



GORGEOUS  
GRUESOME  
FACES

*you'll love them  
to death*

L I N D A   C H E N G

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*To JM,  
For every adventure we've gone on,  
and every storm we've weathered*



# Prologue

## THEN

Two years ago

**Candie predicted I was** going to ruin everything months before it all happened. When we were told that our sophomore album was put on hold and our show wouldn't be renewed, I knew she was right. Our careers were officially over.

She said I was selfish and stupid, that I was throwing away everything we've worked for, that my bad decisions were going to cost us our futures. I called her an egotistical glory hound who doesn't give a shit about anyone's feelings or anything other than fame. And Mina, always the peaceful mediator, was caught in the middle of the storm yet again, doing her best to hold her umbrella of nonpartisan support over both our heads as Candie and I lashed out at each other.

The truth is, I think that fight was what broke us for good, not what came after.



I said a lot of terrible things I shouldn't have. But isn't that what "best friends" are for? They alone can reach into your core, scoop out the ugliest bits, and hold them up to your face so you can see exactly what kind of damage you're carrying around.

No. That's an excuse. I said those things to hurt her.

The three of us have spent the past several years conquering stage and screen together, hand in hand, in matching costumes. Our bond was forged under the burn of spotlights and the intrusion of cameras, stewed in the sweat we poured out in practice rooms, sworn in with the blood that dripped from the blisters between our toes. I thought what we had would last forever. Now all we have is a scandal-tainted legacy and a surplus of unsellable merch.

The only reason Candie's meeting up with me today is because we agreed that, for Mina's sake, we need to set aside the crimes we've committed against each other and go check on her as a united front.

Mina hasn't been herself since we attempted the ritual.

The last time we saw her, bubbly, happy Mina, who reliably banishes dark moods and has an inspirational glass-is-half-full speech for every occasion, she didn't smile or say a word, even as our manager unloaded a metric ton of bad news on us. No anecdotes of encouragement, no soothing hugs. Afterward, she left without a goodbye. Then she stopped answering her phone.

Mina moved out on her own a few months ago. At first, I thought there was literally nothing cooler than living in a fancy downtown apartment with barely any adult oversight. But with her family on the other side of the country, there's no one there to look after her.

Candie's BMW is already in the visitor's spot when I pull into Mina's building. At the same time, we step out of our cars into the dim fluorescent lights of the parking garage. I struggle to meet her eyes.

"Has Mina responded to you?" Candie's voice echoes against the concrete.

I force myself to look up. "No. She text you back?"

Candie shakes her head, bone-straight hair bending gently against her clavicle. Our world is imploding around us and she still looks radiant and assured, her outfit precisely put together, while I barely managed to put on a bra and wrangle my hair into a messy bun. She's in a blazer, a skirt, and her favorite oversize sunglasses, the ones that make her look like a total movie star. Like she was born to be pop royalty.

Standing beside her has always made me acutely aware of the differences between us—the way my eyes don't shimmer with alluring depth, how my cheeks are chipmunk round instead of high and defined, the coarse texture of my wavy hair compared to her shampoo-commercial-grade locks. The glow she exudes is mesmerizing, like a light shining down from an otherworldly place. When she performs, it's impossible to look away from her.

But if you cross her . . . that's when the idol vanishes, and a whole other persona surfaces.

I want to ask Candie if she's still angry with me. Her shoulders are rigid, her expression closed off. The emotional distance between us spans a few more feet, and for one frantic second, I consider reaching out to catch her wrist and pull her back before she can float further away. But then Candie turns and walks into the building. My hands stay where they are.

The elevator ride up to Mina's floor is pin-drop quiet, Candie and I occupying opposite corners of the silent gray box. The doors slide open before I can work up the nerve to ask how Candie's feeling. I shouldn't even be thinking about us right now, I remind myself. We're here for Mina.

Candie uses the spare key to let us into Mina's apartment. The interior is pitch-black.

"Mina? It's us," Candie calls out into the darkness.

I feel for the light switches. "Are you home, Minnie?"

The overheads come on with a click, illuminating the front hallway. A sample of Mina's colorful heel collection forms orderly lines on the rack, undisturbed. We remove our own shoes and leave them beside hers. In the living room, the walnut coffee table is free of clutter, the plush pillows on the sectional couch neatly propped. Nothing appears out of place.

The walls of Mina's apartment are a curated collage of her life. *Sweet Cadence* promo posters and magazine covers hang in frames among candid pictures of family and friends. My favorite of her displays is a photo strip from our early era, before anyone knew our names. I remember that day so clearly, the three of us squeezed into that smelly mall photo booth, our faces pressed together, arms looped over necks and shoulders. Our show had just premiered, and between us there was only trust and camaraderie. No cruel words said out of spite, no awful secrets that pushed us apart.

I'm pulled from the whirlpool of nostalgia when I notice something strange about that photo strip. I lean in and squint.

There's a brownish-red smudge smeared across Mina's face in each square.

And it isn't just that photo strip. Mina's face is vandalized in *every* photo and poster on the wall. The glass over each shot of her face is caked over in the same brown muck, leaving dark blots between Candie's and my shining photo-shoot smiles.

"Candie, look . . ." My voice trembles. "Is that . . . what I think it is?"

Beside me, Candie's eyes are already wide with alarm. It jolts me every time I see cracks in Candie's composure. Like standing on an empty beach as the ocean suddenly recedes. A warning that something terrible is coming.

We call out for Mina again and again.

The kitchen and the rest of the living area are empty. We turn down the hall toward her bedroom. At the end of the corridor, the door to Mina's room is cracked. There's someone muttering inside. For the second time, I fight the urge to reach out and grab on to Candie. Our feet pound in unison as we hurry down the hallway. When we reach the door, Candie doesn't hesitate, pushing it wide open.

There's a shadow of a person sitting on the edge of the bed, back facing us.

"It's not right. It isn't mine," the shadow whispers.

Candie reaches for the light. I gasp in relief to see that it's Mina, that she's here, she's home, she's safe.

"Minnie, didn't you hear us calling for you?" I rush forward.

Candie's left arm shoots out, a sudden barrier across my midsection. I freeze at the abrupt impact.

"Careful." Candie points to the floor. There's broken glass all over the carpet.

Before I can fully register the warmth of her touch, it's already

gone. Candie steps past me into the room, carefully dodging the shards as she makes her way to Mina.

I follow her and find the source of the mess. The full-length mirror on the wall has been completely shattered. So has the mirror on her vanity table. My stomach clenches into a solid knot. I hurry to Mina's bedside to join Candie, who's already kneeling down, her brows pinched in concern.

Mina's head is hung low, the ends of her short bob trailing forward, obscuring her face. There's a handheld mirror in her lap. The glass is broken as well, scattered in a jagged halo at her feet. Her hands and nails are filthy. Like she's been digging in dirt.

"It's not right," Mina mumbles.

"What's not right? Are you feeling sick?" I brush my hand across Mina's forehead, and then I flinch. "Oh my god, Minnie, you're burning up! Here, lie down, I'll get you some ice—"

"Ice won't help," Candie says. "She needs to come with me."

"To *where*?" I snap. "And you better say the hospital!"

Mina looks up, finally, and I suck in a breath. Her face looks . . . different.

At first, I think she's wearing makeup. It's as if a beauty filter has been applied to her features, shifting and heightening them to uncanny proportions. Enormous eyes turn up to me, alien wide. Her pupils are massive. Is she wearing circle contact lenses? Her nose is thinner, pixelike, her mouth miniature. Her jaw seems daintier, curving down to a tiny, pointed chin. Did she contour to change the shape of her face? Mina has always preferred natural looks, secure and comfortable with herself in ways I can only dream of being. The girl sitting in front of me looks almost like a complete stranger.

“Minnie?” I ask in a faint whisper.

“It isn’t right.” Mina looks down at the broken mirror in her lap again. “It’s not my face . . .”

“I’m going to call her parents.” I reach for my phone with shaky hands.

“No!” Candie shouts. “I can help her; I just need her to come with me.”

Mina starts scratching at her cheeks with her dirty hands. “This isn’t my face!” she cries, clawing at her neck, her jaw, brown nails sinking in, dragging out red marks down her paper-white skin. “*This isn’t my face!*”

I jump to my feet. A sliver of glass presses into my heel as I step back, but I hardly feel it. All I can feel is my thundering heart about to burst.

Candie grabs at Mina and wrestles her hands away from herself. “Mina, calm down! Everything is going to be okay; we’re here to help you!”

“I want to go! I have to go! Let me go!” Mina screams.

I stumble back a few steps as Mina starts to sob, long animal howls of anguish. I’ve never heard her make sounds like that. I’ve never heard anyone sound like that.

“This is happening because of me, isn’t it?” I turn to Candie, like I always do, for her guidance, for her care, things I have no right to ask for anymore. But I’m spiraling, panic choking me, my breaths raging faster and heavier. “It’s because I stopped the ritual . . . Because I couldn’t go through with it . . .”

Candie looks up, and the second her attention is split, Mina breaks free from her hold. Mina bolts out of the bedroom, her bare feet slapping across the glass shards littering the floor.

“Mina!”

We race after her out into the living room to see Mina throwing open the balcony door. The night breeze lifts the sheer curtains, enveloping her in a white shroud.

Time congeals. Everything churns in slow motion. We run toward her, arms stretching, fingers reaching. Candie pulls ahead of me, and the grip of terror eases because I know she will fix this.

Candie will make Mina come back inside.

Candie will save her.

But Mina doesn't stop. She starts to climb, pushing herself up to stand on the balcony railing. Behind the billowing curtains, she spreads her arms out wide as she turns to face us, and we hear her say:

“I want to go home.”

Then Mina's body tips, and she drops backward into the night.

# Chapter 1

## NOW

I'm never wearing anything cute or doing something glamorous when I get recognized these days. Either some TMZ photographer's trying to get pictures of me eating a burrito from a deeply unflattering angle or I'm in a sweatpants–flip-flops combo on day three of not washing my hair, standing in the frozen aisle of Kroger.

The lady hovering next to me pretending to look at Eggos while not so covertly examining my profile waits for me to drop the sixth frozen meal into my shopping cart before she shuffles forward.

“Excuse me, dear, I don't mean to bother you, but I just wanted to ask, were you on that TV show? The one about the Asian pop group?”

The fact that she didn't use my name or the title of the show is enough to tell me that the best course of action here is to show myself out of this potential social disaster by offering her a polite “Sorry, you've got the wrong person.”



But the corners of my mouth lift and the words are spilling out before I can stop them.

“Yes, I was!” My voice automatically pitches into a higher register, the one that makes me sound younger, friendlier. “That’s me.”

The lady lets out an excited whoop. “Oh my gosh, would you mind taking a quick picture with my daughters? Just one? They absolutely adore you!”

“Of course.”

The rational, self-respecting part of me floats away, untethered, glancing down in disappointment at the lesser me left behind—the one who still craves the validation of strangers.

“Aubrey! Anya! Come here, quick!” the lady hollers. “You’re not going to believe who I just met!”

Two tween girls come bounding around the other end of the aisle. One has locks of purple twisted into her curls, and the other’s got streaks of blue weaving through her high ponytail. They look twelve, thirteen at most, but their style is impeccable, their makeup stunning enough to be on a Sephora ad. They probably have a dance video out there that’s got eight hundred thousand views. The next generation of trendsetters, here to step all over the corpse of my career with their rhinestone sneakers.

“It’s Candie—from that show you love!”

The name lands like a gut punch, and I bite the inside of my cheek as the pang hits.

Even during the height of our popularity, Candie and I still got mistaken for each other all the time. I used to get happy

butterflies when it would happen, thinking that it meant people thought we looked alike. It took me a while to realize they merely thought of us as interchangeable.

The mother presents me like she's unveiling a prize, and the girls' faces progress through a slow-motion car crash of emotions, shifting from surprise to recognition to alarm to disappointment to unbearable secondhand embarrassment. And finally, to pity.

"Um, no, Mom, that's—" Purple Curls attempts to correct.

"*And* she was nice enough to agree to a picture!" The woman's already got her phone out and she's shoving her daughters forward, arranging them next to me, one on each side, like we're estranged relatives being forced into a family photo.

I flash Purple Curls and Blue Pony a tight smile, hoping to assure them with my eyes that I won't make this any more uncomfortable than it already is and that the sooner we get this over with, the sooner we can all be released from this awkward circle of hell. The girls cooperatively stay silent and lean into me as their mother snaps a picture of us against a backdrop of frozen peas.

"Thank you so much!" the woman gushes.

"Yeah, thank you," Blue Pony mumbles.

"Uh, good luck with everything," Purple Curls adds.

"It was nice meeting you both," I tell them, forcing myself to maintain the smile until the girls rush their mother away into the next aisle. The lady's voice comes sailing over the top of the shelves.

"What's the matter with you two? What are you upset about? I thought she was the one you liked."

“Mom, you are *so* embarrassing; that wasn’t Candie—that was Sunny!”

“We have literally never liked Sunny; she was such an annoying character, and then it turned out she was trying to steal Jin-hwan from Brailey—”

I flee out of the aisle before I can hear the rest of the indictment. Even with two whole years’ worth of new celebrity scandals, the internet is forever—and no matter how far from the limelight I retreat, the long, ugly shadow of my mistakes always finds a way of reaching me.

On my way to the front of the store, I pass by a long shelf of fashion and tabloid magazines. Instead of the current models and actresses on the covers, all I can see is the past. *My* past. I see our debut, the three of us posing in our trademark formation.

The headline says: **Meet the stars of *Sweet Cadence*: the K-pop inspired musical hit!**

Candie stands in the middle, the centerpiece of the show. I’m on her right, my elbow propped on her shoulder, in a cheerleader outfit. And to the left, Mina. The heart and soul of our group, with her bob cut and freckled nose, nothing but the purest joy reflected in her smiling eyes.

When my eyes move across the rack, the headlines and covers change.

**K-pop star Jin-hwan Woo phone-hacking scandal! Leaked nudes!**

**Teen pop triangle feud ends in heartbreak.**

Splashed across the front of *People* magazine are photos of Jin-hwan and me. Stills from his cameo on our show. Pics taken backstage at an award show, his hand on my waist, me leaning in with a smitten smile. Pap shots of me getting into his car.

I push my shopping cart down the aisle, and the headlines change again.

## **Tragic accident halts production on teen music show.**

### ***Sweet Cadence* star Mina Park dead at age 18.**

Mina's face stares back at me from another glossy magazine cover; it's the black-and-white memorial photo they used at her funeral.

I tear my gaze away from the magazine rack. Suddenly, it seems like everyone in the aisle is turned toward me, staring, their faces look strange, eyes too large, chins too small—

My fingers release the cart's handle and I run, abandoning my groceries in the aisle. I run away, like I always do, as if I can somehow outpace the oncoming panic attack, narrowly avoiding colliding with the other shoppers as I race out the doors.

Out in the parking lot, I keep glancing over my shoulder, terrified I'll see that face right behind me. Once I'm safely in my car, I try to do the breathing exercises my therapist taught me but give up when I can't remember if I was supposed to hold my breath for four counts or six before exhaling. I throw the car into reverse and peel out like I'm fleeing a crime scene, cursing

the loss of this convenient location because I can never set foot in this Kroger again.



**After we lost Mina** and *Sweet Cadence* was canceled, my mother moved us from LA to Atlanta.

“It’ll be a fresh start,” she explained as I watched the movers load the furniture onto trucks. “For both of us.”

But mostly for her. With all the film and show productions shooting in Georgia, the move felt like a decision made to benefit her career as a producer more than anything else. She sold the relocation to me as a perfect chance to get away from the toxic LA scene so I could focus on “recovery” and “re-centering myself.” Now that I’ve graduated high school with tentative plans to take a gap year, Mama’s been bringing up work again.

“Maybe we can get you a small role on a superhero movie,” she’d try to pitch while driving me to therapy. “Or a CW show?”

But no matter how many opportunities my mother concocts for me, I haven’t gone to a single audition. When everything ended, the limitless future that once spread out before me like a glittering carpet turned into an endless black tunnel, the walls steadily crushing in against my body as I descended from “before” to “after,” from celebrity to obscurity.

We had a tutor on set, so when the show ended and I transitioned back to regular school, it was already senior year. I could barely force myself out of bed every day; there was nothing left

in me to rebuild a social life with, especially this close to graduation. And after I found out the girls in my grade had a group chat dedicated to my scandal, I stopped trying to make friends.

As expected, the house is empty when I get home from the store. When my mother left this morning, she said she'd try her best to make it home to have dinner with me, but her "best" is an arbitrary sliding scale of effort that's entirely dependent on her work schedule. I don't know why I still get my hopes up. It's pilot season; she doesn't have time to nurture our fading mother-daughter bond when she's trying to launch a new network drama.

I take out the last frozen entrée from the freezer and pop it into the microwave, then carry the flimsy plastic dish up to my bedroom to eat in front of my computer. I fully intended to pull up the trashy reality show I've been bingeing, but instead I navigate to Candie's vlog.

It's been a long time since I've looked at any of her accounts, but that Kroger encounter has thrown me right off the wagon. She's posted several new videos since the last time I checked. I click on the most recent one, with the word *announcement* hand-lettered across the thumbnail.

*"Hi, sweeties, welcome back. Thanks for joining me today."*

Candie waves at me from the other side of the screen. She has bangs now.

There's always a moment when I'm watching her vlogs where it feels like she's actually here, sitting across from me, and we're talking just like we used to, late into the night even with a 6:00 A.M. call time. Like we're squeezed in front of a bathroom mirror

trying to lance the zit on my chin. Like we still mean the world to each other.

When I first moved away, I tried to reach out to her a few times. She rarely responded. She's busy, I told myself. She's trying to start over. Trying to heal. We both were.

Through her posts, I received curated updates of her post-*Sweet Cadence* life. There was Candie's new bedroom. Here were Candie's new clothes. These were Candie's new friends. My texts to her would sit for days without an answer. It was almost a year before I realized she'd stopped replying at all.

The sound of shuffling steps drifts into my room from the other side of my door. Someone is coming up the stairs. I look away from the computer screen.

"Mama?"

The light thuds travel up to the second-floor landing, the floorboards in the hallway creaking. I didn't even hear the garage open, or her coming into the house. The slow footsteps grow closer, stopping just outside my door.

"Mama, is that you?" I call out. Nobody answers.

I push up from my chair and open my bedroom door.

"Mama? Are you home?"

The hallway outside is empty. I step out farther, wandering over to the top of the stairs to glance down. The living room below is dark and silent. There's no sign of my mother.

Suddenly, from back inside my room, a bout of familiar laughter floods out of the speakers. Laughter that doesn't belong to Candie. My entire body tenses.

It's Mina's laugh.

I hear my own chattering voice, too, along with Candie's

gentle chastising. It sounds like footage from the dailies, or something we filmed ourselves backstage.

Candie never talks about me or Mina in any of her videos. She avoids all questions about *Sweet Cadence* in her Q and As. Why would Candie put something like this in her vlog?

I dash back into my room, nearly crashing into my computer desk. On-screen, Candie is talking about the benefits of exfoliating facial scrubs to the same sleepy ambient music. I scrub back through the footage. There's no clip of the three of us. Only Candie speaking. I click to the beginning of the video and watch it over again. Same thing. I click around frantically and find no other tabs or windows open on my desktop. Candie stares back at me from the screen, her deep brown eyes blinking slowly.

A familiar chill crawls up my spine, notch by notch, before clasp around my ribs. My breath catches.

Is Candie doing this? Is she making me hear things that aren't there? Screwing with my head from several states away?

The Candie in these videos, the charming starlet who smiles all the time while openly inviting strangers to peer into the private corners of her life . . . is a complete act.

I know who Candice Tsai really is. What she's really like. The things she can do.

*"I have some pretty exciting news I wanted to share with everyone," Candie says. "I'll be taking a brief hiatus because I've been selected to participate in the SKN workshop in Atlanta next month. The chosen finalists will get to travel to Korea to become trainees under top producers who are putting together a new girl group. Thank you to everyone who has supported me all these years; I hope you'll continue to cheer me on."*



My mouth falls open. I'm stunned by the way she's glossing over such a momentous part of her life—*our* lives—and all those horrific things that happened. Not only that, she's planning to mount a comeback in Atlanta, where I *live*?

Her gentle smile carves open every half-healed scab, and the hurt feels fresh all over again.

This is it. This is her leaving me behind for good, fully cutting ties with *Sweet Cadence*. She's going to win this contest, move to Korea, and debut as part of the hottest new girl group next year. She's going straight to the top, the place she once promised we'd someday stand together. Why does she get to have all that when I'm still cowering in shame, haunted by memories and terrorized by her fans in grocery stores?

When her video ends, I immediately google the words *SKN workshop Atlanta*. The splash page is sleek with a deep plum velvet texture, the header image featuring girls in various pop-star dance poses, the photo cropped to only show the bottom halves of their faces.

They're still accepting applications.

The program is being run by an entertainment company I've never heard of. The K-pop world is notoriously hard for non-Koreans to break into, and the only Korean I know are the five phrases I've learned from watching K-dramas. The last time I auditioned was for my role on *Sweet Cadence* when I was barely fifteen years old. And the last time I performed in front of an audience was at our final concert two years ago.

But my brain leaps over all those logistical obstacles and latches on to the fact that this workshop is my way back to Candie. Back to all the things that I've lost. I have so many

questions about what happened to Mina, and Candie is the only one who has answers. If she wants to pretend the past no longer exists, then I'll just have to show her how wrong she is.

I won't let her forget about Mina. About me.

I drag the cursor down the page and click on the big button that says **APPLY NOW**.

# Chapter 2

## NOW

**The audition for this** supposedly prestigious workshop is at some nondescript brick building tucked inside a back alley in Midtown.

As I walk up to the door, all I can think about are the horror stories of idol hopefuls who signed their souls away to the K-pop industrial machine only to get scammed, exploited, or trapped into yearslong “slave contracts” with unethical companies, leaving them with nothing but shattered aspirations and mountains of debt.

After my online application was accepted, I got an email with instructions for the in-person audition. It included a link to a dance routine I was expected to learn and perform for the judges.

The video submission I sent in with my application was focused almost entirely on my vocals—my best asset. Back then, even after putting in tons of extra rehearsal time, I was still the

weakest dancer in the group. I don't have Candie's natural talent or Mina's ballet training, and for the past two weeks, I've done nothing but practice the routine until the choreography was burned into my muscles and the backs of my eyelids. The second I stopped practicing and turned off the music, a highlight reel of all the nastiest comments I've ever read about myself would start playing in my head instead.

Can they just recast her pls? tired of looking at her face.

She's a total nepo baby, her mom's like some famous producer.

Home-wrecker! You're nothing compared to Brailey!

I've never seen anyone so incredibly FAKE and UNTALENTED!!!

I didn't tell my mother I was trying out; she would have gone full momager and hired a team of instructors and consultants to whip me back into shape, or worse, contact the workshop herself to demand that they give me a spot. My mother wasn't a producer on *Sweet Cadence*, but she was incredibly invested in me landing the part and repeatedly assured me of all her close studio contacts. I never asked my mother outright if she influenced the casting process of *Sweet Cadence*. But I've never stopped wondering.

This time, I want proof that I can do it on my own.

But my resolve crumbles when I step up to the door and catch an eyeful of my reflection in the glass. Long, loose T-shirt and tights chosen to maximize range of motion and

conceal my weight gain, frizzy flyaways already escaping the bun at the back of my head, my features nowhere near the unrealistic photoshopped perfection expected of Asian pop idols, just another desperate face in an ocean saturated with beauty and talent.

I don't smile a lot these days. I'm not the same starry-eyed preteen drawn to the glamour of show business and addicted to the attention fame brought me. But I can't deny that I miss it.

I miss the stage. The lights. The fans. The ritualistic chants backstage. I miss late nights practicing in the studio and early mornings getting ready on set. I miss being part of something meaningful, something much larger than myself.

I miss Mina. And I miss Candie.

I step up and press the number on the intercom. The door buzzes open.

Inside, I take the elevator up to the fourth floor, where the directions told me to go. When the elevator doors ding open, I fully expect to be greeted by a line of fifty stunning girls waiting to audition.

But there's no one. Just one long, empty hallway with no windows or doors on either side. The whorled gray carpet is dizzying. Faint nausea crawls up into my throat. What did I have for breakfast? Eggs? Toast? Oatmeal? Anything?

I remember this feeling. The cold spike of dread. The pinch of my lungs constricting. The fear of failure, of being mocked, of being a disappointment. Suddenly, I hear Candie's voice, clear as if she's right beside me, murmuring in my ear.

*You really think you can face me again?* she says. *You can't even make it down the hallway.*

I take in a long breath. Candie isn't here. That voice I hear is my own self-doubt.

My feet lift, and I walk forward. The hallway seems to get narrower as I make my way down, and my steps speed up until I'm practically sprinting to push through the double doors at the other end.

Light floods my vision. The room is massive. Floor-to-ceiling windows on one wall, full-length mirrors and a ballet barre along the other. In the center of the studio, four women sit side by side at a folding table. I close the doors behind me, and when I turn, all four of them are looking up at me in unison.

*Go on, then, Candie's voice says. Show me you still have what it takes to stand shoulder to shoulder with me.*

The stage smile blooms wide across my face. I approach the table.

"Hi, I'm Sunday Lee, here for my audition for the SKN workshop."

I can't help it, the second I open my mouth, my voice instinctively hitches higher. Just like it always does.

The judges are all dressed in similarly plain outfits. White blouses, black bottoms. The only hints of color on them are the varying shades of red lipstick. All four women are East Asian, with long black hair and smooth, poreless skin. They look like those ageless actresses who can pull off playing a teenager on one show and a married mother of three on another. A camera is set up on a tripod next to the table.

"Sunday." One of the women stands, pushing her chair back. "It's great to see you."

She comes around the table and wraps her arms around me

in a light embrace. It takes me another second to finally recognize her.

“Oh, Ms. Tao!” I gasp. “It’s so good to see you!”

Vivian Tao was Candie’s talent manager who Mina and I both eventually signed with. She took us under her wing, didn’t coddle us when the execs talked down to us, and encouraged us to speak our minds when producers told us how we should behave. After everything fell apart, Mama fired my entire “team,” including Ms. Tao, and I haven’t seen or heard from her since we moved away from LA. I always assumed it would be difficult to encounter people from that time of my life again, but it’s actually a relief to see a familiar face. Well, somewhat familiar. She looks younger than she did two years ago. I should ask for her plastic surgeon’s number; Mama’s in the market for a new doctor.

“Let me take a look at you,” Ms. Tao says, hands resting on my shoulders. “You’re eighteen now, right?”

“I’ll be nineteen next month.”

She takes a step back and gives me an appraising once-over, cocking her head to the left. “You look good. A little fuller around the hips, but nothing we can’t fix.”

Her smile is so loving it almost softens the blow. Almost. Ms. Tao turns to sit back down at the table, and the row of eyes lands on me once more.

“Whenever you’re ready,” Ms. Tao says, folding her hands neatly in front of her.

I drop my bag down against the wall and settle into position in the center of the room. A few deep breaths, a few tosses of my head to relax my neck, then I nod.

The music starts. Five, six, seven, eight.

Turn and step, reach and pose.

Five, six, seven, eight.

Turn and pose and step in, step out.

Five, six, seven, eight.

My body is fluid; my energy is high. I'm feeling confident and landing all my steps. I turn into a spin. Behind me, one of the doors leading to the hallway is open. I could swear that I pulled them shut?

One, two and three and—*shit*, did I miss a beat? Five and six and seven, eight—

The tempo picks up and my turns grow faster, legs pumping, hips swaying. My arms shoot up, then out, bending and flexing. I try to block out the blaring music and focus on counting the beats.

One, two and three and turn—

Something snags at the edge of my vision. I glimpse a flash of pink and white, a pinwheel of skirts. There's someone standing in the doorway, watching me.

I spin forward again to face the panel. There's no emotion on their faces, no telling what they're thinking, which mistakes they're marking down; I can't mess this up, don't mess this up—

When I spin back toward the door again, I see her.

It's Mina. Standing in the doorway. Her face is exaggerated, her eyes are large and vacant, her mouth small and puckered. Dirt-covered hands reach up to her face.

I let out a silent scream as I fall out of the turn at a bad angle, crashing to the ground onto my side. A soft gasp comes from the judges' table. I push my head up and look again.

The doorway is empty.



Every last breath of air rushes out of me. The room tilts sharply even though I'm not moving. My cheekbone throbs.

"I'm sorry," I gasp, scrambling to my feet. "I—I can't do this—"

"Sunday, wait!" Ms. Tao calls out, but I don't stay to hear what she says.

I grab my bag and flee from the audition room. When I burst through the doors and rush into the hallway, there's nobody standing on the other side.