

AUTHOR OF SEOULMATES
SUSAN LEE

The Name Drop



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—ALI HAZELWOOD,

New York Times bestselling author of *The Love Hypothesis*

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The **Name Drop**

**Books by Susan Lee
available from Inkyard Press**

Seoulmates
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ISBN-13: 978-1-335-45798-1

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

Printed in U.S.A.



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To all those who, in whatever your situation,
maybe even by your own voice, have been told that you can't...
I've been there.

But, I believe in you.

You are beautiful. Now, run. —KNJ

keep walking

jessica

“Dad, I’m fine. I don’t need you to walk me inside. You’ll get a ticket if you leave your car in the drop-off zone,” I say. I hope it’s just enough to convince him to let me go. Sometimes money is the only language my very cheap father understands.

His eyes close for a brief moment as he weighs the options: walk his only daughter into the airport to make sure she starts off okay on her very first solo trip. Or, risk getting a ticket and possibly towed. I can practically see his mind working as he calculates how far it would set back his monthly emergency fund.

He grabs my hand and squeezes gently. “Jessica, it’s not too late to change your plans for the summer,” he says, back in broken record mode.

“Dad, please, not this again. I know you’re not thrilled with me going, but you eventually agreed. Do we need to rehash this? You’ve worked at Haneul for over ten years. If you can survive that, surely I’ll survive one summer internship.” I smile, hoping it’ll appease his concerns.

He looks like he’s about to keep arguing but thankfully my

mother steps in and gives me a hug. “Remember to say thank you to everyone who works on the airplane. And to insa with a bow to everyone who works at the company. And to give a small smile to everyone who works at the bus and subway stops.”

“Umma, I get it...show respect. I know, I know. You’ve hammered this into my head my entire life. Have I ever disappointed you?” The knot in my stomach tightens. *My choice in college notwithstanding*, I think to myself.

“We just worry, Jessica. But we’re also very, very proud.” I spot the tears welling up in her eyes immediately and I am not having it. Nope. I will not cry.

I turn my attention to my father. His back is ramrod straight, lips held in a tight line not betraying any emotion. This could go one of two ways. Either he changes his mind... again...and drags me back in the car and home to Cerritos where I work at my part-time job saving up money for tuition. The safe path. Or he lets me go and challenge myself in an ultracompetitive internship program in New York City. Which just so happens to be for the same company he works for, and oh yeah, hates.

His brows are stitched together. He swallows, and I track the movement in his neck. The weight of his internal war presses heavy in my heart. I hold my breath.

“Jessica, don’t spend money frivolously like on eating out and shopping.” He pauses, clears his throat before continuing. “And stay out of trouble. Don’t bring needless attention to yourself. Don’t walk anywhere alone. And only buy toilet paper on sale. Better yet, roll some up from the office bathroom and take it home with you, but make sure no one notices.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. It's his best effort to let me go and I'll take it. Plus, it's not bad advice about stockpiling some office TP.

"I'll be fine. I promise," I say.

"But most of all, don't let this internship change you," he says. He doesn't meet my eyes.

Thing is, I absolutely intend to be changed by this experience. It's my first chance to do something big on my own and I'm going to make the most of it. I open my mouth to tell my dad this very thing, but the words get stuck behind all the emotion in my throat.

Better yet, I'll just show him.

"I'm going to make you both very proud," I say. "Love you." I push the last words out but can't avoid the crack that betrays everything I'm feeling—anticipation, determination...fear.

I quickly grab the handle of my suitcase and turn toward the airport entrance.

Don't look back, I tell myself. Keep walking.

And I do.

elijah

"Mom, I'm fine. Don't get out of the car." I lean through the window to give my mom a reassuring smile. Our family driver in the States meets my eyes in the rearview mirror and gives me a small nod. He'll help me avoid a big emotional goodbye. If there's anything my mom hates, it's a scene. She's the queen of decorum.

"Honey, are you sure you don't want me to go with you to New York? I could always, I don't know, make a shop-

ping trip out of it. Maybe your sister will fly out to meet us? We can spend some time getting lost at The Met, then catch a hot new show, and have brunch the next day at Balthazar. I'd hate for you to miss Balthazar your first time in the city. There's so much I want to introduce you to in New York."

I watch as my mom makes an alternate plan for my summer right before my eyes. Not gonna lie, her suggestions sound a lot better than what my dad has in store for me. Spending nine-to-five days in a glass prison with a bunch of stuffy corporate types in some made-up "executive training" role for kids of VIPs is not my idea of a good time.

But I've spent months trying to come up with excuses to get out of it. And my dad has hit his wit's end with me. If I survive the summer, maybe he'll get off my back about all the other ways I've disappointed him and fallen short of the family name when I come home to Korea.

"Mom, Grandpa would be disappointed if you cut your visit with him short. Plus, I need to do this on my own. Isn't that what you and Dad expect from me? To start showing that I can be responsible and figure my shit out?"

She lets out a deep sigh. "Elijah," she warns.

"I know, Mom, watch my language. I'll try." I flash her a smile and her eyes immediately warm.

"Go and do your best, Elijah. But," she pauses and looks into the distance at something I can't see, a future she's not even sure of yet, "have fun and...be happy."

I want to tell her I don't know what that looks like, what that takes. I want to tell her the irony is that there's no room in our life of luxury for the ultimate luxury of being happy.

I want to remind her who my father is, as if she isn't constantly reminded of the man she's married to.

Instead, I cock my head and say, "Oh, I plan to have a lot of fun, Mom, don't you worry."

"If you need anything, anything at all, just let someone on staff know who you are. They'll take care of you," she says.

"Mom, we agreed that I'm going to be incognito this summer. I'll do what Dad wants of me, but I don't want anyone bending over backward because of who I am, because of who he is."

Her entire face collapses with worry.

"I'll be okay. Trust me. I'm scrappier than you think," I say, trying to convince her. I wink at her and she laughs. I knew that would get her.

"I love you, Son," she says to me.

My heart starts to race. It's go time. I'm heading into the shark-infested waters of my dad's company without anyone there as a safety net.

"Love you too, Mom," I say, my voice sounding small in my own ears, betraying my nerves, my hesitation...my dread.

I quickly back away from the window, tap the car twice to let the driver know that I'm leaving, throw my backpack over my shoulder, and head into the airport. I walk toward a future I'm uncertain about, one I don't even think I want.

Keep walking, I tell myself.

And I do.

1

jessica

A warm afternoon in June...

It takes three deep breaths for me to convince myself it's not my time to die.

Why did I think it was a good idea to fly alone to New York City again? Outside with my parents, all I wanted was to get away. But now, inside on my own? I'm sweating bullets.

"Are you okay?" The irritated woman at the airline counter is clearly not into my inopportune potential panic attack, not with the line behind me snaking back and forth with impatient passengers waiting to take my spot.

I remember what I researched via the University of Google, reminding myself again how statistically unlikely it would be for my particular plane to crash and burn while I'm on it, before answering the question. I release one more deep breath and nod.

"Name," the woman—Julie from Tampa, FL, according to her name tag—asks.

“Jessica Lee,” I answer. I pull out my driver’s license and hand it over to her.

Julie From Tampa looks down at my ID and back up at me. I stand mesmerized at how only her eyeballs move and the sheer disdain with which they laser themselves into me.

“Oh, sorry. My Korean name, the one on my license, is Yoo-Jin Lee.” I swallow the lump lodged in my throat. “I’ve been meaning to change it officially on my license and everything when I turned eighteen, but I haven’t gotten around to it yet. It gets confusing. I’m usually much more organized than this. So much so that people find it annoying. But officially changing one’s name feels kinda monumental, ya know? Anyways, I’m flying to New York City...for an internship. It’s my first. I just graduated. I’m going to junior college in the fall. It’s the smart financial decision for me right now.”

Her eyeballs make their move again, rolling up to look directly at me, and then continuing upward toward her forehead, making her lashes flutter, screaming without words that she well and truly could not care less.

Right. Busy airport, irritated airline worker, not exactly the best place for me to break out into my nervous habit of oversharing. I force an awkward smile.

“Just the facts, Jessica,” my mom always says when I get sidetracked. “You sound smarter if you just speak the facts.”

This is a huge moment and I’m not going to ruin it by causing a ruckus at the airport. It’s my first time flying alone. My first time living without my parents. I’ve saved up enough money from my after-school job to supplement the pennies I’ll make from the internship and hopefully survive a summer in New York City.

If I can make it there, I can make it anywhere. At least, that's what I hear.

And, best of all, there will be no overprotective father looking over my shoulder. It'll be good for us both. I need to grow and make my own decisions, good and bad. And he needs to learn to let me go, his only child, his baby girl.

The conversation we had minutes ago was nothing compared to how angry Dad was when I announced I was taking a job at his place of employment, Haneul Corporation, Korea's second largest technology company. My grouchy, overworked, underpaid father, is some kind of finance guy in their Los Angeles branch. You'd be hard-pressed to find someone who hates their job more.

Dad may not have wanted this for me, but I don't think he gets how much I want it for myself, how much I need it, actually. Dad works in numbers, but he doesn't understand the messed-up math of college financials. Our family is too poor to afford any of the schools I got into. But according to the system, on paper, we're too "rich" to get financial aid. And the few scholarships I was eligible for needed referrals, recommendations...connections. Middle-class people like us don't have connections. So I didn't even apply.

It's better my dad believes I was too slow in getting applications done, too late to get support, too unimpressive to be granted help. Otherwise, he'd blame himself, and what else could he have done to put us in a different position in life? This is just how it is. The rich get all the opportunities and the rest of us have to figure out other ways.

This internship is my other way.

I picked Haneul not only because working for a Korean

company is important to me, but I'm way more likely to get a recommendation from a Korean person-of-note. That is, as long as I am able to stand out and impress them. But I'm up for it. The competition for the internship was fierce. Rumor has it that there were thousands of applicants. But I'm proud to say that I am now one of ten new interns to be selected for the program. Step one, done.

Activate internal happy dance.

I look around, taking in the massive production that is LAX. I wonder how many people fly through this airport every day. It's packed full of travelers unfazed by the thought of flying. That's a good sign. I, too, can be unfazed, I lie to myself.

My attention catches on the guy standing two stations over. At first, it's the long black trench coat, worn over a gray hoodie, that stands out to me. Who wears that many layers in this heat? My curiosity is piqued. Granted, LAX's air-conditioning is no joke and I'm kinda wishing I had my own trench coat. I don't own a trench coat. I literally do not know one person who owns a trench coat. And his is *fancy*. I, fashion-impaired as I am, can even tell standing ten feet away.

I can't quite make out if he's handsome or not, since the bottom half of his face is covered with a black mask and his ball cap is pulled low so I can't see his eyes. But he exudes handsome. I bet he smells handsome too. It's the air of mystery. Today I'm realizing that a possible international jewel thief or potential con artist is my type apparently because I'm very curious.

It would be fun to be seated next to a cute guy on the plane, exchanging witty banter, flirting to distract from my fear of

free-falling thirty thousand feet to my demise. I wonder where this guy is going.

He tosses his passport at the airline worker, talking to her without even looking up from his phone.

Welp, there goes that fantasy. Rude to customer service workers means likely rude to his mother and would definitely be rude to me, his brief daydream girlfriend. And considering the possible lines of work I've assigned to him, I don't think rude adds much charm to being a felon either.

"You're all set," Julie From Tampa says, holding out my ID and boarding pass.

I watch as my bag is none-too-gently tossed onto a conveyer. Goodbye, bag. See you in New York. Have a safe flight. Be nice to the other bags. Somehow I get the feeling even if possibly-cute-mysterious guy isn't up to no good, he definitely wouldn't be interested in me, the Luggage Whisperer. Go figure.

"The Preferred security line is to the right."

I smile and nod. It was nice of Julie to tell me which line she prefers. I grab the documents and place them carefully into a folder in my new Coach tote bag. It's my most precious possession. It was a miracle find at the Coach outlet store. Even though it was already marked down and the salesperson offered me an extra fifteen percent off because of the barely noticeable black scuff on the back of the tan leather, I spent more on it than I have on anything. I need a serious bag for my serious internship.

"This can't be right," I hear the frustrated trench coat guy say to the airline worker as I pass by. He has an expensive-looking backpack with a large triangle logo reading "Prada" hanging loosely from one shoulder, the front pocket unzipped. I have

the urge to tap him on the arm and let him know before his stuff falls out.

But he seems upset.

He has a Korean passport in his hand. We're likely not on the same flight after all. A sense of relief washes over me. I'm nervous enough as it is. I don't want angry passengers bringing bad mojo onto the plane.

The security line is surprisingly short and the process a lot easier than I recall from the few times my family has flown together for summer vacations. Julie really knew what she was talking about when she directed me to this line. I see why she prefers it.

I smile at the TSA agent and hand over my boarding pass and ID. To get a head start, I bend over to untie my sneakers.

"Shoes stay on. Everything stays in the bag."

I look up from my crouched position, confused.

"You don't have to take your shoes off here. You can keep everything in your carry-on. Just place it in a bin on the conveyer."

"But I got a see-through case for all my liquids," I explain. "I made sure they were all under three ounces and whatever I couldn't fit, I plan to purchase at my closest Duane Reade drugstore when I reach New York City since there is reportedly one on every third corner."

Oversharing. It's a gift.

"Good practice for next time," the agent says, waving me through.

I feel a bit uncomfortable that TSA isn't doing their job as thoroughly as they're supposed to. Should I report this? See something, say something. But the agent was so kind to me—why is it my responsibility to call him out?

The other people in the line ahead of me, mostly older men in business suits, seem unbothered. They know this process like clockwork. They take more risks with their lives, apparently.

Plus, who's gonna listen to an eighteen-year-old who has only flown three times in her life? I should trust those who know better and follow the lead of my elders. Sometimes I surprise myself at how old-school and Korean I really am despite not having been there since I was a kid.

I make it to my gate with fifty-four minutes to spare before boarding, my anxiety spiking when I realize I'm six minutes behind my carefully crafted airport plan. I won't be the stand-out of the intern class by being late.

Always be the first to arrive and the last to leave. I hear my mom's calming voice and words of wisdom in my head. It's quickly pushed to the side by a vision of the disappointed look on my father's face. He doesn't even need to say a word and I know I've messed up. My heart immediately starts beating faster.

I'll need to walk places quicker. Be more direct in my communication, waste no time chitchatting. And when in doubt, stand straighter, lift my chin, and purse my lips with confidence. It's my fake-it-till-you-make-it stance.

I'm top three in my graduating class, secretary of the student government, and a varsity tennis player. I have done everything to make sure I'd be considered outstanding. And now it's time to show up for this internship.

Because there's nothing special about where I come from. Nothing to set me apart from kids who have privilege and opportunity. I've got no name or bank balance to throw around and impress like other kids getting into the best schools. This

internship is my one shot to get a step ahead, even if it's a tiny one.

Terrified, sure. But capable, one hundred percent, I remind myself. And when all else fails, like I tell myself at least ten times a day, fake it till you make it.

And one day, I'll eventually get to the place in my life where there's a lot less faking it and a lot more making it.

I'm hoping this summer is exactly where that journey begins.

2

elijah

“Can you check again? Try Lee Yoo-Jin instead. Or maybe Yoo-Jin Lee.”

Maybe I should have taken my mom up on her offer to come with me. What made me think I could do this on my own?

I attempt to mirror my mom’s voice instead of my dad’s. Mom’s tone can, when she wants it to, be sweet and persuasive. Dad has never been sweet in his life. His way of speaking is condescending, insulting, scary as hell.

I don’t think that’s gonna work in my favor here.

I should have used a “please” and a “thank you” as well. Those words feel like the most foreign of English words I’ve ever learned. People don’t expect that from me. I am my father’s son in everyone’s eyes.

At least those who know our family.

I track the brows of the airline worker as they slowly furrow their way into a point in the middle of her forehead. Like skinny worms meeting for a kiss. She, clearly, does not know our family.

“You said your name was Elijah Ri...with a *R*.” She says the letter *R* like it’s code for “fuck off.”

All I’ve ever wanted was for some space between me and my birth name. I even went as far as to go by “Ri” instead of “Lee” in my family name’s English form. All for it to now be the thing that will likely get me dragged away in handcuffs for identity theft or something.

“Yes, um, but that’s my English name. And you said I wasn’t listed on the flight. Here.” I reach over into the open pocket of my backpack and pull out my Korean passport. “This is my passport with my Korean name. Let me check my email and see if I have a confirmation number or something. My dad’s travel assistant made the reservation so she may have done so with my Korean information. Sorry.” I scan my email, a bead of sweat trickling down my back, and I’m too nervous to even look up at the disapproving expression on this stranger’s face. I drop the passport on the counter and try and find the email with my information on my phone.

I’m beginning to think Betty Sue Airline Worker thinks something fishy is going on. Just because I’m standing here wearing a long black trench coat, in June, in LA, with a black ball cap pulled low over my face and a black face mask on, handing over two forms of ID with different names on them...doesn’t make this suspicious, does it?

Shit.

Where is that email?

I should have just booked the flight myself. But my dad, always so certain I will fuck everything up, wouldn’t hear of it. And he for sure would have a field day if I miss this flight.

I’m nineteen years old and can’t do the most basic things

on my own. I'm not *allowed* to do stuff for myself. We have people who work for us to do almost anything and everything we need. I don't even wipe my own ass. We have a high-tech bidet for that, complete with warm air for drying.

Do not get me started on how irritated this makes me.

So here I stand, my future in the hands of an airline worker's opinion on if my multiple identities are believable enough. Her whim will determine whether or not I get on that plane to New York and spend the summer bored to death in the Executive Training Program at my dad's company.

I look down at my wallet and pull out my VVIP card. This usually works in Korea as auto-entry into just about anywhere. But I push it back into its spot. Somehow, I doubt it would work here. In fact, it will likely piss her off even more.

Maybe this is all a sign. Maybe my ancestors are smiling down on me and laughing behind my dad's back.

I don't know if I even want her to let me through or not, to be honest. Spending the summer working for a bunch of miserable executives at Haneul Corporation is not my idea of a good time. But at least no one will know I'm the CEO's son and heir apparent to the company throne. I couldn't stand having them kiss my ass while talking behind my back about how incompetent I am. I get that to my face from my dad on the regular. Thankfully, my mom and sister helped me convince him to let me work from the New York office instead of the headquarters in Seoul, where he'd be breathing down my neck the whole time.

"Your boarding pass," Betty Sue says, holding out a slip of paper tucked in my passport.

Seat 34B. Almost all of my flights are on my dad's private

jet. I rarely fly commercial and when I do, it's in first class where the rows are usually single digits. "This can't be right," I say. "Do planes even have this many seats?"

I consider pulling this trench coat over my head and hiding the moment I see her face. The eye roll, the snarl, the something-smells-like-shit expression. It's another one of those times when I come across like a total privileged asshole and don't realize it. I'm usually better at being aware of these moments and remember to say exactly the opposite of what I'm thinking.

It's why I want to do this internship on my own in New York this summer. I need to experience a life less sheltered than the one I have in Korea. I hate being so privileged that I don't even have the basic understanding of how people do things and behave in certain situations. It's like I'm from another planet sometimes. And though every person in Korea knows of the Lee family of Haneul Corp—we're considered chaebol, the wealthiest and most connected of families, after all—I doubt anyone even knows or cares about that here in America.

"Security check-in is to the left."

I nod and smile, though I'm sure it's lost behind my mask. Well, as my dad always says, "If they're not gonna be important to you later, they don't need to be important to you now."

Wow, come to think of it, that motto's a lot dickier than I ever realized. If I'm not careful, those kinds of thoughts are gonna stick and I'll turn into the junior version of Chairman Lee Jung-Hyun after all.

I can't control the shiver of horror. I'm terrified that it could become a reality.

I put my passport back into my backpack and head toward security.

The line zigzags back and forth for as far as I can see. I don't think I've ever seen this many people at an airport before. Where are they all going at the exact same time?

I eventually get to the front and hand my ticket over to the stern-faced worker seated there.

"Lower your mask," she says without inflection.

I pull my mask down and try another of those "look, I'm just like everyone else" smiles on for size.

She barely spares a glance at me before looking back down at my ID, nods, and waves me into yet another long line of impatient people. I'm not quite sure why they're all taking off their shoes, removing jackets, placing everything in dirty gray bins. But I just follow their lead.

It suddenly occurs to me that all of this might be my dad's form of punishment for my less-than-enthusiastic reaction to the summer job. It would be just like him to book me a trip that any average person would take rather than that of a Korean chaebol, foreign royal, or K-pop star.

Well, that's fine with me. I'm in no hurry. I can stand in line with everyone else. In fact, I enjoy being just like anyone else with no special treatment. I pop my earbuds in and turn up my SEVENTEEN playlist, waiting for my turn to go through security machines.

It's not like this plane is going to leave without me, right?

I'm dripping in sweat and gasping for air by the time I reach the gate. I was putting my Jordans back on at the security screening when the first announcement of my flight's boarding came over the intercom. By the time the final announcement was made, I was still twenty gates away. I started to run.

I'm going to murder my stylist for putting me in this black wool trench coat during summer in LA.

I hand my boarding pass to the attendant who beeps me in and hurries me down the jet bridge. I step on the plane just as they close the doors behind me.

I walk down the narrow aisle passing the unhappy faces of basically every passenger on this plane. My eye catches on a girl in row four, her long black hair tied up in a messy bun, bangs cut slightly crooked. I notice her wide-eyed and smiling out the window. She couldn't be more out of place. I doubt anyone else on this plane is smiling.

What makes someone that happy?

After the first few rows, the aisle gets even narrower and the faces unhappier. I almost stop in my tracks at what I see.

How can so many people be piled in like sardines into the back of this airplane? This flight is over five hours long. People of all sizes, mothers holding crying babies, others fanning themselves with the airplane's brochures, and not a glass of champagne or pillow in sight.

I keep walking, finally reaching the back of the plane and row thirty-four, seat B. The only empty spot is the one in between a man who looks like he may be training for Olympic weightlifting, and a very tall Asian guy about my age whose one leg is jammed up against the seat in front of him and the other straightened out into the aisle.

I point to the empty seat next to him. "Um, that's me," I say.

He frowns but unbuckles his seat belt and stands up to let me through. I take a moment to figure out if it's even possible for me to get past, and if I should scootch in facing to-

ward him or facing away. I choose the latter. I'd rather risk an awkward ass rubbing than an almost kiss with a stranger.

I squeeze my way through and collapse into my chair, my knees hitting the one in front of me. "Sorry," I say to the back of a head. I push my backpack under the seat at my feet and tuck my elbows in since the passengers on both sides of me have draped their own arms over each armrest. I'm sweating like crazy and all I want to do is take off my coat. But there's no way. I can't even move an inch.

Okay, Dad, you win. Lesson learned.

I press the button to lean my seat back but realize there's a wall behind me blocking it. Great. I knew my dad was a tyrant, but this is crueler than I ever imagined.

This is going to be a very long flight. But I can survive five hours in a cramped seat that doesn't recline with the chemical odor of the bathroom wafting in the air.

At least I'm not heading home to Korea to face a summer working with my dad. If this is as bad as it gets, I'll be okay. I'm tougher than he thinks.

But, if I had known then how much worse this summer would get, I would never have gotten on this plane.

3

jessica

I've never flown first class before and the difference is remarkable. I have enough room in my seat to tuck my legs up under my blanket and relax. I didn't want to be a burden to the flight attendant, but since she comes around asking regularly if I want anything to drink, I try each of the different kinds of juices they have stocked on board: orange, apple, cran-apple, grapefruit. Which makes having a bathroom for just the first-class cabin, one that rarely has a line, super convenient.

It's best not to get too used to it all, though.

I'm not sure what's gotten into my dad to make such an extravagant purchase. We're not first-class people. We're most definitely of the economy, nonrefundable, every-restriction-possible variety. But maybe he's feeling guilty for being so resistant to the internship in the first place. Maybe it's his way of telling me he's proud of me. I swallow back the lump in my throat just thinking about it.

The email from Haneul's Internship Coordinator, Mira

Im, mentioned that a shuttle would be waiting to take all the interns to our accommodations. After landing, I look up all the other interns' flights and calculate that I'll likely have to wait about two hours for the rest of the cohort to arrive from their respective cities. I could explore all the sights and sounds of Newark Liberty Airport, but I'm just too tired and don't want to get lost. So I decide to search for the shuttle driver and wait it out.

When I make my way down the escalator to the arrivals area, I look for anyone holding a Haneul Corporation sign as instructed. What I don't expect to see while scanning the group of men dressed in black holding various different signs is a tablet screen held up reading "Lee Yoo-Jin."

I shake my head and do a double take. Yes, that's my name. But that driver can't possibly be just for me. Why would I have a separate driver?

But who else would it be for? My name is right there. My face stretches into a smile. Haneul Corp is going all out for their interns. Nice. My dad has always complained about this company. How they never respect his hard work, or anyone's for that matter. But maybe he's just grouchy and exaggerating. I feel like they're giving me the royal treatment. And if they treat their interns like this, it's a pretty good sign that it's a great place to work.

"Hi," I say, trying to put on my most confident smile. "That's me." I point to his tablet. "Lee Yoo-Jin. Would you like to see some ID? My American name is Jessica Lee but all my IDs still list me as Yoo-Jin Lee, my Korean name, so I'm sure they'll validate that I'm who you're here to pick up. I also have the address of the accommodations if you want

me to show you that as well. But I'm guessing you already know where we're going. At least I hope so. This is my first time in New York City and I would be useless in helping direct you. Though, I could type the destination into Google Maps if you'd like me to help navigate."

The handsome driver's face remains blank as he stares at me. I think I've stunned him. It wouldn't be the first time. He nods once and reaches for my Coach tote.

"Oh, um, I can carry this," I say, holding on tightly to the straps. "I, um, checked a bag as well."

"Baggage Claim is over here," he says gruffly. I hope I didn't hurt his feelings. It's awfully nice of him to want to carry all my stuff, but the most important things like my wallet, phone, and paperwork are in this bag. It's safest if it stays with me at all times.

He starts to walk briskly toward the carousels. It's like he's gaining speed with each step and my short little legs struggle to keep up. I focus on picking up the pace...

...and run right into a human wall.

"Oof, sorry," I say as I watch the entire contents of my bag spill to the ground in slow motion, and a searing pain shoots up my arm. Ouch, that's gonna leave a mark.

I drop to my knees and start grabbing anything and everything off the floor, trying not to think about how many feet, many of which have just come out of public bathrooms, have walked this ground.

The worst horror imaginable is having the world see what one decides to put in their bag for travel. Well, I'm sure I can actually imagine worse horrors, but in this moment, this is what I've got.

I stuff my wallet, my travel-sized hand sanitizer, two granola bars, an extra pair of socks, my knockoff brand AirPods, and the ginseng candy I hate but my mom insists I keep for any and all ailments ranging from indigestion to the flu back into my purse. That would leave just...

Why is it when you're about to face the most humiliating moment in your life, everything slows down to super slo-mo? It's like life just wants you to never forget how very embarrassing this moment is going to be. You know, that moment when you glance over at the black Nike gym shoes, track upward to the perfectly torn knees of the slim-fit black jeans, and finally, to an outstretched hand...holding your in-case-of-emergency extra pair of undies.

Or is it just me?

I grab them quickly and jam my hand into my purse. "Watch where you're going," I try to say curtly. But it comes across instead like I'm about to cry. Come to think of it, I just might die of embarrassment here and now and that surely will be accompanied by some tears.

"Sorry," a voice says. I expected something deeper from a man in all black. Apparently all-black means Darth Vader in my mind. But the voice is surprisingly soft, melodic. I squeeze my eyes shut for one breath, wishing for this day to start over. Maybe just from after we got off the plane since I wouldn't want to miss out on the first-class experience.

Then I open my eyes and brave a glance.

I pull back in surprise as I recognize him as the guy from the airport back in LA. The international jewel thief. Renowned con artist. Rude to his mother. Damn, he *does* smell good.

"I was distracted and not paying attention to where I was

going,” he says. He reaches out his hand—did he even retract it after offering me back my undies (ohmigod)? I stare at his long fingers and perfectly manicured nails. Maybe not a jewel thief, since these hands have clearly never scaled the wall of a Sotheby’s or meticulously tried to crack open a safe ever. These are the hands of someone definitely rich and pampered. Not a hangnail or callus in sight.

I look up into his eyes. They’re the only things I can see between the black of his ball cap and the black of his face mask. They’re warm, smiling eyes, with eyelashes that look as long and thick as a camel’s.

So, I’m never gonna be a poet, okay?

I reach to grab the offered hand and wait for him to help me up. But as I remain on the floor, fingers wrapped around his, he doesn’t stand or pull or even give me a tug. Instead, he lifts his chin toward my other hand. I look down to see that I’m holding a phone. Not my phone.

Oh shit. His phone.

He wasn’t trying to help me at all.

Chivalry is truly dead these days.

“Oh, sorry, is this yours? How did it end up in my hand? It’s not even the same as mine. I still have the version from two years ago. It’s a lot smaller. I don’t think I can have one of the bigger ones like these. I can barely hold it. Good luck trying to take a selfie. Does this even fit in the pocket of your jeans?”

I wait for the eye roll or stitching of the brows that usually follows one of my verbal regurgitations. It’s the slight laugh that I hear behind his mask that makes my cheeks blush.

He takes his phone out of my hand and then actually does help me to my feet.

“Miss Lee, are you ready to go?” the driver asks. He looks between me and the guy currently still holding my hand. I pull away. I miss the warmth immediately.

“Oh, we’re not together. I mean, he’s not coming with us,” I stammer. “You, um, have someone picking you up, right?”

I don’t know why I ask. Maybe because he seems a little lost. Like maybe this is his first time traveling on his own too. But, then again, he’s wearing expensive clothing and has the most recent iPhone in tow. He likely has access to the kind of funds that allow for plenty of ride options.

He pulls his cap off and runs his fingers through his hair. His hairline is slightly damp and I get it. We’re in Newark in the middle of summer and he’s dressed entirely wrong for the weather.

But, then again, I’m in a plain white T-shirt and jeans and I’m feeling a little heated right now too. Nope, that’s the New York summer hitting me. And that sheen of sweat starting to form on my forehead? Humidity, I tell you, humidity. Definitely not because of a cute guy in front of me.

“Yeah, I’ll be okay. Thanks for asking... *Miss Lee*,” he says. The corners of his eyes lift again as he smiles behind the mask. But I don’t get the sense that he’s making fun of me. He’s laughing *with* me. Like *oh how ridiculous at our age to be referred to so formally*.

I smile back and nod. “Okay, well, then, I’ll be going along on my way now.” If I could slap my forehead in a way that wouldn’t draw attention to myself, I would. *I’ll be going along on my way now?*

I start walking and tell myself not to look back. *Do NOT look back.*

But when I do look back, because of course I do, he's gone.

And the feeling of disappointment lingers. What? Did I think he'd be standing there watching me walk away?

Apparently so, because an entire summer romance plays through my imagination in a matter of seconds. Good to get that out of the way now. I do not have time for romance, for friendships, for anything of the sort for that matter. I have to focus on my internship, working hard, and standing out among the rest of the cohort. If I'm impressive enough, memorable enough, maybe I can get a letter of recommendation from Haneul Corp for future school and scholarship applications. So that after my first year at junior college, I'll have more options.

The entirety of higher education is built for a world of the rich-get-richer. I've never stepped foot in that world. But I consider this internship my invitation to enter, or at least dip my big toe in. And this may be my only chance ever.

I turn to the driver who, with arms crossed and a couple peeks at his watch, is clearly losing patience. He probably hates driving around teenagers. Am I supposed to tip him after he drops me off? How much is an acceptable tip? I could just feign ignorance and hope Haneul took care of that already.

"I'm sorry. Yes, I'm ready to go," I say. I point out my bag as it makes its way around the carousel. He picks it up and starts walking without a word. I follow as he leads the way out the doors, through the parking garage, to his black SUV.

Damn, this car is nice. It can easily fit six people, maybe more. And it's really here just for me? I mentally chide myself to stop acting so shocked and amazed like everything is

new to me. This car likely costs the entirety of a first year's tuition at school. What a waste. Don't be impressed.

Still, I can't help but take in a deep breath of the leather scent in the SUV. So this is what rich smells like. I let out a breath and remind myself not to get too used to it. It's likely a onetime treat to kick off my internship in style.

I decide to store the memory of this experience away in the back of my mind to be pulled out one day when I've finally made it. Because once I get there, I'll know this internship was my first step. And when I do, I want a car that smells exactly like this.