of mine probably got us caught," I say, feigning lightness. "I'm sure it'll blow over by tomorrow," I assure her, willing myself to believe my own words.

After we hang up, I ignore the gurgling sound in my stomach. There are tacos on the table, but I'm too scared to leave my

room right now. I change out of my clothes, which smell very faintly of weed, and sit cross-legged on my floor, pulling my sketchbook out from under my bed. When I open my portfolio—the one I’ll be submitting to Maison & Saito Interiors’ summer internship program—I let the familiar soothing feeling that comes from looking at art wash over me as I comb through drawings and designs. I can only hope my drawings are good enough to be considered for the coveted internship position at one of the top interior design firms in the world. But I don’t think about that tonight. Tonight, I stare at my art longer than usual, wishing I was inside a fake home I’ve drawn for myself, one with high vaulted ceilings and colorful Moroccan poufs. I never traveled much, but my drawings allow me to capture the places I dream of going or images from movies or memories I hold on to in my head so I don’t forget.

WHEN I WAKE THE NEXT MORNING, I CAN HEAR MY mom humming from her bedroom. The tension in my chest releases. She must be in a better mood. My mom sings a lot but *always* when she’s in a good, relaxed mood, the way most of us would play a Spotify “Café Vibes” playlist. Our apartment is a one-bedroom flex, so the fake wall in my room is thin enough that I can hear when my mom moves around. I hear her humming “Sweet Caroline,” except for the “ba ba ba” part, which she sings loudly. My mom has the best singing voice I’ve ever heard, besides actual professional singers, although she’s probably better than a lot of them, too. Her voice makes our apartment feel lively, even though it’s just

the two of us. And today, her singing nearly makes me forget about last night. Usually, I'll chime in with her singing, and she'll disagree when I sulk and say my voice is nothing like hers. Instead, she'll usually harmonize once I join in with the melody, and we'll sing until we forget the lyrics, usually half-way through.

I leave my bedroom, and when she meets my eye, I offer a tentative smile. "I like today's song," I say as I head to the bathroom to remove yesterday's winged eyeliner off my face, now smudged in multiple places. I look like a sad raccoon.

I can see her staring at me through the bathroom mirror. "There's kimchi jjigae on the table. I have to talk to your father for a few minutes. After that, we're visiting Halmoni today. Be ready to leave in fifteen minutes."

I mumble an okay and my curiosity nudges me to ask why we're going today, but she shuts her door before I can get a word out. We usually visit on Sundays once a month. Today is Saturday and we just visited two weekends ago, not that I'm complaining. I love my halmoni.

I'm praying my mom doesn't tell my dad about last night. He's a lot more conservative than my mom and me. He's like a well-mannered Korean dictator that's always immaculately dressed in outfits that scream "I am an Important Man at a fancy law firm" and is constantly wishing for a daughter he can teach his ways. Too bad that daughter will never be me. Every time he visits us from Seoul, he's always telling me I need to stop wasting my time and take myself more seriously, whatever that means. When I was younger, I remember being really sad that he lived so far away, but he told me that a lot of Important Business Families live separately, so I didn't bring it up again.

Mostly because he told me to stop asking stupid questions. Once, in second grade, I cried because a classmate, Toby Yang, told me my parents must be divorced if they don't live together and don't talk often and that they're just probably keeping it a secret from me. I soon learned that my parents' situation is different, and that living separately is common in Korea and other parts of Asia, like Singapore and Hong Kong. There's even a name for it—a "gireogi appa" is a father who lives in Korea while his family lives in an English-speaking country for a better education for the kids.

Toby Yang is a jerk.

I dig into my food, sating my hunger from yesterday with big spoonfuls of brown rice today. The spicy kimchi stew warms my stomach, and while I eat my breakfast, I try to empty my mind of the cold-shoulder treatment from my mom and the conversation happening behind her closed door. I wish I could hold on to this feeling of satisfaction longer, but I know life has a way of ruining dreams when you least expect it.

## TWO

**T**he subway ride on the 7 train to Flushing is awkward and tense. My mom and I sit next to each other but don't say a word. We weave through the crowded streets of Flushing, dodging street vendors and aggressive middle-aged women with their shopping bags. My mouth waters at the varied aromas of stir-fried vegetables and beef and fish balls mixing in the air. Eventually we arrive at Hanguk Flushing Home, and I see my grandma outside in the main garden area. I rush toward her and wrap her in a bear hug. "Missed you, Halmoni." The retirement home is catered toward elderly Koreans, and soon a swarm of other ladies—my grandma's friends who have seen me visit every so often for the last ten years or so—surround me, pinching my cheeks and telling me to enjoy my baby-butt-like skin while it lasts. My halmoni comes to my rescue and waves them off, and I insa to the other grandmas as we follow her into her apartment, politely promising in my elementary Korean to say goodbye before I leave.

Inside, my grandma walks slowly toward the small kitchen

table and hands me a plump persimmon. I always get a little sad when I see her because I can tell she's aging fast. The persimmon is soft and mushy and ready to eat. "Eat," she says, handing me a plate and spoon. In Korean, she tells me she and my mom need to talk in private and that I should sit and wait in the kitchen.

"About what?" I turn to my mom, expecting an answer, but they don't respond.

A part of me wants to eavesdrop, but the persimmon is so juicy and soft and reminiscent of warm summer days with my halmoni that I let the happy memories of my elementary school years keep me distracted on the sofa. Between bites, I strain to hear their conversation, but their voices are so quiet that even if I pressed my ear against the door, I don't think I'd hear anything anyway. Instead I continue to enjoy my fruit and pull out my book, turning to an unfinished chapter of *An Ember in the Ashes*.

After their mysterious mother-daughter talk, we visit a Chinese restaurant together for lunch, where I promptly inhale a whole basket of steaming soup dumplings. Even in eighty-four-degree weather, I can think of nothing more satisfying than the hot fatty soup that gushes out of a xiao long bao as I bite into it. Inevitably, I burn my tongue but finish slurping the rest of the soup from my last dumpling carefully so that it doesn't splatter onto the plate. My halmoni compliments me on how well I eat while also telling me not to overeat in case I lose my slim figure. I nod obediently as I stuff my mouth with bok choy. Leave it to a Korean grandma to remind you that metabolism won't last forever. Pretty soon our meal is over, and we are back at the nursing home, where we part ways. I hate saying bye to my grandma because she loves when we visit. I

determine to visit her more often this school year as we wave goodbye.

It's late afternoon by the time we come back home. On the subway I dared to ask my mom what she and Halmoni talked about, but she just stared out the window across from us. I can't tell if she's still mad at me or if something else is wrong. For a moment I panic and wonder if my halmoni is sick. If she is, she didn't show it. I'm about to ask when my mom turns to me.

"I have to run some errands. Be home by eight." She talks with a stoicism I'm not used to.

"I was just going to stay home."

"I need the house to myself for a few hours."

"O-kay." I don't like this tension between us.

A cold shower and a wardrobe change later, I meet Soph on the front steps of her building. As we walk, my boxy, pale-gray linen dress allows me to stay cool in the early evening breezes, and I get a whiff of my own Dove deodorant that the wind carries into my nostrils. We sit inside De Witt Clinton Park on the turf, watching sweaty soccer players in neon-colored pinnies kicking around.

Sophia drums her fingers on her cheek as I explain the strange vibes I'm getting from my mom. "Weird. It's like Lily's freezing you out," Sophia says.

"Yeah, it's bizarre. I wonder if I should try talking to her again or something."

"Doesn't sound like she'd tell you even if you did."

"Yeah, guess not." I don't say much more because I want to change the topic. I turn to face Soph and squeeze her hand excitedly. "How did the audition go? Have you heard back?"

She shakes her head. “They’re taking forever with the call-backs. It’s usually so much faster.”

“You’re going to be Broadway’s biggest star one day. I know it.”

“Oh, you know it, huh? Okay, if one day I am, you can design the stage that I perform on.”

“That’s not really interior design, but I’d still be honored,” I answer, bowing.

“When’s your application due?”

“I’ll mail in my portfolio in a week or so, probably. Maison & Saito Interiors said they won’t announce the final candidates for the internship until mid-October, though.”

Soph throws one arm around my shoulder. “Future famous interior designer, future famous Broadway performer. That’s us.”

“Done deal. Pizza?”

She grins. We peel stray blades of Astroturf off our clothes and walk toward Eighth Avenue, where the second-best pizza in NYC stands. 99 Cent Express Pizza will always be the taste of home to us and is easily our favorite pizza joint, no pun intended. It’s not as iconic as Roberta’s or Prince Street Pizza, but it’s homier, and the guys who work there recognize us as regulars, which is always nice.

After we down our pizzas with root beer—the most underrated of all beverages—I grudgingly start heading back toward our street.

We wave from our respective stoops across the street from each other, and I head into my building, panting by the time I reach the top of the three measly flights. When I unlock the door marked 3F, I can barely push it open and stick my head in halfway. There are boxes pushed up against the

door and scattered all over our tiny living room.

“Mo-om?” I shout through the crack of the door.

She helps open the door, and I stare wordlessly around the apartment.

“Did you get a sudden itch to redo our apartment?”

She sits on the sofa and gestures to me to sit across from her on our small ottoman. She sighs and looks at me for a long time before speaking. “We’re moving,” she says, with the same direct tone she’d use to say “Here’s dinner.”

“Like . . . to a different unit? A different building? I didn’t even know you were looking at apartments. I could’ve come with you.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “To Korea.” I can’t read her expression clearly. She looks sad yet determined, like staying is not an option.

I look at the dining table on our left, the boxes strewn about, her bedroom floor where her clothes and books and laptop lie haphazardly in a pile.

“What?” Everything feels hazy to me suddenly.

“We’re moving. To Seoul, to live with your dad.”

I’m confused and starting to feel nauseous. I’m positive I’m mishearing my mom.

“What?” I repeat. “Like on a vacation?”

“Mel, we’re moving to Korea.”

I don’t think I believe her, but I see the mess, the boxes, the clothes, and I know we are, but it isn’t registering. I keep staring at the boxes and wondering if I’m actually here or not. Or if I’m imagining everything.

“How . . . why . . .” I barely manage to get any words out. “*When?*”

My mom sighs again. “Monday night. Our flight departs at twelve fifty a.m.” When I don’t say anything, she continues. “I’m sorry it has to be such a surprise to you, Melody, but your dad has actually been talking to me about this for a while—”

“All those phone calls. These last few weeks.”

My mom stutters for a moment. “Uh, y-yes. Mel, I know—”

I cut her off, my rising anger quickly replacing my confusion. “And you never thought to tell me?” I glare at her, knowing she can see the hurt in my eyes. “Is it because I tried weed? I promise I’ll never do it again, you know I won’t. You know I keep my promises.” My voice is higher than normal and coming out squeaky, like I’m begging her for something. I stand up, feeling all too claustrophobic in this chaotic living room.

She shakes her head. “It’s not about the weed, Mel. We’ve lived apart from your father since you were a baby and I really believed it was for the best, that you should be raised here in the States. But now you have less than two years before you’ll go off to college, and after a lot of conversations, we both agree it’ll be good for you to spend some time with him before you leave for God knows where.”

“That’s what summers are for, aren’t they?” I don’t understand why all of a sudden my mom has this new mantra. Why now? Why when I’m about to start junior year? We’ve been fine on our own this whole time, just the two of us.

My mom pats the sofa but I don’t join her. “Please, honey? Sit. When you were younger, you used to cry all the time because we lived so far from your dad. Don’t you want to try being close again?”

“He visits us plenty. Why doesn’t *he* move here, if he’s so keen on spending time with me again?”

"You know he can't do that with his job."

"No, I know that he doesn't *want* to with his job."

"I've always had a democracy in this house, you know that. I'm not overbearing because that's how my mom was, and it drove me crazy. It suffocated me, and I didn't want to suffocate you. I try to always let you make your own choices . . . but this time it's different. It'll be better in Korea, better for you to also be with your father, to get to know him better."

My voice grows louder, maybe to make up for how quiet she's being. "We're not really moving, right? You're just saying these things because you're angry." My eyes are watering now, and I tighten my lips to keep the tears from falling.

"The decision's already been made, Mel. You just need to trust me on this one. We made this choice a while ago, actually, but I just hadn't been able to tell you. I knew you wouldn't take it well. I should've told you sooner."

"I can't believe you've been hiding this decision from me. How long have you been planning this, huh?" My voice turns cruel. I can't help it; I feel betrayed. "And what happened to 'everything is a democracy in our household'? Did you decide to throw that out the window because Dad wants me to come to Korea all of a sudden? Do you not have an opinion about uprooting both our lives and moving to a foreign country? When are you planning to move us back? Do I even have a say? Our lives are here, Umma. Our friends are here. You don't know or have anyone in Korea except Dad, and you barely even talk to him. Oh, and your sister, someone that I don't even know because you *never* talk to her."

My mom looks at me, her face contorted with pain, probably at the mention of her sister. I know it was a low blow, bringing

in my estranged aunt like that. “Go to your room and start packing,” she says. “You’ll complete junior year in Korea. I’m sorry it has to be this way, Mel, but it does.”

She grabs a few unfolded boxes from her room and puts them into my hands. “The movers come Monday afternoon.”

THE NEXT THIRTY-SIX HOURS GO BY IN A HAZE OF Chinese takeout food, Taco Bell, and endless boxes stacked against the wall. How do you pack up sixteen years of stuff in a day? I guess it’s easier than you’d think if your home is seven hundred square feet.

We’re leaving in a few hours and my eyes are swollen from crying. I’m in Sophia’s room, downloading the KakaoTalk app for her on her phone.

“I can’t believe you’re leaving like this,” Soph says as she looks at me from the floor with her legs propped up against the wall. “This came out of nowhere.”

“Yeah.” It’s all I can manage. “I use this app to talk to my dad and my halmoni. She prefers it over text. It’s basically WhatsApp but for Koreans.” Soph and I send each other crying emojis in our new KakaoTalk (KaTok or Tok, for short) chat and giggle, but there’s a bitterness underneath.

“How’s your mom?”

I pick at the wall. “We’ve barely talked. And I’m not interested in how she’s doing. Do you think I could emancipate myself from her? Then I could stay here,” I say, only half joking.

Soph squeezes my hand. “You’d regret it.”

“Maybe my mom’s been tricking me this entire time. Acting

like everything's fine, acting like we're so close and always telling each other everything, and bam—we're going to Korea." I pause. "I think I really hurt her." I recall her face when I mentioned Aunt Rebecca and accused her of barely speaking to either of them. It was true, wasn't it?

"I really hope this isn't because of the weed. I still feel so shitty. I'm sorry, Mel," Soph says. She scoots closer to me and leans her head on my knee.

"It's not. She said it's been a decision for a long time, apparently."

"Either way, I guess you're leaving."

"Yeah," I say again, feeling numb inside.

When I reach the steps of my building, I turn around to wave a final goodbye to Soph.

"LOVE YOU, SOPH!" I scream across the way.

"LOVE YOU MORE, MEL!" she shouts back.

After I finally force myself to turn away from my best friend and head inside, I go upstairs to my apartment and stare around my almost-empty bedroom. My limbs feel weak and lifeless as I muster whatever energy I have left to pack my bag for the plane and gently slide my portfolio into my tote. I won't let Korea stop me from sending in my internship application to Maison & Saito.

By the time we finish the final bits of packing and watching the movers haul our boxes away, we're a little behind schedule and rush into our Uber. The last forty-eight hours happened so quickly that even after the car ride to the airport and checking in our bags, this all still feels like a bad dream.

"Are you sad?" I ask my mom, giving in to the urge to talk to her as we wait to board. The thought of having to entertain

myself for fourteen hours feels dreadful and impossible.

“Of course I am, honey. This isn’t easy for either of us.” Then she rubs my back like when I was little, but it’s not as comforting as it once was.

“Then why are we going? You can say no. We can still probably go back.”

She pulls her hand away abruptly. Whatever momentary softness my mom had immediately disappears under a stiff exterior. “Please stop making this harder than it already is, Mel.”

I ignore her and scroll through Instagram and see that I’ve been tagged in a post by Sophia. It’s a ‘gram of us from last summer, when we went to Coney Island. We’re on the beach, lying on our beach towels in matching polka dot bikinis.

The Korean Air flight crew calls for all first-class passengers to begin boarding. I pay no attention until my mom tugs at my cardigan.

“Come on, Mel. That’s us.”

I look at her in confusion and bring my ticket closer to my face. Sure enough, there it is in all caps at the top: FIRST.

## THREE



whisper because it feels weird to say out loud. Like confirming that we're trying to take something that doesn't belong to us. "Mom, are you sure these are ours?"

She nods and tugs me toward her. "It's your dad's doing. Or your grandfather's doing, technically. Anyway, come on, Melody."

I'm still confused but I gather my things—making sure to be careful with my portfolio—and fumble after my mom. She looks about as uncomfortable as I do, but we smile and nod politely back at the flight attendants as they lead us to our seats. My mouth falls open at the sight of the private suites. I count. There are only fourteen seats, but not even half are filled. As my mom and I settle into our compartments, a flight attendant comes to take our cardigans and hang them up for us. I let her take mine while I remain shocked at just about everything. Even though my mom and I are sitting next to each other, the sliding partition doors might as well separate our seats by

rows. It feels like a private jet, or I imagine this is what a private jet probably feels like. I look at my mom for a hint of shock in her face, but her face is void of emotion, or like she's deep in thought about something else, something faraway.

"Mom, Mom," I whisper-call to her.

She looks up at me after stowing away her purse.

"They give you *pajamas*."

"What?"

"Look," I say, pointing. "Pajamas. I'm going to change into mine." I walk over to the lavatory, and I'm satisfied to see that it's available. Two bathrooms for fourteen seats. It's a ratio unthinkable in economy.

It's past 1:00 a.m. so I go back to my suite and am stunned to see it has been turned into a bed. How'd they do that so fast? The lights are off and a flight attendant comes to close my door, and I awkwardly stand back up to thank her. I never would have guessed that sleep could come so easily and comfortably inside an airplane. The last thought in my head before I fall asleep is that these pajamas are softer than the ones I own at home.

When I wake up hours later, I roll around in my bed and then browse the mini storage compartments within my suite and find the menu card. It's extensive, like a restaurant menu. When I slide open my compartment door, I see my mom telling her order to a tall, poised flight attendant dressed, like all the others, in all turquoise. She comes to me after, and I point at the Western breakfast options and mumble a polite thank-you in my only half-fluent Korean. I haven't been on many flights that serve complimentary meals, but even in restaurants the food I'm used to ordering is never this decadent. I take photos

of every dish as I make my way through each beautifully plated course and finish it off with omija tea—a first for me. It tastes like a fancy berry tea. After watching *Paddington* on a screen twice the size of a normal economy screen, I wander into my mom’s compartment and sit across from her.

“Why did Grandpa fly us first class?” I stare at her sternly, waiting for a response.

“Because *he* only flies first class, Mel.”

I look at her suspiciously. “Whenever Appa visited us in New York, did he also always fly first class?”

She distractedly pulls out a magazine. “No idea.”

My frustration takes hold, and I snatch the magazine from her hands. “Mom. Stop avoiding me. *Why are we going to Korea?*”

“How many times do I need to tell you that your dad just wants you to be there with him? He’s been asking me for a while, but I always said no until now. You can confirm it for yourself in seven hours when we land.”

I close her compartment door. “Why didn’t we just go with him when I was a baby and he moved back?” Why did I never ask her this before? I guess growing up far apart from my dad felt so normal that I never thought to. We were a business family, that was it.

My mom takes the magazine back and puts it into its rightful place. “He promised to come back.”

I look at her intently, waiting impatiently for her to continue.

She looks back, as if debating whether to divulge more information. “When you were two, he moved back so he could make money faster. We were struggling in New York to make ends meet. But . . . well, he entered into your grandfather’s

world and was so determined to work his way up that he kept putting off his return to New York. Thirteen years later, he's still there and we're still here."

I nod slowly, memories of me crying every time I said goodbye to him as he left for the airport, back to the other side of the world, filling up my head. "But why couldn't we go with him?"

My mom looks at me with resignation, like she knows I'm not leaving until she gives me some answers. "I couldn't. Not after how hard my parents worked to move us to Flushing. It's hard to understand, Melody, but I couldn't do that. Go backward in their eyes and move back to the country they left. It would've discounted their immense sacrifice." Her lips are tight in a straight line, and I know that's all I'm going to get. There are so many more questions I want to ask all of a sudden, but I think she sees the curiosity in my eyes because she holds her hand up. "Things are different now, and it would be nice for you to be in Korea with your dad and get to know your culture, your country, and your father more. So just try to make the best of it, okay?"

I stand up to leave when I think of a question I can't help but blurt out. A small potential bright spot in this whole move. "Will we get to see Rebecca Eemo?" I haven't seen my aunt since I was in elementary school—the first and last time I visited Korea. But I remember I liked her. She had a fun energy.

My mom purses her lips. "We'll see."

If there's anyone that can hold a grudge, it's my mom. I vaguely remember a fight that she and my eemo got into years ago in Seoul, the night before we were heading back to New York. I heard yelling even though I was in the other room at the

hotel we were staying at. Ever since then, we never spoke much with her. My mom said my aunt never became an adult and that she would be a bad influence on me. So that was that. And every time I tried to bring her up, my mom would get angry in a way she never did at any other time. Eventually, I stopped asking.

Multiple times, the flight attendant comes by with various wines and champagnes, and I politely decline them all. By the time we're almost in Korea, I'm super full from all the food they served throughout—including an eight-course meal for dinner—and admittedly, I feel a tiny bit sad to leave the plane, but I'll never share that piece of information with anyone else. At the end of the flight, the attendants come and thank my mom and me for flying with Korean Air, and I bow repeatedly and thank them back.

There must be some sort of airplane class system in the cargo hold, because our bags are among the first out while everyone else stands around waiting. I don't remember much about Seoul, and I don't expect to like it very much, but Incheon International Airport is sublime. Clean, massive, not crowded. I sigh as I realize that I am officially on the other side of the world from home. As we exit through the doors below signs informing us that we cannot return to this area once we've left, my heart beats faster in anticipation. Because of what, I'm not sure. My mom tells me "they" are waiting outside the arrivals entrance, but whatever thought I might have had circling my jet-lagged brain just then is wiped out when I am greeted by the intense humidity of a Seoul summer. It feels like a dirty mop slapping me in the face, the kind you find leaning against a questionable wall in a public gym.

Then I see the “they.” My dad and a man in a black suit who I assume is his driver are standing by the open trunk of a Range Rover. When our eyes meet, there’s no waiting gesture of embrace, which isn’t particularly surprising since he’s not the affectionate type. Nothing’s been said yet, no greetings whatsoever, but I already feel awkward. I try to study his face as casually as I can, but his eyes give nothing away. He looks at me as if he’s waiting for me to enter his conference room for a business meeting. I glance at my mom and she’s giving him a small smile, but she looks as uncomfortable as my dad does. The man in the suit takes our suitcases and insas to my mom. She bows her head, too, and then nudges me to do the same.

“Anyoung haseyo,” I say to him.

“Hi, Appa,” I say to my dad.

He extends his hand and I shake it. “Solmi. How was the flight?” He sounds formal and I fidget. I think of those people I’ve seen in Union Square holding Free Hugs signs and imagine my dad being offered a hug.

“It was okay,” I lie. *Best flight of my life.*

He nods curtly. The man in the suit opens the door for us, and we slide into the backseat and start the drive to my dad’s apartment.

“Did you always have a driver, Dad?”

He shakes his head. “Since about five years ago. And an upgraded car when I made partner this past year.” I can hear the pride in his voice.

“Ahjusshi,” I say, inching my body a little closer to the driver’s seat, “what’s your name?” I ask in Korean.

He just smiles awkwardly at me, but before he can respond, my dad jumps in.

“Solmi, we do not talk to the driver when he is working. Sit back against your seat.”

I silently sulk back into my seat and look out the window. My parents make brief small talk about the flight, the move, the arrival of our boxes, and even though I don’t fully understand every word they’re saying, it feels tight and unnatural, the way they talk to each other. I also notice that the taxis in Korea are silver or black instead of yellow, and whether it’s the winding car ride or the suffocating silence, I feel nauseous and homesick. A cab is not a cab if it’s not yellow.

“Hell’s Kitchen feels so far away,” I say out loud to no one in particular, but for everyone to hear.

My appa frowns at me, and I can see the disapproval and wrinkles on his face and forehead. “Hannam-dong is one of the most coveted neighborhoods in Seoul. I’m sure you’ll adjust just fine. It’s a much nicer home than your previous apartment.”

The way my dad says “previous apartment” makes me feel an irrational surge of anger, like he has a personal vendetta against it. I wish I could tell him that it’s natural for me to miss my own home and to give me a break, but I turn back to face the window instead. I don’t feel comfortable enough to say what’s on my mind. Not with him.

Some of the buildings are ridiculously tall and have large Korean letters emblazoned on them. I imagine they’re big companies, but the buildings are significantly taller than some I’ve seen in New York. I squint to try and read them, but the driver is going too fast for my slow Korean reading skills. After some time, we drive through an area that’s a stark contrast from the neighborhood with the tall buildings. It looks a lot older, the buildings are much lower, and the signs on them are mostly big

red or blue letters that look dusty and on the brink of collapse. At a stop sign, I roll down my window and look at the strange things the street vendors are selling. These street stores sell kitchen and bathroom supplies outside. There are toilet brushes, plastic chairs, even bags of chips that hang from plastic rods.

We must have driven almost an hour by the time we enter into an area where the driver seems to be slowing. I start squirming in my seat, trying to find a new comfortable position. I slouch low and prop up my knees against the driver's seat, but my dad swats at them and makes me sit up straight.

"We'll be home soon, Solmi, just sit up and sit still. This isn't your bedroom."

We drive slowly through the neighborhood, and here the buildings all look fancy. There are a lot of little stores that are selling jewelry and clothes, endless cute-looking cafés, and a lot of Italian restaurants. Everything looks modern and polished.

No Name Driver pulls up to a building and comes to a stop. There are mid-sized cream-colored buildings behind black iron gates, looming over me looking more like they were built to keep people out than welcome people in. Once I get out of the car, I can see two or three buildings, but it looks like there are more hidden behind. After we thank the driver, I follow my parents past the intimidating iron gates. The complex beyond them is solely comprised of similarly cream-colored buildings and a central courtyard with a seating area and a currently unoccupied playground. I notice the exterior of these buildings seems to be some sort of smooth stone, and I wonder if the interior is as lavish looking. The stone slab on our building reads:

## 4, HANNAM TOWERS

My dad scans his key card, and we get inside the elevator that greets us in Korean. Our apartment is located on floor eight, which appears to be the highest floor. When the elevator opens, I see a long hallway and only one door. This must be ours.

“Only one apartment per floor seems like a bad use of space,” I comment.

“Or a way of maintaining privacy,” my dad responds.

He punches a code into the keypad that unlocks the door, and I follow him in.

“This is our luxury villa. The master bedroom and your bedroom are upstairs. The guest room, study room, and my office are down the hall.”

I consider asking why a study room and his office are two separate rooms, but my shock numbs my mouth and I’m unable to say anything as I slowly slip off my shoes and take in my new home. The foyer is decorated with oversized canvas paintings and opens up into an enormous living room. Panoramic floor-to-ceiling windows line the entirety of the space that eventually connects to an open kitchen layout. Just the living room alone though is more than twice the size of our Hell’s Kitchen apartment. I can’t tell if the windows make the ceiling look taller, but it must be at least twenty feet high. Off to the side is a sort of second, slightly smaller (but still huge) living room. The furniture is pretty much what I would imagine a wealthy middle-aged man to have—minimal, dark and muted colors, with random sculptures and paintings that look too expensive to touch. I walk toward the window, feeling completely flabbergasted, and join my mom, who looks out the tall windows onto our view.

“It’s the Han River,” she explains.

My dad heads toward the kitchen, so I turn to my mom. “Did you know he lived in a mansion?” My voice comes out quiet enough that my dad can’t hear us.

Her expression reveals nothing. “It’s not a mansion,” she answers, and walks toward the kitchen to join my father. I can’t decide if she looks resentful or sad.

I follow her in and run my hands along the black marble kitchen island, surrounded by black cabinets. The walls in the living room and kitchen are plain white but two sides are painted in a dark shade of navy blue, serving as beautiful accents for the rest of the space. The kitchen floor is some sort of matte gray porcelain, while the living room looks like white desert oak flooring. I wonder how impressed my parents would be if I pointed out how much I knew about the materials and design of this home. Or if they’d just be angry that I’m wasting my energy and brain space on knowledge like this.

“What do you think? You haven’t seen your own room yet.” I don’t think it’s in my head that I sense a hint of excitement in my dad’s voice, like I could be bought with a nice room. The stairs start from the living room and are covered on one side by frosted glass paneling. I hold back any expression of anticipation as I head up the stairs to find my room. When I open the large ivory door, my breath catches in my throat. “Oh my holy *moly*.” I take a cautious step inside, as if rushing in is out of place with the luxury of this room. Or, like my dad would somehow sense that I ran in and would come upstairs just to yell at me, saying a young lady doesn’t rush. With every additional step I take, I realize that this is what my dad probably always wanted for me. I see now why he always lectured me

on how my bedroom was furnished in New York. I mean, I knew he always hated our plebeian lifestyle—I still remember his words—because he was always making comments about my “too colorful” room or my “disgraceful” eating habits. *Stop slouching, Solmi; Use a proper napkin, not a tissue or paper towel, Solmi; Photos aren’t artwork to hang up, Solmi; blah blah blah.* But my room in New York wouldn’t be able to fit even half of the furniture in my new room.

A mini living room is set up near my bed, with a three-seater suede sofa and an oval antiques mirror table with two uncomfortable-looking chairs. My bed is very high up and the sheets are a pale gray shade of satin. Next to my bed is a nightstand with a crystal vase filled with peonies. Two large paintings of different shapes that look more like they belong in the Museum of Modern Art hang on the wall above the sofa. It’s fine, not super attractive, but has an elevated air to it. Another painting hangs across my bed, which I immediately decide I’ll replace unless I want to wake up to see an oil-painted rice paddy every morning. Past the sofa and the bed is a separate workspace with a long desk and an accent chair. An empty bookshelf is next to the desk, waiting to be filled. It’s instantly my favorite piece of furniture in this oversized apartment. It’s a shelf that will be completely and utterly me, irrelevant to my dad’s more opulent tastes. I think of my small bedroom back home. I think of my IKEA furniture and HomeGoods linen baskets, and I miss everything so much my heart feels like someone is pushing down on it. But a small thought creeps up into my mind: Why couldn’t we have lived like this in New York? How have my mom and dad been living so differently all my life? And why did I never know this? Before I head back downstairs, I

see a piece of paper with a WiFi name and password; when I connect, a stream of messages come through all at once on KakaoTalk. For the first time since leaving New York, a genuine smile spreads across my face.

**SOPH**

had the most boring day without you.



can't believe you'll be on a plane for  
another 8 hours 🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔

what the hell why does it take so damn  
long to get to Korea?! 🇰🇷

text when you land. Must know you're  
alive!!!! 🦴👍

hey fave designer, here's your reminder  
that you better submit your design ap-  
plication soon!!!

Sophia's last message makes me feel motivated. Everything here is closed still, but in a few hours, I need to find a way to mail in my portfolio after some finishing touches. I can't miss the deadline because of an address change debacle. Deep down, I know that even if I get selected, I'll need to somehow convince my mom, who doesn't think interior design is a legitimate career option, and my dad, who has no idea I even enjoy design and considers my choices too "colorful," to send me to

New York for the first weekend of November, which seems highly unlikely. But I'll deal with that if I even get selected for the final in-person round. For now, baby steps.

Taking a deep breath, I open my laptop and head to the homepage of Maison & Saito Interiors. I created a login for my profile a while ago, and even though it's completely blank, just seeing my name on the M&S website gives me butterflies. I wonder what it'd be like to work at a place like that, one of the best interior design firms in the world. Because the position is for rising seniors only, this is my one shot. I comb through the scanned files on my drive. It makes me miss New York so much. Almost all my sketches of the city are included, from Harlem to Prospect Park, Central Park and the West Village, the Bronx and Bushwick. Flushing to Hell's Kitchen, of course. It's everything I've known until now, everything I miss and everything I wish I could go back to. Most of my portfolio was created in secret, over lazy summer days and spring evenings when my mom was at work or running errands. I don't realize that tears are streaming down my cheeks and only notice because my laptop keys have fat droplets on them. I pull on the bottom of my T-shirt and wipe the keypad dry, then wipe my eyes.

i'm alive!! barely. jk.

miss you so much.

you still better tell me all the details  
from your audition, my superstar  
best friend.

so jetlagged.

this place is nutso.

Before going back downstairs, I lie down on my satin sheets for a moment, the exhaustion of a supremely long (albeit supremely fancy) flight washing over me. I can faintly hear my mom's voice calling me from downstairs, but sleep comes to me before I can will my body to get up and face my parents again.

## FOUR

**W**hen I wake up, it's past lunchtime. I can't believe I slept for almost six hours straight in the middle of the morning. It's still Wednesday, and even though it's the middle of the night in New York, my stomach growls. I tiptoe downstairs, not comfortable enough here to roam around freely. My mom is sitting in the den by herself, reading or watching something on her phone.

"Morning," I mumble.

My mom starts when she sees me.

I look at her suspiciously. "Why so surprised? Didn't see me?"

She gives me a half smile, and for a brief second, our relationship feels normal again. "Didn't hear you. Did you sleep well, Mel?"

I nod and sit down next to her on the sofa. "Mom," I say slowly, "is Halmoni or Rebecca Eemo sick?"

I feel a wave of relief as my mom's mouth opens slightly in confusion. "No, of course not, honey. Why would you think that?"

I shake my head. “Everything just seemed sudden. Us moving here, all of that.”

My mom hands me a yogurt and spoon and pats the chair next to her. “Mel, I really am sorry I sprung this on you. In my head, it had gone on for a while, and I was so conflicted I didn’t want to bring you into it. But ultimately, I do think this is the right choice.”

I pick at my yogurt for a few seconds. “Did Dad always live here?”

“No, not in this villa. It’s recent. Since he became a partner at your grandfather’s law firm.”

“Wow. He got a lot of upgrades when he became a partner, huh. So he didn’t *always* live this ridiculously lavish life?”

Mom raises her eyebrows at me. “What’s going on inside that head of yours?”

I let out an exasperated sigh and stand up in frustration. “I don’t know exactly, Mom. You uprooted our lives and moved us to Korea right before my school year was going to start, and it turns out my dad lives in a huge mansion apartment with five bedrooms and a driver, while we lived in a tiny walk-up apartment my whole life. I don’t know what’s going on inside my head, either, but I sure as hell can tell you I’m confused because no one’s being honest with me.”

My mom releases an equally loud, even more tired-sounding sigh and pinches her forehead. “Feeling a little dramatic, are we? This villa isn’t paid for by your dad. It’s your grandfather’s money.”

“Harabeoji is paying for this?”

“Paid. He already bought it for your dad. For us.”

Before I can ask anything else, my dad walks in. “There you are.”

“Hi, Appa.”

“Here.” My dad hands me a black, weighted credit card. “This doesn’t have a limit and it’s under your name and active, but don’t go too crazy.”

“Yeobo,” my mom says, standing up and taking the credit card from me, “she’s a student, she doesn’t need a credit card.”

My dad frowns but speaks calmly. “She’s almost an adult—sixteen in the US but eighteen in Korea. A young woman of her age should have a credit card on hand, especially for emergencies.”

“Melody is—”

But my dad cuts her off. “I already have it under her name, and she’ll need it once school starts for eating out with her peers. And she might need it tomorrow when she meets Junghoon,” he says gruffly.

At this unknown name, I jump in on the conversation. “Wait, wait, wait. Who’s Junghoon?”

By the guilty look on my mom’s face, I can tell she’s in on this.

“A young, smart boy,” my dad responds, matter-of-factly, and extremely unhelpfully.

“Good for him, but that tells me nothing. Mom?”

My mom averts her gaze.

“Solmi,” my dad cuts in. “Junghoon Kim is the son of one of Korea’s most preeminent professors. Some people think their family is not that wealthy, but I think they secretly are. And I got you a meeting with him. It’s important you associate with the right people now that you’re in Korea. Junghoon’s father was also very excited for this to happen. I will not have my

daughter running around with just anyone.” My dad tugs on the lapels of his jacket, straightening them out.

In that moment, I piece it together.

“You’re setting me up on a blind date?” Though I don’t intend it to, it comes out like I’m asking a question.

“It’s not a blind date, Solmi,” my dad says. “He goes to your school, so it’s a good way for you to meet a classmate before you start on Monday.”

“Then why can’t I just meet him on Monday?” I keep my voice measured because he is sounding increasingly annoyed.

“Solmi, you accept help when your parents help you.”

My eyes fall to the floor and I twist my fingers uncomfortably. I look to my mom for support, but she doesn’t say anything. “I’m not interested, but thank you,” I say, trying again to stand up for myself.

“This is not up for discussion.” My dad doesn’t even look at me; his eyes are focused on the paper in front of him.

If my mom had told me this, I’d fight her. My dad and I don’t fight, though. We don’t laugh together, either. It’s always been surface level, which I never minded, but up until now, I was never in a situation where I was forced by him to do anything I didn’t want to do. My dad takes my silence as obedience. And I guess I do, too.

“Try to sleep at a normal time tonight so you’re not so jet-lagged tomorrow. The driver will be picking you up at eleven a.m. to take you to the meeting location. You both must be tired. I’ll go warm up lunch,” my dad says, ending the discussion and walking away. I can see him from the den at an angle, grabbing bowls and plates.

"The ahjumma came by while you were asleep. She made a lot of food," my mom says, as if changing the topic would make me feel any better.

"I didn't realize coming to Korea meant letting Dad control my life," I say to her quietly. My shoulders tighten and rise toward my ears. "And I don't *want* to use a driver. Tell Dad it's all his."

"Seoul International Academy starts Monday. Your dad is just trying to help so the transition is easier for you." She reaches over to pat down my hair, but I swat her hand away.

"I don't mind being friendless for a few days, okay?" I speak slowly, using all my strength to keep my voice calm. "I don't know why you're taking his side when he's the one that never came back to us. I'll go on this forced date just to get out of this apartment."

My mom doesn't say anything, and when I sneak a glance at her, her eyes are focused on her food, wordlessly moving the soup around with her spoon. Neither of us talk for the entire meal. I spend the early afternoon unpacking my boxes with my door closed and wondering if Sophia has already gone to bed. A couple of hours into it, I hear the vibration of my phone on the bookshelf and immediately rush to it.

"You're awake! And you read my mind. Thank God you called," I say, my voice coming out high-pitched in my excitement at seeing her face.

"Finally," she says, grinning. "Miss you so much. Tell me everything. Although, I guess there isn't much yet, huh?"

"That's what you'd think," I say, and then I give her the full run-down of the new apartment, the flight over, and of course, the forced date happening in less than twenty-four hours.

"That's wild. Aren't we too young to be going on blind dates? Isn't that what moms do when we're forty and single?"

"He said it like it was the most normal thing."

"So are you going?"

I look at the ceiling and think for a second before I answer her. "On the one hand, I want to get out of this apartment, away from my parents. And honestly, I feel uncomfortable about disagreeing with my dad so outright. I've never been super comfortable with him in general, you know?"

"Yeah. He's very . . . uh . . . formal."

"On the other hand, I want to take a stand. Like a You-Can't-Control-Me Stand."

Sophia laughs and then frowns. "I guess you can look at it as an introduction to Seoul? I'm sure a lot has changed since the one time you went when you were like six."

"Maybe. I'll think about it. I don't have to decide right now, anyway."

She gives me a knowing look, and it's so familiar that it aches not being in the same room as her. "Pretty sure your dad already decided for you. Plus, you're too obedient and uncomfortable with him to say no."

"Whatever. I don't care what he wants," I lie. Of course I care. She's right. Soph knows better than anyone how bad I am at resisting authority, especially when that authority is my dad. The fact that we've never really had a meaningful conversation before makes saying "no" feel like a declaration of war. I'd be starting a battle I'd end up losing because one, I'm "just a kid"; two, I'm in an unfamiliar country; and three, it's the first time our family is living under one roof together, and I'm not ready for an emotional blowup twenty-four hours in.

JET LAG MAKES YOU HUNGRY AND NOT HUNGRY AT weird hours, so that night, I end up skipping dinner. Surprisingly, I manage to keep myself awake until 11:00 p.m., and when I wake up the next morning, it's a little before seven. Melody one, jet lag zero. The morning passes quickly as I beat almost fifteen levels on *Candy Crush*, and then I finally get out of bed and look through my clothes. I have no interest in impressing my prospective classmate, but I won't leave the apartment looking like a slob, either. Eventually I find myself standing with cropped wide-legged jeans and a baggy beige plaid tee draped over me in front of my full-length mirror, perfectly propped up against the wall and showing me a complete head-to-toe reflection of myself. I could fit three of me side-by-side in this mirror, whereas my narrow white over-the-door IKEA mirror in New York was just barely big enough to check my outfits.

I head downstairs in my pajamas and find it completely empty. My dad is back at work, I assume, but he messages me to say that the driver will be waiting at the designated time outside our home. I guess he's sending him from the office. I open the fridge and find grapefruit juice and boil myself an egg.

"Knock-knock."

I turn my head in surprise. You really can't hear when someone is walking around this place.

"How's your jet lag?" my mom asks me.

"There's no door, why are you knocking?" I ignore her question.

She comes closer to me and sits down on a dining chair. "Your dad is trying," she says, "in his own way."

“And if you were trying, you would have told him he’s being unreasonable,” I snap at her.

The bags under her eyes make me feel almost guilty. “Mel, we’re all trying our best to make this work and keep the peace. You think you can do your part?” She doesn’t sound mad as she says this. More sad, which makes me feel worse.

I turn my attention to peeling my soft-boiled egg. “Are you going to start working here, like you did back home?” I ask without looking up.

“Probably not. I’ll have plenty to do helping you adjust to your new school and taking care of other things while we’re living here. I do miss everyone at Two Points though.”

My mom’s been the receptionist at a tech firm in midtown New York for as long as I can remember. It’ll probably feel weird for her to suddenly stop working now, but I don’t want to bring it up.

“I’m sixteen, I don’t need help adjusting. But what other things?” I think of Aunt Rebecca, and I wonder if that’s what my mom is thinking about, too.

“It’s been so many years since I last lived here, just people to see, people to catch up with. Just stuff. Melody, I know you don’t want to go out today, but you’re just meeting a new friend. That’s all it is, okay? Think of it like that and who knows, you might have a better time than you think. All I’m asking is for a little bit of openness.”

Without a word, I take my egg and juice upstairs back to my room.

o o o

IN THE SHORT AMOUNT OF TIME I'M LYING ON MY bed after consuming my sad and lonely breakfast, I speed-read through *Coraline*—one of my comfort reads—and drift into a fantasy about “other parents.” Eventually, I throw on the outfit I picked out earlier and grab my Strand tote and go outside to meet the driver. I'm morally opposed to taking this ride, but I don't know how to get around Seoul yet, so I accept it for now. I need to learn to find my own way around the city as soon as possible. In the car ride over, I send Soph an update and a barf emoji, though she's probably sleeping by now. The driver stops on a long street lined with cafés and boutique stores. Dad said I was meeting this guy at a place called Like Coffee. I search for the name, but there aren't many signs. All the storefronts look so hipster; the only signs that stick out are logos or random letters. One store's sign just says *W::*.

Eventually I see it: in a thin, cursive-type font, a sign that reads:

*likecoffee*

It kind of looks like it's trying too hard, but it also looks chic and minimalistic. I catch my reflection before I push open the door; my neon yellow flats match my neutral outfit nicely. My hair is up in a messy bun so that my gold hoops shine against the blazing sun outside. I go inside and scan the room, not entirely sure who I should be looking for. I've never seen the guy, and Appa didn't show me a picture. An overeager hand waves at me from across the room, attached to a boy who has a too-large grin on his face.

I dread this instantly. Uneasily, I make my way over to him

and stick out my hand, like I'm here for a job interview.

"Solmi!" He leans in for a hug as I sit down across him, and it's a very cringy few seconds as he leans forward more and more to try and properly hug me.

"Awk-ward," I say, leaning my head farther back and lightly pushing him away. "And it's Melody."

"I knew it was you from the moment you walked in," he says, beaming. He's not ugly; he has smallish eyes, and his hair is parted mostly to one side but isn't waxed or styled much.

"How'd you know it was me?" I ask. "You're Junghoon?"

He nods. "My father showed me a picture of you that Abeonim sent. You look different though. More beautiful." He uses the formal word for "father" when he references my dad and it makes me cringe.

He's staring at me all googly-eyed and grinning, and I'm suddenly seized with an impulse to poke him to see if he's real. He seems like he popped out of one of the cheesy K-dramas my mom watches. When I squint at him, his face shows a flicker of discomfort, but it's so fleeting that I can't be sure I really saw it.

"Let's go get coffee." He's acting all cute. Not that I find him cute, but *he* thinks he's being cute. "Something wrong?"

I could think of twenty things wrong, but I just look at him and shrug instead. "Okay."

"My treat. What can I get you?" he says, cocking his head to the side and gesturing to the seat to get me to sit down again, the smile never leaving his face.

I fight the urge to grimace outright and fail. "I'll pay for my own."

He shakes his head. "You're adorable. No, really, I'll pay."

*Adorable?* I don't deign to respond to this and instead pull

out the credit card my dad gave me, which I didn't think I needed but turns out to be very useful right now. I twiddle it between my fingers tauntingly. "Unlimited." I flash him my fakest smile and head over to the register without looking back.

When I return with my iced americano, I find Junghoon has moved to the same side of the table as me and is now sitting next to my tote bag. "What are you doing?"

"I wanted to sit a little closer to you. The table is so wide. It's better this way."

I really think this guy is pranking me. I exaggeratedly look around us for a secret video camera or a cast of TV crew members. "Are you going to get your coffee?"

He pats the seat next to him. "Yep, I was saving our seats. I'll go get mine now," he says cheerfully.

I sit down and watch him as he walks toward the register. The second he starts placing his order, I grab my things and rush out of the café as fast as I can. Three minutes with Junghoon is three more than I can handle. I barely make it out the door (damn the little silver bell!) when a hand grabs mine. A K-drama moment! One of those scenes in dramas I always wish guys would stop doing.

Instinctively, I pull away with all my strength. "What the hell are you doing?" I say a little too loudly, my annoyance unmistakable.

His smile finally falters. Around us, people start staring, and a few shuffle past me from the street into the coffee shop.

"Are you leaving?" He has a look mixed of confusion and annoyance on his face.

"Yes."

"Why?"

A small part of me feels guilty. It's mostly my dad I'm mad at. "Sorry. I just, this isn't what I imagined my first few days in Korea to look like, okay?" I speed walk down the main road. I must have caught him off guard, because he remains standing there for a few seconds before jogging to catch up with me.

"Wait, hold on!"

When I hear his footsteps, I turn around so suddenly that my now loose bun whips his face and he nearly bangs into me.

"Clearly I made you mad, but I wasn't trying to," he says. "I'm sorry, okay?"

My expression must soften a little, because he continues.

"I was just trying to get to know you. Honest."

I chew my lips again. "Fine. But no more calling me adorable or anything resembling that." I continue walking a few steps before I turn around and look at him. "Are you coming? Might as well explore."

His grin comes back. "So we're continuing our date?"

Ha. So it is a date. We walk silently down the main road, and I notice that the street is lined with vendors selling beautiful jewelry. My eyes linger on a booth with dainty gold jewelry.

"What is this place?" I ask him.

"This area is called Garosugil. It's popular for its boutique stores and some designer brands nearby, I think. I don't really come here often."

I walk over to the gold jewelry booth and try on some bracelets. I pick up a thin gold bangle and ask how much it is. When the ahjumma working the booth tells me the price in Korean won, I shut my eyes to figure out the conversion into dollars. Then I slip the bracelet off and put it back on its booth. Eighty dollars is a lot more than I'd ever pay for a flimsy bracelet, but

before I realize what he's doing, Junghoon hands his card to the owner and adds a thicker gold bracelet to the purchase, which he slips onto his own arm. In one swift motion, he puts the thinner of the two around my wrist.

"No, I really—"

He cuts me off.

"Look," he says, shaking his wrist at me. "Couple bracelets!"

*Dear Lord.*

"Couple bracelets?" I repeat.

"Do you like them?"

I stare at him, not in the mood to argue again with a future-classmate-slash-current-stranger. "Umm, I mean, I don't want it though. And I don't need you to—"

"You never know what the future holds," he says with a nudge. I am in too much shock to immediately respond to this statement.

Finally I shake my head at him. "You really are straight out of a Korean drama," I say as I continue walking.

"So, what do you want to know about Korea?" he asks, while casually slinging his arm around my shoulders. I not so casually wiggle out from underneath.

"Okay, listen. Can you please relax with the physical contact? This week already sucks and I don't need it getting any worse. We don't know each other like that, okay?"

He doesn't say anything back, which is a relief. I'm just trying to make it home in one piece without pissing off my dad too much if he gets wind of this horrible date. I look at my cell phone. The driver is picking me back up at 3:00 p.m. I need to last three more hours.

For a while, we walk past bougie-looking stores in silence

and for the first time since meeting Junghoon, I'm not completely annoyed. The street we're on now is wider and cleaner, and the people-watching is entertainment enough.

We walk into a store that looks like it only sells clothes in neutral colors: white, beige, gray. It's a dream. This is my ideal wardrobe—plus of course, my essential single pop of color, like my yellow neon flats. Right on cue, Junghoon breaks the silence, and I am immediately back to screaming internally in annoyance. "Here," he says, extending his arm, "give me your bag."

"What?" I shake my head and instead turn to browse through a rack of soft beige and brown dresses and blouses.

"I'll take your bag."

"I'd ask why you're offering, but I'm not sure I want to know."

"I can hold it for you while you try on clothes."

I sigh. "I can hold my own bag, Junghoon. Been doing it all my life, believe it or not."

"Okay. I guess I find your self-reliance attractive," he says, walking around the store.

I stare at his back. I find it very odd that he doesn't *look* like the type of guy to say the things he's been saying. Or the type of guy to casually throw an arm around a girl he just met. But maybe I just don't know Korean guys. I switch over to a different section of the boutique displaying beautiful silk tops. I stop in front of a stylish white blouse and imagine it with my bright red skinny jeans. I look at the price tag and am instantly appalled. "Four hundred twenty dollars for a T-shirt?"

Junghoon walks over and sees the satin blouse I'm holding up.

"That anyone would pay four hundred twenty dollars for a shirt with fabric this thin and no real design or any sort of

embroidery on it seems beyond unreasonable.” I insa to the salespeople and head back into the humid August outdoors.

Junghoon frowns. “It’s not that bad, in my opinion. If you really love it, I don’t—”

I put my hand up close to his face. “Don’t finish that sentence. *Please.*”

He makes his mouth small and doesn’t say anything.

I rub my eyes, exhausted. I’m jet-lagged, Junghoon’s still annoying, and I haven’t eaten a proper lunch yet. “Is there anywhere we can grab a quick bite before I head back home? I’m starving.”

His eyes light up. “I know a place,” he says, pulling me by my arm until we get to a small restaurant with red signage against a white backdrop. Next to the restaurant name, white plastic rice cakes stick out in 3D.

“Okay, can you let go and talk now?”

“Oops,” he says, dropping my arm. “This place has the best ddukbokki you’ll ever eat.”

I look above me at the laminated menu stuck to the walls. It’s written in cute fonts and lists various combinations of spicy rice cakes and deep-fried foods, ranging from squid to vegetables to fried seaweed rolls. Luckily, underneath the many, many Korean words there are English translations. My mouth is watering, and even though I’ve never tried this place before—or any place in Korea, for that matter—I know it’s going to be good. The spicy aroma of gochujang paste fills the small restaurant. One ahjumma working behind the steamy foods and stirring rice cakes asks us for our order. I let Junghoon place the order while I point to a few things that interest me. Within a few minutes, our food is ready, and Junghoon goes to grab a

tray and brings everything back. I can see the steam rising from our late lunch, the mountain of rice cakes lathered in a deep red sauce.

“This looks amazing.”

“Wait till you actually try it.”

We plunge our chopsticks into the bowl and make sure the dduk is well coated in the sauce before stuffing our faces. It seems stupid of me to have not guessed how spicy this would be; Junghoon doesn't seem to experience this at all, but my mouth feels like an army of bees have just flown in and stung it. The heat of the rice cakes in my mouth combined with the thick red pepper sauce swirling around inside make my throat feel like it's burning. But through the suffering, I'm also marveling at the taste. I've had ddukbokki a lot in K-town back home, but it never tasted this good. Not even close. After I gulp down multiple cups of water and recover somewhat, I watch Junghoon in grudging admiration as he eats his ddukbokki unconcernedly, swallowing one rice cake after another without so much as taking a sip of water.

“Is this not spicy at all to you?” I ask.

“This restaurant is actually not known for their spiciness. If you think this is spicy, Solmi, you've been in America for way too long.”

It feels weird to hear my Korean name spoken out loud by someone else. It's usually only in legal documents or spoken in disappointed tones by my dad. “Melody,” I remind him, since I mentioned that the very first time he called me Solmi.

“Huh?”

“It's Melody. I don't like being called Solmi.”

“Why not?”

“Because. I just prefer Melody. It feels more me than ‘Solmi’ does.”

“Well, that seems a little discriminatory.”

“You don’t get to judge that.”

“I’m not judging, I’m just sharing an opinion. It just seems a little arbitrary that you would have such a strong dislike for your Korean name, when it’s your *actual* name. Legally, I’m guessing your birth certificate says ‘Solmi’ on it? Thereby, Solmi is your real name.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Using words like ‘thereby’ don’t make you sound any smarter. We get it, your dad is a professor. Hurrah.”

“Fine, Melody it is.”

“Thank you. Do you have an English name?”

“No, just Junghoon.”

“Right,” I say, pointing my chopsticks at him, “so you wouldn’t understand.”

I turn my attention back toward my food and pick up a crispy seaweed roll. I dip it into the ddukbokki sauce and savor the combination of the crispy fried seaweed, the soft clear vermicelli noodles inside, and the rich, thick sauce melting together inside my mouth. Junghoon, perhaps sensing my earlier agitation, grins at my satisfied expression and proceeds to also dip the fried vegetables in the sauce. I feel like we’ve both learned that silence is golden with us, so we finish the rest of our food quietly and drop off the empty bowls and plates by the drop-off station and head out.

I have one more hour to kill, and I’m typing out a message to Sophia when Junghoon nudges me.

“So you want to meet up again tomorrow?”

I shouldn’t even be shocked by his off-putting questions and

comments after just a couple of hours in his company, but I am. “No, not really,” I manage to say. “Not at all, actually. And I wouldn’t believe you if you said you did!”

He walks over to a street vendor nearby with a bunch of hoodies and tees bearing the Supreme logo on them. “Once you get to know me, I’m *supreme*,” he says, pointing at the tees and grinning.

I try to suppress my laughter and shake my head. “To someone in this world, I’m sure you are.”

“To most people, believe it or not,” he answers, walking back over from the vendor. “When’s your driver coming anyway?”

“At three.”

He looks at his phone. “Fifty-two minutes.” And then sighs.

I study his expression. “I’m getting the sense you also don’t want to be here.”

Junghoon doesn’t say anything. “Why don’t we walk that way? We haven’t gone down that street yet.”

I trail behind him a few steps, and as we turn a corner, I see a store I am immediately drawn to. Through the glass window, I can see little trinkets, small wooden sculptures, and notebooks. It looks like a design store. “Hey,” I call out to Junghoon. “Come back, let’s go in here.”

Without a word, he turns around and follows me in. This Junghoon I can get on board with.

Inside the store, I feel an overwhelming sense of calm. Large green plants dot the space, making it feel more like an oasis than a concept store. In the corner of the store is a small coffee bar with wooden stumps for sitting and small black circular tables. The store itself sells a variety of small vases, minimalist stationery, artistic-looking paper holders, and other small home

decor items. The pleasure of wandering through this newly discovered sanctuary takes my mind off Junghoon, off my parents, off being in Korea. Right now, I'm just browsing a design shop and in love. When I wake from my trance, Junghoon is nowhere to be found. I finally leave the store and find him waiting outside.

"How long have you been out here?"

He shrugs. "It's almost three. Is your driver coming here?"

"I told him I'll meet him at the subway stop."

"Hope you enjoyed the ddukbokki."

"I did. I really did," I tell him honestly. A lingering awkward pause fills the air. "Well, see you Monday, I guess." I turn around and walk the other way toward the subway stop.

"It's the other way," he calls from behind me, and I can tell by the way he's saying it that he's almost teasing me.

I silently turn around, raising my hand to cover the side of my face and avoid eye contact when I walk past him.

A surge of relief washes over me when I see the familiar car drive up. Overcome with jet lag, sleep hits me hard when I slouch into my seat, and however many minutes later, the driver is shaking me gently awake, informing me that I'm home. It takes a moment for me to adjust, and for a very brief second, I feel disoriented and confused about where I am.

Then I remember.

*Oh, right. I'm still in Korea.*

## FIVE

**A**fter the worst blind date, the rest of the weekend goes by too quickly, most of it spent in intermittent naps or being just barely awake enough to eat and then go knock out again. On Friday, while my dad is at work, I carefully put my portfolio into a box and ask my mom to help me send a package to Sophia. She believes me when I tell her it's filled with snacks and a cute dress I bought while out with Junghoon. I did buy her a cute little trinket from the design store though, so hopefully she'll like that. By Sunday evening, I feel mildly better, but not at all ready to start at a new school. I'm still feeling groggy when I realize someone is calling me from my door.

"It's dinnertime, Solmi." I can hear my dad's voice from the threshold.

My head hurts from a weekend of too much sleeping, but the pleasant aroma of Korean food draws me downstairs.

"Finally awake?" my dad asks me once I join him at the dining table.

“Yeah, jet lag sucks.” I pull up a chair and sit slouched in it while studying the fancy-looking plates in front of me. Thin, flat, charcoal-colored stoneware plates with heavy silverware are set on the table. The table is covered in galbijjim, at least seven different traditional side dishes, and doenjang jjigae. Steam rises from the stone pot in the center, which has a beautiful wooden ladle next to it, and my mom brings over little bowls filled with rice for each of us. In the hours I was awake on Saturday, I skillfully avoided my dad or pretended to be asleep when I heard him poking his head through the door, so the topic of my horrid date with Junghoon has not yet been discussed. I think of Mister Dumpling and its ten dollar dinner combo of General Tso chicken and fried rice that my mom and I used to get at least twice a week. Mr. Wu—the owner of Mister Dumpling, which is right in the building next to ours—always gave us extra helpings of chicken and fortune cookies.

My dad eats a spoonful of rice and turns to me. “Good of you for trying with Junghoon. His father told me you two had a decent time. As friends. But keep him in your network.”

I pretend to rub my eyes so my dad doesn’t see them practically rolling over backward. *Network*? Really? I open my mouth to protest, but he hands me a thick stack of paper before I can say anything.

“Here is all the information you need to know about your classes. The administrator at Seoul International Academy—SIA—will give you details on your exact schedule tomorrow.” Maybe that’s what my dad was trying to give me on Saturday.

I take them from him and study them. The classes seem challenging, but nothing completely outside of what I’d expect from

junior year. AP World History, AP English, Pre-Calculus . . . Honors Korean?

"Wait, what's this?" I pull out the sheet with "Honors Korean" on it.

"Your Korean class," he says.

"I'm nowhere good enough to take an honors class in Korean, Appa."

"You can catch up. You took Korean classes in Queens, didn't you?"

"In Flushing. But that was when I was in elementary school. It's been years."

"Exactly," he says. "You are Korean. You need to know how to speak your country's language."

"Yeobo, I think Honors Korean will be too tough for Melody right now," my mom chimes in as she brings over three glasses of water.

"Thank you. How am I supposed to be the top student if I'm forced into a class I *know* is beyond my level?"

"You'll catch up," he says sternly.

"She shouldn't need to catch up. She can start where she belongs and learn at an appropriate pace," my mom argues back.

"It's not up to her to decide that."

"It's *her* schedule." My mom's voice is rising to match my dad's.

I slouch lower in my seat, uncomfortable and guilty that they're fighting already because of me, though I'm grateful my mom is finally saying something back to him.

"She's Korean, she should be in Honors Korean." My dad's lips are tight as a line as he looks at my mom.

“Us coming to Korea doesn’t mean you get to decide all of Melody’s schedule.” My mom stands up, fists clenched.

I grab her arm. “It’s . . . it’s okay, Umma. I will. I’ll catch up.” I wish I didn’t have to, but for the peace of their relationship, I force myself to believe I can.

My mom squeezes my arm in a futile attempt to encourage me as she sits back down and regains her composure. After a few moments of silence, my mom breaks the ice. “So, tell us more about Junghoon? You’ve been in your room all weekend.” She forces a smile, but I can tell she’s stressed inside.

I poke at a grain of rice. “Very Korean.” I shudder at the unwelcomed memory of him slinging his arm around me. “It was fine. He was fine. It was nice getting to meet a classmate, I guess,” I add, trying to throw out whatever words might fully divert our topic from this almost-fight.

“Did you enjoy exploring Seoul?” she asks.

I nod. “Yeah, I guess so. I went to a cool design store which I liked. And the ddukbokki here is so much better.”

My dad shows a small smile when I praise the food.

I bring a spoonful of stew to my mouth and study it before slurping. “I still haven’t met the ahjumma. Does she come every day?”

“Three times a week. She wasn’t here during the weekend, but she made all this on Friday while you were asleep, again.”

“Is she going to join us for some dinners?”

My dad scoffs in a way that makes me feel a little stupid. “She’s just the help, Solmi.”

“I’m sure she has a name, and I’m sure she eats,” I mutter. I purse my lips together tightly, wishing I had the boldness to say this louder. Is there anyone more elitist than my father? I force

a fake smile and excuse myself to go back to my room, where I eagerly open KakaoTalk to call Sophia.

"I haven't talked to you in days," she says, greeting me with the same level of excitement I feel to see her. Seeing Soph, even through a screen, washes away thoughts I have about my dad, about my whole situation, my life, really, and I feel comfortable again.

"That's because I've been basically sleeping on and off for the last two days."

"Bad jet lag?"

"Absolutely horrible."

"Is that your *room*?" Sophia asks me, squinting at her screen and trying to see past me.

I flip the camera around and give her a tour of my room.

"Your room is as big as your New York apartment!"

"It is *massive*. Did you get the package?"

"My fake for-Sophia-but-really-for-Maison & Saito package?"

"Exactly the one."

"Not yet. But didn't you only ship it out on Friday? I'm sure it takes longer than a few days to get here."

I bite my lip nervously. "Yeah, you're probably right. I just don't want to miss the deadline. That would be the saddest way to not be selected for the final round."

"You should have listened to me and sent it in while you were in New York."

"I couldn't. I had to properly look at it and add finishing touches to it. And I was too busy being consumed with anger about my mom ruining my life."

"Okay, okay, now for the important part of this call. Tell me everything about your blind date," Soph says expectantly.

I update her on every detail from my “date” with Junghoon, the T-shirt and bracelet shenanigans, the design concept store, the ddukbokki that burned my insides, and then the Honors Korean conversation at dinner. At the end of our phone chat—which is cut short because it’s the first day of junior year for her—I make her promise to update me on her callbacks.

“Clinton Park High isn’t going to be the same without you today.”

“Seoul International Academy is going to suck since you won’t be there.”

After we hang up, I open my sketchbook to a new page and end up drawing Clinton Park High. The gray cement building, the heavy doors, the hallways with blue lockers and our mascot, a tiger. I draw the back of me and Soph, walking with our arms linked. I’m wearing high-waisted shorts with a men’s medium tee tucked into them, and Soph is wearing a red cotton dress with faded dandelions printed all over. Before I sleep, I study the information on my new classes one last time and stare at the uniform that hangs ominously on my door. What I’d give to be back home, breezing through school instead of worrying about tomorrow. A tear unexpectedly falls down my cheek, and I wipe it away bitterly and force myself to sleep instead.

IT’S 5:04 A.M. AND I AM AS AWAKE AS NEW YORKERS on a summer evening. I wish I could sleep another two hours before I have to get ready for school. Propping myself up against my large decorative pillows, I hold the phone in front of my face and video call Sophia, but she doesn’t pick up this

time. I reflect on how normal I felt only days ago as we talked about junior year. Never would I have imagined that it would start out this way. I open my KakaoTalk and see a message she sent while I was asleep.

**SOPH**

mr. reuben said he missed having you in class  
because you were the only one that seemed to  
understand symbolism (besides me)

lol 😞 wish me luck, day one at SIA  
starts in two hours.

I glare at my uniform, mocking me from the entryway. “You scream private school,” I say to it. I bring it down from its hanger and hold it up against me in front of my mirror. A pleated navy skirt with a beige checkered stripe running around an inch from the hem, a white blouse, and a navy tie. In a bag on the small sofa are the other uniform accessories my dad purchased: a thin checkered vest, a ribbon-like tie, a blazer, a cardigan, and knee-high socks. I don’t bother taking anything out of the bag since I’ll be wearing the bare minimum of this forced outfit. I throw the uniform over my chair and plop back onto my bed and read until it’s time to get ready. I hear padded footsteps coming down the hallway, and a moment later, my mom pokes her head through the door.

“Morning, honey. Happy first day of school,” she says, walking over and kissing the top of my head.

“Morning. Thanks,” I mumble.

She sits on my bed with me and plays with my hair. “How do

you feel? I can't believe my little girl is a junior in high school."

"Old and sad."

At my answer, my mom bursts out laughing. I involuntarily smile at the sound of her laughter, which I haven't heard much of since coming to Seoul.

"You're so young, and in time, you'll feel better. I promise."

When my mom heads downstairs to make breakfast and coffee, I begin getting ready, which doesn't take long when you have a uniform. I apply my winged eyeliner, put on some hoops, and throw my hair up into my signature bun. When I look at myself in the full-length mirror, I have to admit I don't hate how I look. It's a somewhat okay schoolgirl-chic vibe. I make a wry face at myself for liking the attire even a little bit and head downstairs. My mom changed into her around-the-house T-shirt, and I don't say anything but silently appreciate it. It's her oversized i am rufus tee that I won at a carnival in Jersey, with a worn-out picture of the naked mole rat from *Kim Possible*. She grins when she catches me looking at her shirt and hands me a cup of coffee, and I join her to gulp down my yogurt.

"Your father left for work earlier, but he said you could take the driver to school."

"No thanks. I'll take the bus. I can't give dad the satisfaction of puppeteering every aspect of my life."

"Melody, please. The driver already took your dad to work and is waiting outside for you. I can't have my only offspring getting lost and disappearing on her first day of school. Now go, before you're late," she says, rushing me out the door with my backpack and cardigan.

"Fine, but it's still summer, I don't want this," I say, tossing

the cardigan inside the apartment and speed walking to the elevator.

In less than twenty minutes, the driver slows down to a large uphill. There are other cars in front of us, all similar, like this one. Black vehicles waiting single file to enter through the main campus. I look outside the window for a bus stop and see one at a distance, up a set of cement stairs. It feels pretty far from the school. At first glance, SIA doesn't look like a school: it looks more like an expensive hybrid between a college campus and a giant estate, with modern glass exteriors and marble pillars flanking the entrance. What I assume is the main building of the school is tall, wide, and very formidable in appearance. At a distance, I see a large grass field and a few smaller buildings. The main grounds of the school are packed with clusters of students of all ages, hugging each other and taking first-day-of-school selfies. I feel so out of place as I walk past the other kids and look for the administrator's office. My mom had offered to come with me, but I didn't let her. If I had known how big the school was, maybe I would have. I make my way toward the main gates, where a large sign spells out seoul international academy.

In the main lobby, I weave through crowds of students more or less dressed the same and find my way to the office, where I receive my new student orientation packet. A few students glance my way and I pretend not to notice. I hope there are other new kids in my grade. After getting a brief overview of the basics from an expressionless administrative employee, I climb up three flights of stairs to find my homeroom. I notice the lockers here are all a darker grayish-navy color. When I open mine, I can't help but feel satisfied at how spacious they

are, too. No more shoving all my books and quickly slamming the door shut so they don't fall out.

I approach a door with a sign that tells me I'm at the right spot.

## ELEVENTH GRADE HOMEROOM 2—Miss Smith

Taking a deep breath, I walk in and slide into a seat in the back row. My mind goes back to Clinton High, where I always sat up front. Right now, I don't want to be seen by strangers. The class has less than thirty students, much smaller than what I'm used to back home. A thin, young-ish looking Korean woman walks in, wearing a hip-hugging pencil skirt and a form-fitting blazer, with heels that look like they could puncture clumsy toes. She's the hot teacher type, the type high school boys will talk about when she's not there. But she doesn't smile or have the warmth of an older, veteran teacher.

She drops her stack of books on the table, producing a bang and silencing the class. "I'm Miss Smith." She has a British accent. "Most of you know me, some of you don't. I am the junior class Homeroom 2 teacher, and the AP English and English Literature teacher. Whoever has AP English—expect it to be a challenge. We have one new student—"

The dark walnut door slides open so fast it hits the door-frame multiple times, making Miss Smith pinch the back of her neck, and a tall boy rushes into the empty seat next to me.

"Chae Wonjae!" she shouts in perfect Korean. "It's the first day of school. How can you possibly be late?"

The tall boy grins and shrugs. "The driver took a wrong turn, Miss Smith," he says coolly, as if having a geographically

challenged driver is something beyond his control.

"As I was saying," she continues, throwing Wonjae a disapproving look, "we have a new student from New York. Melody Solmi Lee, would you like to give a brief introduction about yourself?"

I stand and smooth my skirt, giving the class an awkward wave. "I'm Melody . . . My parents forced me to come here, I'd rather be in New York, and nice to meet you. Um . . . anything else?"

Miss Smith shakes her head. "That's fine. Be seated." As I sit, I steal glances at Chae Wonjae, who seems to show no remorse for his loud interruption. I wish he wasn't, but *wow* he is hot.

The first half of the day goes by quickly, and I'm forced to do that stupid introduction for every single class. This gets repetitive, so by third period, I am introducing myself to my unsuspecting classmates as Luna. It seems random enough to be funny. The teachers don't seem to be that amused, though. My fourth period is Pre-Calc, and I'm about to sit down (back row again) when a boy and girl approach me, their arms linked.

"Hi," says the girl. She's Korean, too, as is the boy, and it's surprisingly nice to have so many faces that are similar to my own. She looks so much cuter in her uniform than I do, and her legs look long, even though she's wearing high-top sneakers.

My jaw aches a little after having been fake smiling at teachers all day, but I give her one anyway. "Hey."

"So, you don't want to be here, huh?"

I shake my head. "Nope."

"Who would? New York's so much more fun," the guy says.

My ears perk up. "You've been?"

“We’ve both been. My family usually goes once a year,” he says.

I let out a gentle snort. “Not the same as living there.” I feel like a jerk almost immediately after I say that, and I hope I didn’t just ruin my chance at having a somewhat friend. “Sorry,” I add, just in case.

This guy has thin eyebrows but a great big mess of hair. He has a smaller nose and average-sized eyes. And large lips. “Someone’s a New York snob,” he teases.

I smile sheepishly.

“Kimbeom,” he says, extending his hand to me. His uniform pants have definitely been tailored. They’re a lot tighter than the other students’.

I shake it, and I’m relieved he doesn’t take offense.

“Yura,” the girl says. Her hair is slightly wavy, like a perm that’s coming undone, and she’s not wearing any makeup. Her thick lashes make it look like she’s wearing eyeliner, though. She looks like she’d be a very popular student, and I wonder why she seems to be going out of her way to be nice to me.

“Hello?” she says to me, smiling. She waves her hand in front of my face, and I glance at her perfectly manicured nails. She has a bright red half French manicure.

“Oh, sorry. I blanked out for a second,” I answer. “I’m Melody.” I hope my expression conveys how thankful I feel in that moment that someone finally talked to me.

The teacher walks in, so they scramble into their seats. I don’t pay attention to the other students and this time, the teacher either forgets that I’m a new student or doesn’t care, but either way I don’t have to give an introduction.

Pre-Calc ends up being hard. Really hard. Math was one of

the easier subjects for me at Clinton, so by the end of the class, I'm frazzled and frustrated. Thank God it's lunch time.

"Want to head to lunch together?"

I turn around and realize Yura is talking to me, so I nod, hopefully not too aggressively. "Sure. Thanks." *Thank God.* I seriously contemplated going to the library for the entire lunch period to avoid sitting alone. She walks with me to my locker as I put my stuff away. Our lockers turn out to be near each other, so after she's done stashing her things in hers, we head downstairs to the cafeteria. At first glance, the cafeteria doesn't seem all that special or private school-ish, but the food appears to be actually edible, not like American cafeteria food. I can appreciate that. We get our lunches and sit down at one of the many dark wooden tables (real wood!) and Kimbeom joins us shortly after.

I look at his tray, empty besides a can of Korean soda. "Why aren't you eating?"

"Going to ditch my next period and go to a restaurant with real food."

"This is a lot more real than my previous school's lunch," I say as I recall Clinton's mystery meats. I'm thinking about the uneven plastic tables from my old cafeteria when the loud clatter of a tray hitting the table jolts me out of my thoughts. I look up and see that we have been joined by another boy, the hot one I was staring at in homeroom.

"Who's this?" he asks.

I look at him with mild annoyance at the way he's talking as if I'm not right here.

"This is Melody," Kimbeom says, introducing me.

"She's in our homeroom, idiot," Yura says.

"Ah, the new girl. I'm Wonjae," Late Boy says to me with a goofy smirk.

I take another long look at him. He's wearing navy slacks and a white button-up shirt with a beige tie. But he's also wearing a navy vest and a cardigan with SIA's crest sewn in. He looks like a walking catalog for the school's uniform.

Before I comment, he leans in closer so we're face-to-face. "Why are you checking me out so intently?"

I don't avert my gaze, despite the unwelcome tingles I feel in my body with a guy I barely know five inches away from me. "I was trying to figure out if the school pays you to advertise their clothes." Sarcasm is the best way to cover up anything.

"Well, seeing as you have goose bumps on your arms, I'm guessing you're cold and wish you had your cardigan on you." He pauses. "Unless there's another reason for goose bumps," and laughs like he's the funniest guy in the world. "The school blasts the air conditioners every day. Rookie mistake, but you'll learn soon enough," he says, tsk-tsking and standing up. "I'm going to go eat with Junghoon. Bye, New Girl." Something in his tone, the way he talks, is very mocking, like he's laughing about something I'm not in on, and it bugs me instantly. *Of course* he's looking for Junghoon, I'm not even surprised that the two annoying guys I've met from this school are friends.

"Everyone seems to know everyone here," I say to Yura and Kimbeom.

Kimbeom nods. "It's a small school. There are only two home-room classes for juniors, so less than fifty of us total. I wish it was still summer vacation." He looks dreamily at his soda can.

"That's because you got to spend it with Rishaan in Singapore, cruising on yachts and sleeping in beautiful hotels

and doing nothing but ordering room service,” Yura says pointedly. “Rishaan is Beomee’s boyfriend. He moved to Singapore earlier in the spring, though. But before he left, the two of them were basically the envy couple of the school,” she explains to me.

Blush rises to his cheeks. “We’ve been together for almost a full year now. He is *dreamy*.”

“Very yummy,” she says, giggling. “You two are lucky. Meanwhile, I spent the summer in board meetings and being forced to meet boring old people in suits every other day.”

“Board meetings?”

Yura groans. “My mom wants to start having me see more of what she does at Dynasty before I take over her business one day. One day far, far into the future when she’s too old to do it herself, but that’s years away.”

“Dynasty is one of the biggest department stores in Seoul. Yura’s mom owns it. She’s a big fancy boss lady,” Kimbeom adds.

“Oh, wow. That must be a lot of pressure for you,” I say.

She waves like it’s no big deal. “It’s fine. My brother’s a lost cause to them, so they’re forcing me to take over one day. I get to shop there for free and already have lifetime job security.” She grins and gets up. “Bell’s gonna ring soon.”

I pick up my own tray and follow after her, smiling slightly.

I know the rest of the day will be easier since my main classes (AP English, Chemistry, AP World History, and Pre-Calc) are all before lunch. Since it’s the first day, study hall is designated as quiet time to read through all our course syllabi. I spot Junghoon, but we don’t make eye contact. I see him again for seventh period Creative Writing and groan inwardly. He’s

sitting in the opposite corner of the classroom. I send him a silent thank-you with my mind that he told his dad that we mutually agreed we were better as friends. Saved me a forced second date with him.

One more class and the day is over, but it's the one I dread the most: Honors Korean. The teacher, Mrs. Lee, thankfully doesn't give us any major assignments on day one, but it already feels harder than any other class at SIA. She briefly runs through a midterm project we'll be paired up for and informs us of monthly Korean exams. Great, I have a month to become fluent in Korean.

"Can you even speak Korean?" a teasing voice whispers from behind me.

I throw a defensive look halfway in the direction of what I now recognize as Wonjae's voice. "Better than you can speak English," I lie.

"Want my cardigan, New Girl?"

"Nope, not cold," I lie, even though I'm freezing and, yes, would actually like his cardigan. Instead I bury my attention into my textbook. After class, I see Yura by the lockers and rush up to ask her a question before she leaves. "Hey," I say, forcing some pep into my voice. "Do you know how to get to Hannam-dong from here?"

"Fastest way is by car. Why?"

I shake my head. "No, like a subway or something. I live around there."

Her eyes light up. "Wait! Me too! Do you live in Hannam Towers?"

"How'd you know?"

"A few of us from Homeroom 2 live in that area, and we're

all in HT,” she says. “It’s a pretty popular residential building in the neighborhood. Okay, if you’re dead set on taking public transit, you can walk down the big hill and up the stairs past the CU convenience store and take bus 402. Get off at Hannam O-guri, the Hannam intersection. It’s a pain though, the stairs are annoying.”

I give her a big smile. “Thanks.”

“So why are you taking the bus?”

“To annoy my dad. And to be myself,” I add, which she laughs at.

“See you tomorrow.”

Before Yura heads down the hallway, I shout at her back, “Was Pre-Calc hard for you?”

She turns around and shakes her head. “No, you?”

I bite my lip. “Nope,” I answer, in a lame attempt to save face.

Walking up the hill, I feel a stab of guilt about leaving the driver hanging. He’s probably still waiting at the school parking lot, wondering why his boss’s daughter hasn’t shown up yet. But he wouldn’t be fired for this, right? It’s completely out of his control that I just didn’t show up. I really hope my dad doesn’t blame him.

When I reach the convenience store, I stop inside for a snack. It’s a wonder how clean these convenience stores are compared to 7-Elevens in New York. The bell dings when I push open the door, and a guy who looks like he could be in college greets me politely. Food in convenience stores seems the most interesting, no matter where you are in the world, but this one in Korea ranks high among the convenience stores I’ve been to: varieties of flattened sausages on a stick, triangular kimbaps, instant noodles, and actual full-on meals that are prepackaged cover the

aisles. I'm exhausted and still jet-lagged, so I quickly browse the section of small kimbaps and pick the least suspicious-looking one, with a picture of a chicken. I pay for it with the credit card my dad gave me (which is proving to be useful in many occasions now) and carry it delicately to the bus stop. It seems easily smushable.

At the bus stop, there's this wooden shelter where a few grandpas and grandmas are sitting, and it has a roof so it's giving shade to them. I kind of want to join them, but I don't. I just sit down on the plastic chairs by the bus stop, and I closely study the arrows to unwrap it the right way.

"That impressed by mass-manufactured junk food?"

I jerk my head up and see Wonjae with his window down from a car. A driver has his eyes fixed on the road.

"Want a ride?" he asks. His eyes are so laser focused on me that it makes me feel a little exposed.

I shake my head, averting my eyes. "Nope, waiting for the bus."

"I can see that. Where do you live?"

"Hannam-dong."

His expression tells me something, but I'm not sure what. "You sure you don't want a ride?" he asks again.

What would I say in a car with a guy I just met that I find annoyingly attractive?! I shrug. "I'm good, thanks," I say, hoping he can't see any red in my cheeks. Plus, if I was going to take a car, I would've gone with my dad's driver.

"Suit yourself. Bye, New Girl."

I focus my attention back to the samgak kimbap and carefully peel the arrows off the wrapper. It doesn't work; half my kimbap drops to the floor with an ugly thud, and the kim,

which is supposed to stay as one piece, rips in three places. Pride takes over and I throw the rest in the garbage can next to me. *Fine, Korea. You don't want me to eat your food? I don't want it anyway.*

When the bus comes, I'm relieved to discover my credit card also functions as a transportation card, and I tap it against the machine as instructed by the driver. It takes me a bit to figure out how to get to Hannam Towers after the bus drops me off, but eventually, I see the cream-colored buildings. I start walking through the courtyard toward our building when I see an unwelcome presence reading on a stone bench.

My mouth falls open in surprise. "You're *stalking* me now?"

Junghoon looks up from his book. "Don't flatter yourself."

"What other explanation is there, then?"

"The natural guess is that I could also live here."

Oh. "Well, I hope it's not my building."

Junghoon looks at me like he is already tired of this conversation, which, funnily enough, is how I feel as well. "I can't be stalking you because I'm not interested in you." At my confused expression, he continues. "My dad forced me to go on that date. Didn't yours force you?"

"Yeah, so?"

"So I don't know what your relationship with your family is like, or if you tell your parents everything, but I needed to convince you that I was 'into you' so you wouldn't rat me out. My dad wanted me to get on your dad's good side, so I was forced to try and make a good impression."

"I would never!" I protest, crossing my arms.

"I wouldn't know that. Anyway, let's clear the air. I'm not into you, Melody. And for the record, I didn't actually want to

get matching bracelets with you and I wasn't dying to hold your bag, either. I just had to do all that to cover my back."

My words come out awkward and stilted. "Fine. Good. I'm glad." I think back to the date and how off I thought Junghoon was. How his actions didn't seem totally aligned with his facial expressions or the kind of person he came off as. It makes much more sense now. He faked it. "You're a horrible actor, do you know that?" I add.

He snorts and turns his attention back to his book. "If I'm such a bad actor, I'm not sure why you would have thought I followed you all the way to your home," he says, without looking up at me.

Dang. Good comeback. Junghoon 1, Melody 0.