

The woman's face is so close to mine that I can tell her eyebrows aren't real. Doodling in some eyes, fins, and tails would turn the pair into two fish facing off. Her eyes are red from crying. Her cheeks are streaked with gray from mascara that made a run for it. She looks down at me. I sink into my corner seat. There's no place to hide in the basement of the First Korean Full Gospel Church.

"I feel so sorry for you. Poor, poor boy. Poor, poor Ok. What are you going to do? My heart, my heart," she says, slapping her chest with her right hand, which is shackled with golden rings suffocating her plump fingers. "My heart aches for you and your mother," she says, and pounds my back with a force that would dislodge a rock from my throat.

I bow my head and wait for her to move on to the group of women in the middle of the room, huddled around my mother like burrowing wasps, buzzing loud prayers. They moan and babble because the Holy Spirit has a hold of them. I wish the Holy Spirit would get a hold of me so I could wail my sadness too.

As soon as Fish Brows leaves, another woman rushes to me. She squats down at my feet so she can meet my lowered head. She puts her hand on my shoulder, looks up into my eyes, and tells me my father is in heaven, smiling down on me. See him? The woman bids me to be good and strong for my mother and have faith in God's will, because I'm the man of the house now. God works in mysterious ways.

I nod like a robot. She stands and pulls me in to her, pressing my cheek against her stomach. I hear her heart beat, her insides gurgle, and her stomach growl. She opens her purse, digs out her wallet, pulls out bills, stuffs the money into the pockets of my borrowed suit jacket

two sizes too big, and tells me to take good care of my mother. What does this mean? Isn't she supposed to take care of me? I politely say thank you.

As Moneybags leaves, another woman walks toward me. She carries a plate of food. She's short and round and looks plenty hungry. I brace myself for baptism by spit and bits of food. The plate is piled high with rice, fried dumplings, grilled short ribs, fried chicken wings, kimchi, bean cakes, potato salad, and japchae noodles. The woman looks down at me, smiles like we know each other, and puts her plate of food on my lap. It smells good. She tells me to eat, eat up, even if I'm not hungry, even if I don't feel like it, because I'm going to need all the strength and energy to grow through this very hard thing that's happened to me. It's not normal, she says. It's all wrong. What a senseless mess. Makes you want to kick some idiot's ass, she says, shaking her head and exhaling, "Aigo. Aigo." I take a bite of rice. It's warm and soft and sticky, and tears start to form in my eyes, and soon my food is being sauced with snot. The woman hands me a napkin, and I thank her. I wipe my face, thinking how much I need my father to come back to life.

Chapter 2

I help my mother sew. I stand behind her as she's curled over a borrowed sewing machine parked on our dining table. I pin the cuffs to the sleeves and stack them in a pile, waiting for my mother to stitch them. She earns a nickel for every cuff and sleeve she brings together. This is her job at night, after she's cooked in the morning for a carryout called Soul Nice in DC and worked in the afternoon and evening as a cashier at Arirang Grocery. She works without stopping, to make ends meet, to keep us fed, to keep a roof over our heads, to send me to college someday, to keep from missing him, to keep alive my father's plan for success in the USA. In two years, he said, he would buy his dream property, which was the dilapidated house

located outside our apartment complex. Fix it up. Live in it. Sell it for a nice profit. In five years he would own his roofing business. In six years he would send me to college. In eight years he would visit Korea. In ten years he would buy me a car for my graduation.

“Ok-ah,” my mother says. “Fix these pins. They’re crooked. Pay attention.”

As I straighten the pins, I accidentally prick myself. A bead of blood forms on my thumb, and my mother elbows me away, telling me to hurry and go get cleaned before I stain something, because we can’t afford to pay for what gets damaged. The point is to make money, not lose it.

I go to the bathroom. While putting on a Band-Aid, I remember how my mother would make her own with toilet paper and Scotch tape. She would fold a square down to the size of a quarter and gently use it to cover my wound with two strips of tape. She made such a fuss whenever I got hurt. She’d say, “Aigo. Aigo. What have you done to yourself? Hurry, let me take care of it before you bleed to death.” Her urgent attention always had a way of making me feel better, even if I was bleeding to death.

I quickly return to help. Once I’ve backed up my mother with a tower of pinned cuffs and sleeves ready to sew, she says, “Go make some ramen for us.”

I go to the kitchen. I’ve gotten good at cooking ramen. When the water boils, I add the blocks of noodles and soup base. I chop green onions and cut Spam into little cubes. I crack two eggs into the pot, break the yolks, and watch the liquid turn murky. I plop in two scoops of rice and watch the grains swim and separate. My ramen is the best. My father’s was pretty good too. He used to melt a slice of American cheese into his, turning the soup creamy. It was very tasty for about two minutes, and then the gas and cramps would kick in. I’m not on friendly terms with lactose.

I set the bowls on the coffee table in the living room because the dining table has turned into a city with skyscrapers of partially assembled shirts. My mother and I sit on the floor. She says grace, and we eat, slurping noodles under the watchful eyes of my father, whose portrait is framed in black and propped on top of the television. Next to him is a shot glass of Johnnie Walker, a Camel cigarette and lighter, a bowl of Starburst candy, a plate of dried squid, and a pyramid of Oreo cookies that shrinks every time I walk by.

“This is so good,” my mother says.

I smile, feeling proud.

“Ok-ah, eating your ramen makes me feel like everything’s going to be fine. I’m not worried. God will take care of us. We just need to do our part and believe he loves us. Sometimes things don’t make sense, but there’s so much we don’t know, so we have to trust him. No matter what happens, we have to trust him,” she says.

I nod, bring the bowl up to my lips, and pour soup into my mouth.

After she eats, my mother sits on the couch and closes her eyes. “For just a minute,” she says. I clean up. When I come back from the kitchen, I see her, sitting upright, her hands crossed on her lap, her head tilted to one side, dangling like a sunflower too heavy for its stem. She sleeps.

“Ömma,” I say. She doesn’t answer. I look around the room. The sewing isn’t done. They’re coming in the morning for pickup. I need to wake her up.

“Ömma,” I say again, and tap her on the shoulder. My mother falls over, landing on her side, her head hanging off the edge of a cushion. Her mouth is wide open. She snores.

It was a rule never to wake my parents up when they napped after church on Sunday afternoons. I imagined their Sunday best thrown about the room, my father's suit, shirt, and tie deflated at the foot of the bed, and my mother's dress draped over a chair, while they snored. When I was younger, I watched TV, played jacks, rode my Big Wheel back and forth on the balcony, waiting for them to wake up. They always woke up hungry and too groggy to cook anything, so my father would announce dinner at Bob's Big Boy. We'd sit in a booth, me enclosed by my mother to my right, a wall to my left, and my father in front of me. Between sips of his Coke, he told me that I could accomplish anything in this country if I put my mind to it. Opportunities abounded.

I sit in front of the Singer, wondering, How hard can it be? Working a sewing machine can't be as hard as making the best ramen. I take off my T-shirt and use it to practice. Press pedal with foot. The harder you press, the faster the needle pumps. Guide the fabric through like you're feeding the hungry needle. Chomp-chomp. It's a cinch. I sew my first cuff to a sleeve. It looks good. A nickel earned. Ka-ching. I sew my second pair, then a third. I'm on a roll. The sewing machine hums. I complete the pile. The point is to make money, not lose it. Ka-ching. I want my mother to wake up and see what I've accomplished for her, but she snores.

I wash up, go to bed, and sleep.

I dream that I'm running through a field with Clifford the Big Red Dog, except he's not as big as he appears in the books. He's the more reasonable size of a horse, rather than a house. And Emily Elizabeth is there too, running with us. She's very cute, and she keeps calling me Charley, but I don't mind. We play fetch. We laugh. We ride on Clifford's back. We feed him apples. It's all perfect and happy, like a dog-food commercial, until Clifford starts to bark. He

barks and barks and barks and won't stop. Then he growls and growls and growls. His growling wakes me up, and I slowly realize it's not Clifford, it's the sound of the sewing machine.

My mother shouldn't be sewing. There's nothing left to sew. I finished it all. I get out of bed to see what's going on.

I stand in the dark hall. My mother doesn't notice me. She's hunched over the machine, its needle pumping thread through fabric. The jelly-bean-size bulb lights her face. She picks up a set from the pile I sewed, takes a seam ripper, and pulls apart my stitching. My stomach sinks. I did it all wrong. I made things worse. I made more work for her. I feel so sorry. I feel so stupid. She turns the cuff, rearranges it against the sleeve, and sews it correctly. I return to my room and crawl back into bed. I stare up at the ceiling. I knuckle my head twelve times, for each year I've been alive, mumbling, "pabo, pabo, pabo, pabo," just as my father would've done. Don't call me stupid. My name is Ok. At least I didn't trip while working on a roof and come tumbling down and land so hard and wrong on concrete that my neck broke. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I knuckle my head again. They said he died instantly. They said he felt nothing. No pain.

I feel the springs of the mattress against my back. The barley grains inside my pillow cradle my head. The blanket warms my cold feet. The moonlight casts a shadow of the tree outside my bedroom window. Its dangling leaves make me wish money grew on trees.

Chapter 3

No one sits at the front of the school bus, so that's where I go, right behind Mr. Rufus, with his black leather driving gloves, mirrored aviator sunglasses, and the shoulders of an offensive lineman. I don't mind being alone up here. I prefer it. It's not so bumpy, which decreases my chances of getting carsick and throwing up. Cannot risk throwing up. I can also

hear the faint sound of Mr. Rufus's radio, which plays classical music. And most importantly, I'm far from the likes of Asa Banks, who sits with his own personal audience and portable fan club in the back of the bus, making an annoying ruckus—you know, the typical sounds friends make when having fun. Asa and I had a run-in some time ago, and I try to avoid him at all costs.

It happened in the hall. I was on my way to the boys' bathroom but stopped to stare at the poster hanging above the water fountain, about the upcoming talent contest. The prize would be a hundred big ones. All interested students should sign up at the front office. One hundred dollars up for grabs? Sign me up! My eyes were getting wide, seeing the earning potential, when Asa, coming from the opposite way, looked at me. I failed to turn away in time, and our eyes met. A split second of eye contact was all he needed to let loose on me. I stared at my feet and prayed I wouldn't piss my pants, prayed I wouldn't get beat up because I looked like one of those kids you couldn't help but beat up. If you were big, bad, and bored, you were going to want to use me as a punching bag, or worse, a urinal. Something about me embodied the ideal victim. Something about being Korean, about having hair that grew out like a Chia Pet's, about my big, block-shaped head, my buckteeth, my slit eyes, the archipelago of acne on my chin, forehead, and right cheek, my cracking voice, my use of words like "archipelago," and my impeccable grades made them want to squash me like an annoying cockroach.

"Boo!" Asa said, stopping in front of me.

I froze. He smelled my fear. He leaned down into my face. He was close, any closer and my hair-needles would've pricked his eyes. I avoided his stare and looked at his mouth. His lips were plump. The top lip was brown. The lower lip was pink. Spit lined them, and when he opened his mouth to speak, stalagmites and stalactites formed. Asa burped loud and long in my face. It came from deep within, because I smelled his constipated baloney sandwich from two

days ago. I threw up in my mouth and swallowed it back down to keep from messing up his Nikes. He had nice sneakers. He wore perfectly creased jeans that fell at just the right place on his Nikes. Next to his feet, mine in their used knockoff Chucks from Value Thrift looked like they belonged to a poor toddler. My jeans were too short and showed some sock. It was a rule among the cool kids at Landover Hills Middle to never show sock.

“Nice socks, Okie Dorkie,” Asa said.

No one at school said my name right. It’s Ok. Try this: Say “pork.” Drop the p sound. Now drop the r sound. Ok. I’d been kind of wanting to test this out, but everyone ended up calling me Oak, like the tree, which I’d gotten used to. At least it conjured up images of something big and strong. But Asa couldn’t even give me the benign mispronunciation. He went for the jugular. Okie Dorkie. That was a good one.

I stared at the third button on his shirt and said nothing.

“I said, nice socks.”

I said nothing.

“In this country, when you get a compliment, you say ‘thank you.’ You know what a compliment is, boy?” he asked, wrapping his hand around the top of my head. He grabbed my hair and shook my head up and down, forcing me to nod. He held back my head like a Pez dispenser and said, “You sure about that? Well, I don’t think you know what a compliment is, ’cause if you did, you’d be saying ‘thank you’ to me ’cause I told you a compliment by telling you how nice your socks show, but you didn’t say nothing back to me, so I’m feeling like you trying to disrespect me and hurt my feelings or something. You trying to hurt my feelings?” With

a handful of my hair, he shook my head left and right. “So what you suppose to say when someone give you a compliment?”

I said nothing. I looked down, staring at that third button on his shirt. It was round and white with four holes and was held in place by yellow thread. The others were sewn on with white thread. Perfect white X marks holding the buttons in their places, but the third button was all messed up. Someone had done a lousy sewing job. Instead of an X, the button was held in place by an incomplete square, a three-sided should’ve-beenan-X. Asa, dressed in jeans with sharp creases along the sides, a shirt with sharp creases along the sleeves, and Nikes, had a mother who didn’t know how to sew.

“What’d I tell you? Why you be so rude? You deaf? You speak English? Wong-chung-chung?” Asa said, poking me in the chest with the corner of the hall pass. Three pokes. One for each syllable.

I cleared my throat, put my hands together like I was praying, stuck out my buckteeth, squinted my eyes, bowed, and said, “Okay. Okay. Wong-chung-chung. You happy now?”

Asa let go of my head, slapped his leg, and laughed with his mouth wide open and his teeth showing white and bright, like a toothpaste commercial.

I tried my best not to break into a run and limp-strutted back to the classroom, scared and nervous, expecting Asa to jump me from behind. I was nothing but a traitor with a full bladder. I betrayed someone or something in me. Here was the mark of a true coward: making fun of the way your own mother talked to give your enemy a good laugh. What a loser.

My head bops against the bus window as I try to think of ways not to be a loser. I need to bring in a regular income for my household like my father used to do. I could earn a hundred

dollars by winning that school talent show, but I have no talent, not the kind they're looking for. Hearing violins cry from Mr. Rufus's radio, I wish I played an instrument. Maybe I could sing and dance for the talent show? Do my Michael Jackson impersonation? They would definitely boo me off the stage. Magic tricks? Telling jokes? Juggling? As Mr. Rufus turns the steering wheel like he's stirring a big pot of soup, the bus enters Parkside Gardens and rolls over a speed bump, causing the kids in the back to exaggerate their bounce and say woo. They burst out laughing. They're not laughing at me, I assure myself, fighting my curiosity to turn and look.

I almost never laugh at school. But I do remember this one time I couldn't stop laughing. It was last year. I was placed into this advanced reading group called Booked, and we were talking about revenge in *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, and this one girl, her name was Carole, she was very serious and proper and had perfect manners, she sneezed really hard, so hard that she farted at the same time, and it had all of us hysterically laughing. Carole even laughed. It was the one time I felt like myself in school. After that incident it was like ice had broken, and we all participated more during discussions. This one kid named Jerome even told us about his grandfather, who went to jail for marching for civil rights with Martin Luther King Jr. I even shared how reading books was sometimes the only thing that kept me from feeling like a complete outsider, and they all nodded in agreement. They don't have Booked in middle school.

I scramble out of the bus. I walk quickly, avoiding anyone who might be noticing me and trying to catch up to ask about homework or an upcoming test or something like that, not that that's ever happened, but I like taking precautions. I hurry to vanish from the scene. Invisibility is key to survival. If you're invisible, you don't get in trouble. You don't get hurt. No one sees you. No one at school knows about what happened to my dad. Not even the teachers. My mother said they didn't need to know, since I didn't miss any school days. My mother said I don't need

people feeling sorry for me, especially my teachers. The pity of a teacher poisons judgment and contaminates the learning process.

As I walk to our apartment building, I see Dolores Brades on her patio, braiding a woman's hair. Our downstairs neighbor wears fancy high-heel boots, leather pants, and a leopard-print sweater. I stare as she braids, her long red nails flashing among the dark strands of hair. I hear Dolores showing off about her fancy Camaro. If I had her car, I'd show off too. It's sapphire blue and shines like diamonds.

I know her name because taped to her door is a sign that reads DOLORES BRADES, with her phone number in red marker.

What's puzzling is that her mailbox, which is right next to ours, has Olarunfemi as her last name. As I get closer to them, it dawns on me: Dolores can't spell. Dolores Olarunfemi braids hair for money. If fancy-car-fancy-clothes-fancy-shoes-fancy-nails Dolores, who cannot properly spell what she does for money, can do it, so can I.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Olarunfemi," I say, walking by her.

"Mrs.? Who call me Mrs.? I am no Mrs. No man be owning me. I am Miss. Miss O. Like O for Oprah," she says, laughing into the braid between her fingers.

"My apologies, Miss O," I say, and stand there, staring at her fingers.

"Hey, little mister, how you know my name? You my little stalker?" she says. Her customer laughs. Miss O chuckles. Keeping her eyes on the braid, she says, "You stare long enough, I be charging you by the minute, you know."

I hurry into our building and dash up the steps with an idea and violins playing in my head.

Chapter 4

I sit under a poster for the upcoming talent show in the back corner of the cafeteria and eat alone, wondering if competitive eating could be considered a talent. I could eat a hundred hot dogs for one hundred dollars. I'd eat bugs for a hundred dollars. People love watching things that gross them out. I open my can of sardines. I don't mind eating alone. I read two books. The one on the outside came highly recommended by my social studies teacher, Ms. Lincoln, about Andy Rusch, a boy my age who has a weirdo friend who eats an excessive amount of onions like they're apples. I like onions, so I can relate. The book I'm hiding inside Onion John is an instructional manual on how to braid hair. Peering over my books, I see Asa and his entourage limp-strut into the cafeteria. I've practiced that walk at home. I haven't quite perfected it yet. My mother watched me limp-strut from the sewing machine to the kitchen and asked if my leg was hurt.

"No," I said.

"Then don't walk like that," she said.

It was the walk of the Asas of the world, the walk of the big and the bad. It was the walk of men like Clint Eastwood. My father loved that man. Whenever he pointed at me with hands shaped like pistols, he was trying to be Clint. Whenever he squinted, he was trying to be Clint. Whenever he chose silence or mumbled, or walked stiff like he couldn't bend his knees, or let his cigarette barely hang on to the ledge that was his lower lip, he was trying to be Clint. I get it.

This wanting to talk some other talk and walk some other walk that says I own this cafeteria, I own this classroom, I own this bus, I own you.

What makes Asa look like he owns the world makes me look lame.

“Anyone sitting here?” Mickey McDonald asks, standing beside me with a tray.

Mickey’s nickname is Old McDonald, not because she has a farm or anything, but because she wears old clothes, like corduroy bell-bottoms and velour shirts with collars big enough for Dracula. I’ve seen the popular girls tease her. Mickey instructs them that it’s vintage, it’s disco chic, and the girls hold their noses as they say, “Ewww. Don’t talk to us. Out of the way, Mothballs.”

Mickey stands near me, wearing a Bee Gees T-shirt. Her hair is big, like atomic-bomb-mushroom-cloud big, and my fingers twitch, wanting to practice the fine art of braiding. She smells like bug spray, but it doesn’t bother me.

“Yeah,” I say, angling my books over my food.

“Who?” she asks. “Your imaginary friends that eat with you every day?”

“Sure,” I say.

“Liar,” she says.

“Medusa,” I say.

“A muh-what?” she says.

I want her to take the seat so that I can tell her all about how Medusa, who was supposed to be like a virgin nun for Athena, fell for Poseidon, the god of the sea, and married him. If you

had a chance at marrying the sea god, wouldn't you? But this ticked Athena off so badly that she cursed Medusa with green skin and snakes for hair. Talk about eternal damnation. Green skin, snakes for hair, and if you made eye contact, she turned you to stone.

"Ching-chong," Mickey says.

"Ping-pong," I say.

"Ding-dong," she says, and stomps away.

Who needs to eat with other people? It's not so bad alone. I prefer eating by myself. Leave me alone with my ching-chong cuisine of stinky fish cakes, kimchi, candied fish, pickled radish, mandu, bulgogi, and kimbap. There's nothing like opening up that wrinkled, used-one-too-many-times, about-to-rip-apart aluminum foil and finding kimbap in three neat rows stacked two layers deep like Legos and smelling oh so stinky. Rice, Spam, egg, dandelion leaves, pickled radish, and carrots rolled up in seaweed. Yum. I wouldn't trade it for company with the VIP of Landover Hills.

Once, I packed my own lunch, a cheese sandwich on white bread with potato chips and an apple, thinking maybe someone would sit next to me, or the new contents of my lunch might give me the confidence to plop myself down next to a person of my choosing, but it didn't work. I ate alone. The only difference was that the food was lousy, and minutes later my stomach was cramping because I'm lactose intolerant. The cheese made me churn. I was also starving and ended up wasting my emergency quarters on a bag of Fritos that had only five chips in it. Rip-off.

I don't buy school lunch, although I'd probably qualify for reduced lunch, but I think my mother is too proud to sign me up for it. She says that that food is no good and will make me sick

and stupid. So I learned my lesson: Eat Ōmma's food to keep from becoming sick, stupid, and poor.

And for the record, we're not poor. It's just that my mother is frugal. Ways my mother likes to save money: reuse aluminum foil and plastic bags; flush the toilet once a day; use public restrooms as much as possible; bring home toilet paper, paper towels, and soap from public restrooms; fill her pockets with napkins, straws, and packets of ketchup, mustard, salt, pepper, sugar, and cream from McDonald's; keep lights off; cut each other's hair; hang clothes to dry; shop at thrift stores; buy marked-down food at the grocery store; gather acorns to make acorn gelatin (actually, this is really tasty); eat weeds like dandelion and nettle; grow food on our balcony; and collect rainwater.

Let's put this in perspective, as Ms. Lincoln would say. Maybe by American standards we're a little poor, but by the whole world's standards we're not. We have indoor plumbing. Back in Korea, I got potty trained in an outhouse. My mother used to tell me horror stories of children falling into the pit of poop. We have electricity, clothes on our backs, shoes on our feet, meals every day, free education. In Korea, schools aren't free. Everyone has to pay tuition, and you have to bribe the teachers regularly so they don't mistreat your kids. We have a car (but Ōmma doesn't have a driver's license), a television set, and toilet paper. I don't have to use newspapers to clean my butt. (Some still do that in Korea. That's why kids run around with ink-stained butts.) I don't have to use my left hand. (Some still do that in India. That's why you're not supposed to eat with your left hand or extend it to anyone as a greeting. Big insult because you're basically telling them to shake your poopoo hand.)

We're not poor. We might not have as much money as we did when my father was alive, but we're not poor. Sometimes my mother buys meat, not the feet, tongue, or nose of an animal,

but real meat. That's not poor. With my father gone, there's one less mouth to feed. No more Camels. No more Johnnie Walker. No more secondhand smoke. No more ashes. No more TV on all night wasting electricity. More savings for us. We're better off. I'll bet he was with Johnnie Walker on that roof. I'll bet he was smoking, too. I'll bet he lost his balance trying to keep his cigarette from falling off his lower lip. Blaming him helps. I don't miss him. I don't. I have everything under control.

The bell rings. Lunch is over. As I get up to throw away my trash, I see Asa shooting a spork into Mickey's hair. It sticks on the back like a dart to a board. She can't even feel it. Asa's friends point and laugh. Some girl giggles and says, "Oh my God, that's so mean," but does nothing about it. Another girl says, "Someone's hungry for attention." Some other girl says, "Her hair is, like, so huge. Big girl, big hair."

As I walk by them, I shake my head. It stinks to be teased. I know what that's like, and I feel sorry for Mickey. I want to say something smooth and heroic like, "Yeah, she is a big girl, big in the best sense of the word, but you, on the other hand, are nothing but small minded, feeble brained, and too blind to see that your own hair is a regular grease pit. When was the last time you shampooed? Shampoo more often. And you know what would look beautiful on you? Braids. You should treat yourself to some pretty braids to crown that pretty little head of yours. Here's my business card. The name is Ok. Get braided by Ok."

But I don't say anything. I lower my head and leave the cafeteria, hurrying to catch up to Mickey. As I quietly walk behind her, I reach up, quickly pull the spork out of her hair, and make a run for it around the corner.

Chapter 5

While my mother is at work, I watch TV at home. A commercial comes on. A man wearing a blue suit jacket, white shirt, and red tie looks at me. He's bald, with bushy eyebrows shaped like baby Snickers bars. His cheeks are pink. His forehead bubbles up with beads of sweat like small blisters after a burn. He's serious. He's upset. He's important.

His mustache twitches, trying to hang on as his words shoot out of his mouth: "Have you been hurt? Have you been in an accident? Have you been injured on the job through no fault of your own? Well, you need a lawyer who will fight for you. Get what you deserve. I can get you fast cash settlements. Call me, Trent Bedderman. I'm the man for the job. I won't stand for injustice. You have rights. And I'll do everything in my power to get what's rightfully yours. When things are looking down, look me up. Trent Bedderman. Because you deserve the best."

I turn off the TV. I sit on the floor in the dimming light, surrounded by my mother's sewing. My father's portrait looks down at me. It's an enlarged black-and-white of his passport picture, so he looks young. His slicked-back hair is stiff with gel. His skin is smooth and pale, which is not what he really looked like. He had a tan. He had stubble. He had wrinkles around his eyes, which deepened when he smiled. I remember because he didn't smile a lot. The look in his eyes teeters between fear and courage. I remember that look. I saw it often. Depending on how I felt, it either scared or emboldened me.

I open my backpack. As I take out my math book, the class picture order form falls out. Picture day is tomorrow. I need a check to order pictures of myself. Last year my parents ordered a package that cost eighteen dollars. I guess I won't be ordering pictures this year. Not a big deal. I'll ask to go to the bathroom when Ms. Lincoln passes them out. Besides, I haven't changed that much. I open to page 62. How to calculate the area of circles. I start on my homework.

I'm hungry.

My mother won't be home for five hours. The rice maker is turned off, which means there's no rice. I'd better make some before she gets home. We keep the rice grains in a big plastic barrel under the sink. I open the lid. There's only about a cup left. I pour every single grain into the rice maker and leave the barrel out to show my mother she needs to buy another big sack. This is enough for tonight, but we'll need more tomorrow. I wash the grains. The water is murky white at first. With each rinse, the water clears. I drop the bowl into the rice maker and push the on button.

Our fridge is practically empty. Three eggs, a brown banana, a slice of Spam, an orange juice carton half full of barley tea. The bottom shelf holds four large jars of kimchi, which I can't touch because they're reserved for selling to some deacons at church. My mother makes the best kimchi. The church ladies want to know her secret. She lies, tells them it's raw oysters you need, it's more garlic, it's pears, it's her homegrown red peppers. The women complain it doesn't work. My mother tells them to lay their hands on the batch and pray. It never works. She won't give her secret away. It's bad for business.

When my mother makes kimchi, our apartment reeks of garlic, but it's okay because the four big jars of her kimchi lined up in the fridge give me hope for a better future.

I look in the pantry. Ramen noodles. I grab a pack. I put some water on to boil. The phone rings.

"Hello," I answer. "Oh, who is this?" the man says. I can tell he's Korean from his accent.

"Hello," I answer in Korean.

“Is your mother there?” the man asks in Korean.

“I’m sorry, but no, she’s not here,” I say.

“Then can you tell me when she’ll be home?”

“She’ll be home later. Excuse me, but may I ask who’s calling, please?”

“Oh. Yes, this is Deacon Koh from church. You must be Ok. How are you doing?”

“I’m doing fine,” I say.

“How’s school coming along?”

“School is fine,” I say.

“How are your grades?”

“They’re fine,” I say.

“Uh, I’m just calling to see if you and your mother are doing all right,” he says, sounding nervous and fishy. His voice doesn’t sound like this is just a courtesy phone call on behalf of the church. Deacon Koh is known as the lonely widower of FKFGC, and I’ve seen him trying to talk to my mother during fellowship hour after service.

“Hello, Deacon Koh. We’re fine. I’ll let her know she received a call from church.”

“Uh, tell her it’s Deacon Koh.”

“I will. Thank you. Good-bye,” I say, and hang up.

The water on the stove boils. The phone rings again. I let it ring because I suspect it’s the deacon again, wanting to leave his personal phone number. But then again, it could be my

mother calling to ask me if she needs to bring home a new sack of rice. It could also maybe be Jerome from Booked. We're in the same science class. I answer it.

"Good evening. This is Pepco calling. Am I speaking with Mr. Lee?" The woman's voice is clear, confident, and full of purpose, like a teacher's voice calling roll. Mr. Lee? Is there a Mr. Lee present? Raise your hand and say "Here."

It's easier for me to answer yes, so I deepen my voice, turn on my Korean accent, and say, "Speaking."

"Mr. Lee, I'm calling to notify you that your Pepco bill in the amount of fifty-nine dollars and seventy cents is three months overdue. If you cannot pay this amount in full by the next due date, we will have to shut off your electricity. You will lose your power, Mr. Lee. Do you understand?"

"Yes. Yes. I understand. I take care. I take care. Thank you berry, berry much," I say, and hang up, my heart pounding hard.

The water boils over. I turn down the heat, carefully drop the noodles in, and watch the dry block soften and separate. What was once stiff and brittle comes unglued. The curls relax into waves as the noodles depart from one another. I sprinkle in the soup base, and the water browns. My mouth waters as I stir the noodles and wonder how in the world Trent Bedderman might get us some cash. Fast.

Chapter 6

My mother and I are at church. We sit in the back pew. Pastor Chung finishes his sermon by telling us to bow our heads in prayer. I close my eyes and pray, telling God that I need a talent