

"The perfect childhood friends-to-lovers story—full stop."

—CHRISTINA LAUREN, *New York Times* bestselling author of
The Unhoneymooners and *The Soulmate Equation*

Soulmates



SUSAN LEE

Seoulmates

Seoulmates

SUSAN LEE

inkyard
PRESS



ISBN-13: 978-1-335-91578-8

Seoulmates

Copyright © 2022 by Susan Lee

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

For questions and comments about the quality of this book, please contact us at CustomerService@Harlequin.com.

Inkyard Press
22 Adelaide St. West, 41st Floor
Toronto, Ontario M5H 4E3, Canada
www.InkyardPress.com

Printed in U.S.A.



Recycling programs
for this product may
not exist in your area.

To my dad...who always used to tell me I could be anything—
from Miss Korea to the president of the United States. :)
Well, I chose storyteller...and I hope this would have made you very proud.
I miss you.



CHAPTER 1: *Hannah*

Nothing says “I love you” more than patting your boyfriend’s back as his head is in a toilet, barfing up warm Bud Light.

He groans miserably.

I switch to rubbing circles and throw in a “there, there.”

It’s not my dream date, but it’s a good place to be, all things considered. I started high school with no close ties and now I’m going into the summer and my final year with a perfect boyfriend and a built-in friend group. It’s funny how life can change so suddenly when you’re least expecting it.

We’ve come a long way, Nate and me. We’ve known each other since he was a big, clumsy kindergartner and I was a small, mouthy one. We used to hate each other when we were kids. But fate has a way of showing up when we least expect it.

I ran into Nate at the beach last summer, the day after my sister moved to Boston. I was feeling particularly raw, and Nate was being surprisingly charming. “Why would

anyone leave San Diego?” he asked me. “Worst decision ever. Best way to get back at someone who leaves is to take advantage of everything the city has to offer.” And then we went to Carlsbad and walked through the flower fields, something I’d never done before. It wasn’t cheesy like I thought it would be. It was nice.

And that’s when I knew he was on my side. Because really, why *would* anyone want to leave San Diego? Nate gets it. He gets *me*.

The knock on the bathroom door elicits another groan from Nate, sending a whiff of something pungent my way. I swallow hard, pushing back the gag reflex to avoid my own fiasco.

“We’re busy in here,” I yell.

I hear the snorts and giggles from the other side of the door.

“Um, not that kind of busy,” I rush to explain.

The last thing I need is for the rumor mill to make up some scandalous story about me and Nate in the bathroom at Jason Collins’s end-of-year party. Trust me, the smell in the air does not make me want any nooky, that’s for sure.

There’s another knock at the door. What, is this the only freaking bathroom in this house or something?

“Hannah? Is everything okay in there?”

Oh, thank god, a familiar voice. Maybe Shelly can call us an Uber and help me get Nate outside. But then again, she’s also kinda the biggest gossip in our friend group. I try not to tell her anything I wouldn’t want the entire school to know the next day, and I’m sure Nate wouldn’t want everyone talking about how he can’t hold his liquor. I don’t

think he'd appreciate Shelly posting about it all over and seeing people write stuff like "Nate is a lightweight." People can be merciless in the comments.

It's fine. I can handle this. I can take care of Nate myself. Despite the current situation, I can't help but smile. I like being the reliable girlfriend. I like being needed.

"We're good, Shelly. Everything's fine. Nothing interesting is happening in here. Thanks," I call back. Hopefully she'll find some other drama to report elsewhere.

"Okey dokey! I'll be downstairs if you need me," she says.

A moan comes from inside the bowl. I look down at the back of Nate's head. "Oh, babe, are you gonna be okay? What can I get you?" I ask him.

"Hannah?" He turns his head slightly to put his cheek against the toilet seat. I try not to worry about all the germs now transferring to his beautiful face from the porcelain throne. Nate's voice is weak, and his breath is rank. I suck in a breath and avoid breathing through my nose. I take the wet washcloth on the counter and wipe his neck, fascinated at the little blond hairs there. Sweat has darkened the rest of his head to a sandy blond, but those tiny neck hairs are almost white.

My heart softens at the sight for some reason. Even though he's a big, strong guy, he's got these small baby hairs. Cute.

"Hannah," he calls to me again, drawing me back.

"Yes, Nate?" I reluctantly lean in closer over him.

"I..." He takes another breath, looking mildly unsure if he's going to hurl again.

"Shhh. It's okay, Nate. I know, babe, I know."

“Hannah, we...”

We. Awww. “Yup, it’s you and me,” I say.

“I... I think we should break up,” he says, rolling his face back towards the inside of the toilet.

“No thank you,” I say.

Time stops. My entire body numbs except for the sinking in my stomach. This shaggy bathroom rug suddenly feels scratchy and rough on my knees, and the room is entirely too small. It’s a warm San Diego night, and a house full of mostly drunk kids isn’t making for the best air circulation. Still, I don’t think sweating this much is normal.

Don’t panic, I tell myself, closing my eyes to center my suddenly spinning world.

I replay his words in my head. We haven’t dated long enough for him to decide we need to break up. I heard it wrong.

We should wake up. Yes, time is ticking and we’ve gotta take life seriously.

We should prank up. Ha ha! Gotcha! Good one, Nate.

We should steak up? I mean, I love a good cut of beef. I’m down.

A large hand wraps around my wrist, drawing me out of my panic. But when I look into Nate’s red-rimmed eyes, notice his runny nose, and try hard not to stare at the suspicious chunk of something stuck to his cheek, my throat tightens.

It’s not love I see. It’s not even anger. It’s...pity.

“Nate, babe, you’re not thinking straight. You’re drunk and sick,” I reason with him, voice shaking.

“I’m sorry, Hannah. I’ve been trying to tell you all night.

But I didn't want to hurt you," Nate says, punctuating his platitudes with another moan reverberating back into the bowl.

"But...but you're my person," I say, the last word almost a whisper. My voice sounds pathetic and small.

"We can still be friends. It's just not working between us," he says. He sounds miserable. I want it to be because he feels bad for breaking my heart and not because he currently has his head in the toilet.

"What's not working? I thought we were having fun. We're here, at this party, um, having fun, right?"

I look down at Nate, who definitely does not look like he's having fun.

"Hannah, we...we don't have anything in common," he says.

"What do you mean we have nothing in common? We have so much in common. We're basically the same person." I struggle to come up with the list, the list of all the things that we both enjoy. It's a black hole right now in my brain, but I don't work well under pressure.

"We really don't. You don't even like the things I'm..."

"We both like *Riverdale*," I cut him off, finally thinking of an answer. See? I knew there was something.

"You hate it. You make fun of Archie every episode."

I let my shoulders fall at his words. He's right. Busted.

"You hate tomatoes..."

That's a deal-breaker when it comes to love?

"...and cats..."

This is true. But can't we agree to disagree?

"...and you don't know anything about K-pop or Korean

dramas. I just can't talk to you about the things I'm passionate about."

K-pop? Korean dramas?

I let out my own groan. No, not Nate, too. Another person swept up into the sudden worldwide fascination with all things Korean. And of course, apparently, I'm the only person in the world that isn't, even though I am...Korean.

"Nate, we can fix whatever you think isn't working."

"Hannah?" He turns his head to look at me again.

Yes, good, he's regretting his words already. I nod to myself and smile. We'll be fine.

"Nate," I say back assuredly.

His eyes widen in panic as he opens his mouth and throws up all over my sandals.

I tuck the phone into my neck so I can suck the chocolate off my forefinger and thumb. I ate the entire Toblerone, starting from the top, biting off exactly at the crease of each piece, holding the same spot at the bottom so that just enough chocolate would melt onto my fingertips for me to suck off at the very end. Strategic consumption for healing a broken heart.

"I couldn't just get dumped in front of the lockers or in the parking lot of In-N-Out like everyone else. Nope, I have to have chunks of chicken nuggets swimming in sour beer vomited in between my toes. Great." Shelly is quiet on the other end of the line. She's probably gagging at the thought of it, too.

"Since when did not liking the same music become a reason to break up with someone?" I ask.

“Nate told Martin Shepherd who told Mandy Hawkins who told Jason Chen who told me that when he asked you who your bias was, you said you had a bias towards ‘justice, equality, and Sasha over Malia Obama.’”

“I didn’t realize Nate felt so strongly about Malia.”

“It’s a K-pop thing.” I can hear her eye roll through the phone. “Your ‘bias’ is your favorite person in the group.”

“Okay, but how does everyone know this but me?”

I reach for the bag of peanut M&M’S on my nightstand. I ate all the other colors, and now only the green ones remain. A feast of green M&M’S is my recipe for healing.

“Seriously, though,” she goes on, ignoring my question, “I can’t believe Nate dumped you right before summer. What are you gonna do now about all those plans you guys made? You can’t do them alone.”

Dumped.

Alone.

The words slap me in the face so hard I can still feel the sting. She’s right. Other than my internship, I thought I’d be spending all other waking hours with him.

“Like lifeguard camp? It’s nonrefundable, you know.” Shelly’s reminder breaks through the haze of my misery.

Ugh, lifeguard camp. I hate the smell of chlorine and the thought of all the damp places for germs and diseases to fester. But Nate had all these ideas and plans for us the “big summer before our senior year,” our first summer as a couple. And he got me kind of excited about it all. Well, maybe I should just count my blessings that I don’t have to go to the pool anymore. Now that I’m...

Dumped.

Alone.

No boyfriend. No summer plans. No life. A Times Square billboard reading “pathetic” in bright, blinking lights to the tune of Celine Dion’s “All by Myself.”

“Maybe I should talk to Nate...”

“Well, like, give it a day or two. Make him miss you. Plus, if you’re gonna try and win him back, you’ll want to be strategic,” Shelly suggests.

“Win him back? Is that possible? Do you think it could work?” I ask.

“Totally. I can help you. Look, I know Nate is for sure Blink, CARAT, and ARMY. Oh, and he’s obsessed with Son Ye-Jin. He tried to get the drama department to do *Crash Landing on You* for the school musical next year. So those are good places to start. Get to know the things he likes, Hannah. If he doesn’t want to date you because you don’t have anything in common, change his mind by, you know, having things in common.”

Her words are gibberish to me. And why do I feel defensive at being schooled by Shelly Sanders, of all people? But maybe she’s right. Maybe I can win him back.

“Uh, thanks,” I manage to get out. “I’ve got a lot to think about.” And a lot to google.

“Anyways, a bunch of us are gonna try out that new rolled ice cream place so I gotta run.” And she’s gone before I can even close my mouth or ask if I can come along. Wait, did I lose my friend group in the breakup, too?

“Bye,” I say to no one. I wipe the chocolate smear off the phone screen with the cuff of my sweatshirt. I stare at the mark on the fabric and consider licking it. Maybe later.

I throw myself prostrate back onto my bed.

My mom barges into my room and throws the curtains open, blinding me with sunlight. My eyes, my eyes. “Okay, Hannah. Time to get up. Why are the curtains all closed? It smells bad in here. Did you take a shower yet today?”

“Mom, please, can’t you see I want to be alone right now? I need time to heal,” I whine.

“Yah, wallowing in the dark, eating chocolate, and being dirty is not the way to move on, Hannah.”

“Mother, this is my process.”

“Process for what? For wasting your life? Hannah, you and Nate dated for not much time. The batch of kimchi I made isn’t even igeosseo yet.” Leave it to my mother to compare a relationship’s validity to the fermentation time of kimchi. “Now, get up and clean your room. We need to get to church so you can sign up to be a VBS teacher this summer.”

My mother cannot think that just because Nate and I broke up, I’m suddenly free all summer to teach Vacation Bible School to a bunch of screaming elementary school kids. I hated elementary school.

“Um, no, not interested. I have other plans,” I lie. I mean, I *could* still go to lifeguard camp after all. Although seeing Nate in board shorts, tanned muscles on display, and knowing he doesn’t want me might be the end of me.

But teaching VBS may actually be a more painful way to my grave.

“Hannah, it’s either VBS, or you sign up for hagwan to prepare for college.”

“But I have my internship,” I say. I’ve used this intern-

ship as an excuse to get out of things on more than one occasion. And even though it's only one day a week for two hours, because it's working for an immunologist, my mother thinks it's basically my surefire way into medical school. She may not be wrong.

"You can do both. VBS is only in the mornings, and isn't your internship only on Monday afternoons?"

Busted.

I bury my face into my pillow. "Go away, please," I beg.

I feel the bed lower as Mom comes to sit down beside me. The light touch of her hand pats me on the back. "Hannah, you are better than this non-Christian, American boy." Her voice is suspiciously kind.

"You don't understand, Mom." *He liked me*, I want to tell her. Me. But maybe now he doesn't anymore. I knew I should've jumped on the BTS train when everyone else was hopping on. It's just that K-pop and K-dramas were things I thought "they" enjoyed, *they* being Korean Koreans, not Korean Americans, and definitely not American Americans. Where was I when the tide shifted so quickly? Now I'm on the outside looking in. And Nate is definitely in.

"What's to understand? Hannah, you should want a boy who likes that you are smart and talented and appreciates your strong calves. What you need is a good Korean boy."

Here we go.

I sit up and brace myself for my mother's attempt to fix me up with the latest "good Christian boy" from our Korean church. Will it be Timothy Chung because he's perfect and plays the violin? Or will it be Joshua Lee because he's perfect

and drives a BMW? No, no, it's gotta be Elliot Park, because he's perfect and got an early acceptance to UCLA.

"But let's not worry about boyfriends right now. I have really good news, and then we go to church."

Wait, that's it? No résumé of some new Korean kid to present to me for my consideration? Is this a trap? Something is not right here. I brace myself for the other shoe to drop.

"Um, what kind of good news, Mom?" I turn my head slowly and face my mother, my brows drawn together, inspecting her face. Her makeup is perfectly done, eyebrows filled in over her microblading, her complexion appropriately dewy from the latest Korean cushion, and lips stained two shades darker than millennial pink. She could be my sister.

"Well, with your dad and sister gone, we have so much extra space..."

With my dad being transferred to Singapore for his job and my sister leaving for Boston for hers, the house has been emptier and emptier. Not to mention it feels like my mom is at church more often than she is at home.

But we've always had summers together. Summers are family time. "They'll be here for the Fourth of July at least," I say, trying not to punctuate my words with a question mark.

"Sure," she says unconvincingly. "But we still have room for guests."

"What guests?"

"Well, I was talking to my friend the other day..."

This is not sounding good at all. “Mother?” I say slowly. “What did you do?”

“Guess who is coming to town all the way from Korea to spend the summer with us?” she exclaims, clasping her hands together.

Oh no.

“My best friend, Mrs. Kim. And her family!”

No, no, no.

I gasp.

Jacob Kim.

After all these years.

I open my mouth to scream in horror, but my mom grabs me, pulls me up off the bed, and envelops me in a celebratory hug. “My best friend is coming, and she’s bringing her wonderful son, Jacob, and her beautiful daughter, Jin-Hee, with her. Our house will be full of laughter and joy!”

It’s not like it’s a hospital around here. I laugh. I joy.

“I can cook Korean food, and we’ll all eat together,” she says.

She makes it sound like I don’t ever eat her cooking. So I don’t like Korean food every meal of the day, and she doesn’t make anything else.

She releases me from the hug but grabs my arms and gives me a shake. I’m limp with shock and am thrown around like a doll. “You remember Jacob! You two were as close as can be growing up. Best friends through elementary and middle school.”

Oh, I remember Jacob alright.

Our mothers never let us forget that we were friends

“even before you were born” just because they were friends and preggers at the same time.

Heat creeps up my neck, and a tightness squeezes my chest, but I ignore it. I’ve stopped having any emotions when it comes to Jacob Kim. I’m not starting again now.

“It’s a perfect time to have friendship like when you were little,” she says wistfully.

“That was a long time ago,” I remind her. We *had* a friendship, a best friendship. He threw it away. He traded me in for a life of fame in Korea. “I’m not interested,” I say, pushing away from my mom.

Mom’s brows rise in shock. “But this is Jacob, Jacob Kim,” she says. Like repeating the name suddenly takes away what he did.

“Fine, but if he comes here, he’d better stay out of my way. I have plans this summer,” I say.

“But you and Nate broke up. You have no plans now.” Damn, Mom, way to go for the jugular. “You can teach Vacation Bible School in the daytime. And then you can have fun with Jacob the rest of the day. It will be a perfect summer.”

“Mom.” I drop my shoulders, stopping short of stomping my foot. This can’t be happening.

“Hannah,” she says in warning.

We stare at each other. I won’t look away. It’s a battle of wills at this point. She won’t win this one. I won’t give in.

I blink.

“Anyways,” she singsongs like a victory chant, “there’s so much preparation to do.” She hustles away whistling a church hymn.

Wait, there was dust in my eye! I want a rematch.

I swear I see her skipping down the stairs. Great, my mom now has more exciting summer plans than I do.

And that's when I make up my mind. Everyone else is gonna be living it up this summer, doing whatever they want. So why shouldn't I? Forget Vacation Bible School. Forget guests from Korea. And definitely forget Jacob Kim.

I've only got one thing on my mind now—Operation Win Back Nate.

Step one: google Blink, CARAT, and Son Ye-Jin.



CHAPTER 2: *Jacob*

“Don’t go, please,” she sobs, voice trembling in desperation. She grabs my arm with a force I wasn’t expecting, pulling me back from the door.

I drop my head, barely looking over my shoulder back at her. “I have to. I have to do this for myself, for my family. I don’t want to hurt you, but we have to break up.” My voice cracks, and I’m surprised by the tear that escapes down my cheek.

“What am I going to do?” she wails in agony, heart shattered.

Dramatic pause.

“And...cut,” the director says, the ringing of a young woman’s cries still in my ear.

I snap out of the scene, out of my character, back onto set in a posh high-rise apartment under stage lights, a floor-to-ceiling view of the Han River in the background. I wipe the tear away.

“Very good, everybody,” the director says. “We’re done for today.”

A flurry of activity happens around me as everyone starts cleaning up the set. It doesn't take me as long to come down from an emotional scene as it used to, but I'm still amazed at how quickly people can just move on.

"Here." Two small wipes are placed into my hands to remove my eye makeup, followed by a packet of papers. "The car will be here in ten minutes," my manager, Hae-Jin, says to me, and she promptly leaves to follow my co-star. Warm and fuzzy, she is not.

I flip through the sheets, the script for the season finale, a brief summary of what season two will look like, and some very official-looking legal documents. My contract renewal. I still can't believe we're getting a second season, which is not the norm in Korean television.

I like acting. Getting to play characters so unlike myself is cathartic. I like the paycheck even more. But thinking of a second season with this character and this cast makes me exhausted already.

I walk to the window and peek down at the size of the crowd today. Even up on the thirty-second floor, I can see, or maybe just feel, their excitement. The number of people is bigger than it was yesterday and seems to be growing every day we shoot here.

This isn't where I live. I may be Kim Jin-Suk, the rising star of the K-drama world and SKY Entertainment's big bet. But I'm nowhere near rich enough to live in Gangnam's Hyundai Tower West. Yet. The real me, Jacob Kim, a young actor just starting out, lives with his mom and sister in a decent-sized, two-bedroom villa apartment a couple dongnaes over.

But it wasn't too long ago that we weren't even sure we'd have a place to live at all. So I am not complaining by any means. I'm just thankful we're not on the street and starving. The familiar panic starts to bubble in my gut and threatens to grow inside me, consuming me, pulling me into the shadows. When you've grown up always worried about money, it's hard to get rid of that anxiety. Even now.

"Time to go," the deep voice of Eddie, the SKY staff member assigned to me, says. He directs me down the hall and into the elevator. Two floors down we stop and as the doors open, I'm immediately slapped with the overwhelming scent of jasmine. It's the unmistakable perfume worn by my costar, Shin Min-Kyung. My nose hairs are singed.

She's changed her clothes and her hair from the shoot that ended what feels like just minutes ago. Her makeup is flawless, and she looks like she's stepped straight out of a magazine. The pound of cover-up over this morning's zit on my chin starts to crack under the pressure of her perfection. She's stunning.

She's also the meanest person I've ever met.

She steps into the elevator with her own entourage pushing me and my one handler into the corner. I watch her eyes spare me the tiniest of glances as her lip curls slightly.

"Annyeong haseyo," I greet her in honorific, bowing slightly to her back.

"I told you to stop eating chocolate. Your skin is a mess," she says.

I've found it's safer to just nod and not respond when she's in a mood to throw jabs my way. I know my place. And yet...

“The scene went really well today, don’t you think?” I ask.

The air is sucked out of the elevator, and all of us collapse to the floor, suffocating to our deaths. Or at least, that’s how it feels when she lets out an insufferable sigh. Damn it. I should’ve gone with the original strategy of keeping my mouth shut.

She doesn’t answer me.

When the elevator doors open, we’re shuffled through the lobby and out the front door of the building. The screaming is loud out here, and I’m blinded momentarily by all the flashbulbs going off.

“MinJin! MinJin!” The fans scream our ship name. Min-Kyung leans in closer to me as we walk. She tucks her hair behind her ear in an award-winning show of shyness and modesty. I put my hand on her back.

I want to stop and thank every single person who took the time and waited out here to see me today. It’s really cool of them to be here. But that’s not allowed. Every fan interaction has to be carefully choreographed. Instead, Min-Kyung and I smile and bow politely in greeting to the group as a whole and keep moving.

As we wait for the car to pull up to meet us, Hae-Jin gives me the nod, my cue for one last bread crumb to give the fans. I look back and wave my hand to the crowd, then run my fingers through my too-long bangs, garnering more screams. I look over the group, wink, and cross my thumb and forefinger into a mini-heart. They all go nuts.

Mixed in with the enthusiastic shouting, a painful wail cuts through the air. “Oppa! I love you,” a girl cries, reach-

ing out her hand, desperately trying to touch me. The crowd pushes forward as they notice my attention drawn towards the crying fan. The girl in front is being smashed into the guardrails, a look of panic on her face. I race over to try and help her, pushing people back. But my foot gets stuck between two railings, and my ankle twists awkwardly. My face scrunches as I scream out in pain.

I feel two hands grab me, lifting me off the ground. “Out of the way,” I hear Eddie shout as he removes me from the crowd and shuffles me quickly into our car. He barely gets the door shut before we speed away, the fans a blur in the rear window.

“What were you thinking?” Hae-Jin hisses at me.

Hae-Jin is meticulously put together in her signature Armani black pantsuit and white silk blouse. Not a hair is out of place in her sleek pulled-back bun. But it’s clear she’s frazzled.

“They were crushing her,” I say. “I’m sorry.” I am a chronic apologist. It doesn’t matter if I think I’ve done something wrong or not.

“You put everyone, including that fan, in danger,” Hae-Jin says. “And what if you were photographed with that awkward look on your face? You know the rules.”

I close my eyes and swallow down the boulder of irritation stuck in my throat. I don’t know if I’m more annoyed at her or at myself. Because she’s right. I do know the rules, and I messed up. I let out a silent sigh and try to drown out the noise in my head. And ignore the pain I’m feeling in my ankle.

I take in a deep breath. The car is new, and the smell

of leather floods my nose. The family car I grew up with had dingy upholstery, stained and ripped, with a faint sour smell that could never be washed out no matter how hard my mom tried.

When I first came to Korea, I was a poor, sickly kid. Three grueling years in the company's Training Program, basically the farm system to find new talent to make the next huge K-pop or K-drama stars, helped me perfect what Koreans call my "charms." And now I'm the male lead in *Heart and Seoul*, the much-anticipated series about star-crossed teen lovers. Now that Netflix has picked it up, our viewership has skyrocketed. We've gone international.

I can't take it for granted. And I can't fuck it up.

"We're heading to the interview with the German magazine, and then you will be with *Entertainment News Canada*. Minky will be in the floral Gucci dress and change to the lavender Celine. Jin-Suk will wear the red Supreme sweater and then change into the white Balenciaga button-down shirt. Looks like your popularity indexes highest when you wear white with the North American crowd."

"How is that even a thing that you guys pay attention to?" I ask. It's crazy the stats that the company tracks. It totally blows my mind that fans even care what I wear, let alone think I'm hot in it.

Fans. I have fans. I couldn't even get a second glance before I moved to Korea. I was always the small, nervous Asian kid with severe allergies growing up in San Diego. Who knew that a bowl cut on a tall, scrawny guy would make the girls go wild one day?

"Stop asking stupid questions. I'm so tired of working

with an amateur. And what was that stunt you pulled back there? Why can't you just follow the rules? I never want to work with an undisciplined *American* actor again." Min-Kyung's sharp comments cut like a knife, slashing one of my most sensitive areas—not being Korean enough for this career.

"Minky." Hae-Jin's voice carries a warning. *Stop being a diva and cooperate.* Truth is, Min-Kyung can't afford to have another male costar unhappy with her. She'll soon be uncastable in any romantic shows if no actors want to work with her.

"Tomorrow we go to Busan for the photo shoot for *Vogue Korea*," Hae-Jin continues.

"Ooh, cool. Do you think we can hang out at the beach?" I've missed the beach so much since we moved. "Or will we have time to check out Gamcheon Culture Village? I've seen pictures..."

"There is no time for that," Hae-Jin cuts me off.

"This isn't a vacation. This is work," Min-Kyung says, not even trying to hide her disgust with me.

"Sorry," I say for maybe the one-hundredth time today. It's still early.

I let out a sigh and try to hide my disappointment. I never get the chance to do or see anything, even when the job takes me to fun places. No rides at Lotte World, no staying for the guard change at Gyeongbokgung Palace, nothing. Not to sound like I'm having a midlife crisis or anything, but I feel like my entire youth is wasting away.

"And, Jin-Suk." The sternness in Hae-Jin's voice pulls me from my thoughts and gets my full attention. "During

the interviews and in the photos, try harder to sell your feelings for Minky. No jokes. No sarcasm. Sell the emotion between you two.”

Make the world believe I’m in love with Min-Kyung in real life to raise the emotional stakes in the hearts of our fans for our on-screen relationship. When Hae-Jin first told me this was an expectation, I thought for sure she was kidding. I quickly remembered that she doesn’t have a sense of humor. And I don’t miss the threat in her tone. Give a believable performance or risk losing this second season, this paying job. I must be one hell of an actor if people actually believe I like this girl.

I look over at Min-Kyung, eyes closed, earbuds in. I’m still new to all this, but she’s been doing this a long time. Is that why she’s so miserable? When the shine of stardom dulls, will I end up jaded and mean like her?

Nope, I’m not gonna let that happen. This job is demanding, sure, but people recognize my face. They scream my name. Plus, it pays the bills. And at this point in my life, that’s all that really matters.

“Well that was a disaster.”

My little sister, Jin-Hee, has a way with words.

“Shhh.” My mom tries to silence her as if that’s ever worked before. We all sit in the doctor’s office, waiting for him to come back and deliver the news.

The entire day, from the time I tried to help that fan, has only gone downhill. The stylist put me in incredibly stiff ankle boots, and every time I winced in pain, she kept

telling me, “It’s okay, they’re Dior.” To which my ankle screamed back, “Fuck Dior!”

I could barely walk onto the set where we were having the interviews, and my face grimaced in pain the entire time. Hae-Jin stood behind camera one with her own grimace, though hers looked more pissed off.

And to make matters worse, during the live Q and A, someone asked about my life leading up to my debut. Why that would be of interest to anyone, I have no clue. And I was speechless. I still am.

But of course, ever the professional, Min-Kyung jumped in. She saw an opportunity and she grabbed it.

She had the entire audience eating out of her hand. They awww’d when she talked about loving to work with me on the show. They ohhh’d when she mentioned how much she enjoys how close we’ve become. And then she had them all crying as she told them the story of how I was sick as a child. How my dad died suddenly and left us in financial hardship. How we came to Korea begging his family for help, and they turned their backs on us. And how I overcame it all to make myself who I am today. She outed my whole life story in embarrassing detail without my consent.

Min-Kyung grew up healthy and wealthy. But that story doesn’t gain popularity and fans. Tying herself to me and using my history to win fans’ hearts is her new strategy. Showing herself as a caring girl in love with her costar is how she solidifies her place in this partnership and for our future. I should be thankful. I should be in awe at the mastery of how she sells us and the show. I should take notes, because this is what the studio wants from us.

Instead, I feel sick. She revealed personal things she had no right to say, that people don't have the right to even know, and I just sat there and let her spew it.

The doctor enters the room with my manager. Grim looks on their faces tell me everything I need to know. It's not good. Shit. My heartbeat picks up just as it always does when I think I'm in trouble.

"Jin-Suk," the doctor addresses me in a voice that immediately makes me nervous. "Your ankle is not broken, which is a relief. It's just a bad sprain. You won't need surgery, but you will need to wear a boot, and I do suggest at least four to six weeks minimum off of the ankle to give it time to heal."

I let out a deep sigh. It's not as bad as it could have been, though not gonna lie, it still hurts like hell.

"Well, it's a relief you won't need surgery," my mother says.

"Doctor, can you give us some privacy?" Hae-Jin asks.

The doctor nods and closes the door behind him.

Hae-Jin releases a breath, and her nostrils flare like a wild bull's. I gulp.

"This is just one of a number of unfortunate events today," she says, jaw clenched.

"Why, what else happened?" I ask.

"We received a call from a gentleman named Kim Byung-Woo."

A gasp comes from behind me. I look over my shoulder and see my mother's hand covering her mouth, eyes wide in shock.

"Mom?" I ask.

“Who’s Kim Byung-Woo?” my sister asks.

“He’s your keun ahbuhji, your father’s older brother,” my mother explains. I don’t have the warmest feelings towards my dad’s family. When he passed, they insisted he be buried in Korea. So our entire family had to fly out here when we barely had enough money to pay rent. And when we asked for some help, some support, we got nothing.

“Why is he calling the company?” I ask. My voice sounds panicked to my ears.

“Apparently, he saw the interview today. He wants to clear the air about what happened when your father died. He’s willing to give an exclusive interview...for a cost. The network reached out to us first to confirm his identity,” Hae-Jin says.

“How’s he gonna do a tell-all interview when he knows nothing about us? And he wants to get paid for it?” I’m shaking, and my voice is too loud for this small exam room.

Hae-Jin examines me closely and then turns her eyes to my mother. “Unless you disagree, the company will take care of it.” Take care of it. It all sounds so sinister, and I wonder how the hell I got here. My life has become its own K-drama.

“This isn’t my fault. Min-Kyung is the one who shared my family’s personal information in the interview. I didn’t ask her to. I don’t even know how she knew any of it.” I’m so busted. I’m so busted.

Mom’s hand rests on my shoulder and she squeezes. “No one’s blaming you, Jacob,” she says calmly. “Let’s just let the company take care of it.”

“We’ve discussed it, and we think the best idea right

now is for you to be out of the spotlight for a short while. With your ankle hurt, it's a good excuse. We'll cancel the photo shoot in Busan tomorrow and work around the injury for filming the finale. Then we'll issue a statement, and you and your family will go away for a couple months for the summer, maybe to Jeju-do. Weren't you complaining about not getting to see the beach? We'll take care of the errant family member."

Hae-Jin is all business. She sounds like a mafia consigliere. *We'll take care of the errant family member.* I imagine her with a scratchy voice, barely moving her mouth as she speaks in a raspy whisper. I fold my fingers to my thumb and hit the air a few times. *We'll lay low, boss,* I say in my head.

I look up, and all eyes are on me. I might have said it out loud. I clearly have seen a few too many mob movies in my day.

My mom and Jin-Hee giggle.

Hae-Jin just rolls her eyes and shakes her head. "I'll call you later when I have more information," she says over her shoulder as she leaves the room.

"Well, a few weeks off doesn't sound so bad," my mom says.

"It actually sounds like exactly what I need, to be honest," I say.

"Where should we go? It will be busy in Jeju right now. Yuck, so many crowds," Jin-Hee says.

"No, I don't think Jeju. And I don't think Busan. In fact, I have another idea," Mom says. She pulls out her phone,

puts it to her ear, and steps outside, leaving Jin-Hee and me staring at each other, confused.

I can hear my mom's loud voice through the door but can't make out what she's saying or who she's talking to.

"I don't care where we go. It will just be fun not to have fans screaming for you all the time. Ew," Jin-Hee says, scrunching her nose.

"Hey, I can't help it that people love me," I say.

"You're gross."

"Well, after today, people will probably hate me. I looked so bad on-screen and god, all that stuff Min-Kyung said in the interview." I pull my hand down my face and shake my head, reminded of the interview, embarrassed.

Jin-Hee turns her phone towards me. "Look, the comments aren't that bad. Most people noticed you didn't seem yourself from your facial expressions. But they seem more worried than annoyed. And as far as MinJin goes, the opinions are mixed so far. Not everyone thinks that you and Minky should be a couple off-screen, too. She has a...reputation."

I raise an eyebrow at my little sister as I take the phone from her. What does she know about Min-Kyung's reputation? "Haven't I told you already to never read the comments?"

Still, I look at the page my sister has pulled up and scroll through hundreds of comments about the interview. Some are excited that we might be dating in real life. Lots of MinJin hashtags. Others say I'm too good for her because of her rumored past relationships. A few say I looked like I'd eaten a sour lemon.

"You know, you could solve this all by dating someone

else. The studio couldn't force you to date Minky if you already have a girlfriend."

"No more K-dramas or webtoons for you, understood? Where do you get these ideas? It's not that easy. The studio would never allow it. Plus, how am I supposed to even meet anyone and build an attraction, exchange witty banter, and escalate the emotions until we get to define the relationship? It's not like I have a lot of interaction with young women these days."

"Uh, wow, you really *are* a dork, huh? A true romantic," she says, shaking her head and rolling her eyes. "Real life isn't a K-drama, Oppa. Just find a girl you like and ask her out."

"Yeah, just like that." As if it was that easy.

"Well, you could at least make it seem like you're interested in other girls so they can't force you into dating Minky. I mean really, Oppa, you're just rolling over and letting them make you miserable. They even control all your logins. That's pretty much an invitation for them to tell whatever story they want online."

I rub my face with both hands, trying to erase this conversation. My ankle is throbbing, and I'm craving hoddeuk. I don't care that the studio controls my social media accounts. It's not like I have anything to post myself. I don't even have friends. The truth echoes through the hollows in my heart, reminding me of how lonely I really am.

Mom comes back into the exam room, a wide smile on her face as she finishes the conversation on the phone. "I am so excited, too. It's been so long. We can't wait to see you." I stare at her, wondering what she's up to. I wait for her to say goodbye to whoever is on the line.

“Well, I have some very good news,” she announces as she hugs the phone to her chest. My mom’s eyes sparkle, and the ever-present lines on her face seem to melt away. “Pack your bags, kids. We’re heading to the land of sun, surf, fish tacos, and dear old friends.”

No.

“Oh my god, we’re going to San Diego?” Jin-Hee squeals with excitement.

“Yes! We leave tomorrow right after shooting the finale,” Mom exclaims. “I’ve set it all up for us.”

“But how?” I ask. The studio would never allow us to go all the way to America, would they?

“Don’t you worry. They were worried about you flying with your injury, but we’ll spring for business class seats,” Mom says.

We have some money saved now. But I never feel comfortable with us spending recklessly. “Mom, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Well, we’ll be saving money on everything else, because—” she clasps her hands together “—we’ll be staying with the Chos.” Her voice rises high with delight.

I freeze.

Exactly what I was afraid of.

Hannah.

My throat constricts tightly with a mixture of sadness, worry, regret...and anger.

It’s been three years. I’ve always wondered if I’d ever see her again and what that reunion would look like.

Brutal. A bloodbath, that’s what.

For a brief second I wonder what’s worse: Staying in

Korea and being forced to fake feelings for someone I can't stand? Or going back home and facing the person I cared about the most, but left behind?

So much for time off.

The cameras and the studio may not be following me, but my past definitely is.