

K=POP
Revolution
STEPHAN LEE

POINT

**TO ALL THE YOUNG CREATORS WHO KEEP CREATING
DESPITE THE ODDS. FORGET THE HATERS.**

화이팅!

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CHAPTER 1

K-POP WARRIOR

Here's the thing about blowing up your own life: The moment the bomb has left your hand and you're watching it make a slow-motion arc through the air, you feel euphoric—it's a thrill, a fountain of fireworks behind your eyes, to say goodbye to the reality you once knew.

It's not until after the explosion that you see the full extent of the blast. You realize that everyone close to you, even people you didn't see, got hit by the shrapnel, too.

It's been four days since my public disaster—what my friend Ethan from home has dubbed “The Tea Spillage of the Century”—but I probably don't look like someone who's just obliterated her own life, shattered the hopes and dreams of five other girls, or made herself Public Enemy Number One of a multibillion corporation.

Instead, I'm in a king-size bed that feels like a cloud made of marshmallows and cotton candy, nestled in an ocean of creamy white sheets. I've just devoured a breakfast of bean sprout soup, seasoned cod, purple rice, fried eggs, and kimchi (Koreans aren't afraid of savory in the mornings).

I've pushed the silver tray to the foot of the bed and now I'm under the covers again, hugging MulKogi, my stuffed whale doll, trying to go back to sleep and forget everything that happened since I came to Seoul. This five-star hotel suite is the last nice thing I'll ever have in my life. I might as well enjoy it for as long as I can.

But I only get to wallow for two more minutes before the sheets are ripped off me.

"Time to get up," says Umma, tsking as she moves my dirty tray to the nightstand, setting it down as noisily as she can.

"Umma, *whyyyyy*," I moan. "Just let me have my sleep—it's all I have left."

"Helena's been up and dressed since seven."

"Well, whoop-de-do for Helena. Maybe you should take her back to America and just pretend *she* was your daughter all along. Kind of like one of those TV shows where they switch out an actor without explaining why."

"Candace, I don't understand a word you're saying." Umma sighs. She throws the curtains open, flooding the hotel room with ultra-bright sunlight.

"Umma!" I groan, folding my pillow around my head like a taco shell. "Why are you like this?!"

At this point, I'm fully aware I'm being an over-the-top brat. Umma can't help but laugh a little as she hauls me out of bed by my wrists. "Just look out the window," she says. "It's a beautiful morning. It'll make you feel better."

I stumble to the window, my legs and feet still torn up after a summer of brutal training. I rub my eyes and squint at the view of Yeouido. It's nothing but a forest of office buildings gleaming in the morning light, which is beautiful in its own way. Then I look down at the street and rub my eyes again.

It takes a second to realize what I'm looking at. I see my own face looking up at me from twenty stories below. A huge group of people, maybe

close to a hundred, has gathered in front of the hotel. Each person is holding up a square of poster board, which add up to form one giant mosaic image—it's a photo, a thousand times the original size, of me giving my now-infamous speech.

The fans and paparazzi have been gathering outside for days, but today is by far the biggest crowd. And they're loud, too. Even through the closed windows, I can hear them chanting, "Candace, *hwaiting!* Candace, K-pop warrior!" A few in the front are chanting into bullhorns, "S.A.Y., debut Candace Park now!"

I hear a chopper overhead—it couldn't be a news helicopter, could it?

"They've been there all morning?" I ask, the air gone from my lungs. Umma nods. My mind races as I think of all the work these fans must have put into printing a massive photo of me and cutting it into hundreds of pieces and coordinating it just so. "How did they . . . they did this just for me?"

"These K-pop fans are something else," Umma says matter-of-factly. "Nobody knows how to band together like Korean people can." I hear a hint of pride in her voice.

Abruptly, I recoil from the window, remembering again the enormity of what I've done.

I can feel my throat tightening, my vision going splotchy. Images from that night flash in my mind: those thousands of shocked faces glowing in the light of their phones; Madame Jung slapping me across the cheek, screaming that I'd destroyed the most important K-pop record label in the world; CEO Sang vowing that he'd stop at nothing to ruin my life. Every time I remember that there's no going back to life as it was before, an almost-claustrophobic feeling overcomes me.

Just then, Helena, looking fresh as a K-beauty influencer in a pink skirt-suit, a full face of dewy makeup and head flowing with white-blond hair, breezes into my room, and I snap out of my anxiety spiral.

“Candace, it’s about time you got up,” she says, clacking her long, pristine nails against her phone screen. “Pak HanSoo at KLN News DMed you for the fifth time for that interview. Other journalists are requesting interviews, too. I think we should say yes—a legit interview could reach all those people who don’t follow you on social media.”

I look at Umma. I expect her to say no, but instead she lights up. “Pak HanSoo is a well-respected journalist. An interview with her could help our case . . . but it’s up to you, Candace.”

Before I came to Korea, the idea of me being on television would have horrified Umma to no end. But now that I’ve pretty much destroyed my reputation in front of millions already, it’s like she’s given up trying to keep me respectable.

I say to Helena, “Okay, I guess. If it’ll help.”

As of now, I’m contractually forbidden to leave the country while S.A.Y. decides what they want to do with me. And, maybe more important, what they’ll decide to do with the other girls who were chosen to debut in the company’s first-ever girl group moments before I opened my big mouth. If a TV interview could force a reaction out of S.A.Y., I’m all in.

Helena’s fingers clack, clack, clack away as she types out a response.

The now-familiar sound smooths my nerves from a chaotic scribble to a gentle sine curve. If you told me just a few days ago that Helena would be the one person on the planet other than Umma who could calm my anxiety, I would have said you were crazy.

It was just a week ago, when we were trainees, that we were sworn enemies to the point where my skin crawled whenever we were in the same room (which, unfortunately, was literally every moment of every day). But when everything was blowing up around me, Helena stepped up like no one else. She was right there next to me doing damage control as we sped away from Seoul Olympic Stadium in a van, escaping the hordes of

paparazzi who were tailing us. She commandeered all my social accounts from Umma's phone, understanding right away that social media was our best weapon against S.A.Y. She calmly told me, "You can still win, Candace. You're never more powerful than when you're trending *for a good reason*. Do you know how rare this is?"

She was 100 percent right. Apparently, Helena is a social media genius, which I never would have known when we were trainees and our phones were all locked away. Helena got #CandacePark and #KPopWarrior trending by calling for the public's support from my Twitter and Instagram handles. She even got us this beautiful suite at Hotel LUXIANA for free, after she put up a post of my panic-stricken face with a caption saying, "Help!! S.A.Y. threw me out & I have no place to go!!!" It only took a few minutes for us to get DMs from a dozen top hotels offering the one and only #KPopWarrior (and her mom and friend Helena) a place to stay.

Now, as we wait for S.A.Y. to make their move—I'm assuming they're going to hit me with a lawsuit my family won't be able to pay in twenty lifetimes—I have some hope that everything will turn out okay. If S.A.Y. actually wants to ruin my life, thousands, maybe even millions, of fans will have something to say about it, and it's all thanks to Helena.

Suddenly, I'm starting to feel all mushy. I put my hand on Helena's shoulder. I'm about to tell her how grateful I am for all her help . . . but she shakes me off and crinkles her nose in disgust.

"Shouldn't you start getting ready?" she scoffs. "Pak HanSoo is coming in a few hours. And maybe you should brush your teeth . . . twice. Your breath smells like dried cuttlefish dipped in Parmesan."

"Oh my God, it does *not*," I say, cupping my hand over my mouth.

I look at Umma to defend me, but no such luck. "Wash your face well, too," Umma says. "Your eyes are really crusty."

Ugh. An unexpected development: It turns out Umma and Helena are

the same person. They're both no-nonsense, focused, and good in a crisis—things I'm definitely not. In all the decisions we've had to make in the past few days, it's always been those two against me.

I stomp off to my marble-tiled bathroom, muttering under my breath, but I actually take Umma and Helena's advice. I double cleanse and brush my teeth and tongue twice. I need to put on my armor for the day, since I'm not just standing up for myself anymore. I'm also standing up for *them*—all those people outside, all those kids who tweeted hashtags in support of me.

After all, I *am* the K-Pop Warrior—whether I like it or not.