

K=POP CONFIDENTIAL

STEPHAN LEE



2 Palmer Street, Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
www.chickenhousebooks.com

Text © Stephan Lee 2020

First published in the United States by Scholastic Inc.,
557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

First published in Great Britain in 2020

Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.chickenhousebooks.com

Stephan Lee has asserted his rights under the Copyright, Designs and
Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted or utilized in
any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or
otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

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

Cover art © Erick Davila 2020

Cover and interior design by Yaffa Jaskoll and Helen Crawford-White
Inside images © Shutterstock

Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

The paper used in this Chicken House book is made
from wood grown in sustainable forests.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

PB ISBN 978-1-913322-29-8

eISBN 978-1-913322-54-0

For Umma and Halmubnee. 사랑해.

PROLOGUE

GIRL IN REFLECTION

I bet I've stared at my reflection in rehearsal-room mirrors just like this one for hundreds and hundreds of hours.

Usually while I'm soaking in sweat, wishing my toes would just fall off from all the blisters and torn nails. Or watching myself try to wink and toss my hair and smile at the exact right time while our dance coach – 'The General' – screams at me for always being half a beat behind.

Now, as I huddle in this room with twenty-four other female trainees – all of whom have been training much, much longer than I have – my reflection looks like me, but she's me through a Snapchat filter. She looks as if long locks of silvery-purple hair have grown naturally from her head her whole life. She looks like she was born with other-worldly blue eyes that can pierce your soul. She looks like she's never had a pimple on her spotless, dewy skin.

She would never let on that her scalp is burning from the bleach, that her eyes are itching from the contact lenses, and that under those layers of ‘natural-look’ K-beauty make-up, she looks like she hasn’t slept in weeks – because she hasn’t.

This girl is me, but she’s not exactly. She’s still Candace from New Jersey. But this version of me knows how to push through pain, through bruises and bleeding feet and homesickness and inhumane diets. She knows how to rise above criticism and insults, keep her eye on the ultimate goal. She’s left friends, said goodbye to family, flown all the way to Seoul. She’s been picked apart by rooms full of executives older than her dad.

On top of all that, I haven’t held my phone in three months. I’ve been *through* it.

Behind a closed door, the CEO of S.A.Y. Entertainment and top executives and investors are deciding the final line-up of their new super-hyped girl group, the female version of the most famous K-pop boy band in the world, SLK. Girls are praying, pacing around. Others are rocking back and forth, talking to themselves. Most are already crying.

Weirdly, I feel totally calm. I step closer to the mirror to get a better look at my familiar but unfamiliar face. It hits me how much I want this. I’ve earned this. I’ve given up everything for this.

I deserve this.

I believe, with all my heart, that I’m about to become a K-pop idol. And whichever other girls they choose, we’re going to slay. Not just in Korea, or Asia, but the entire globe. It’s my destiny. I can feel it in the roots of my unicorn-purple hair.

PART 1

**CANDACE PARK OF
FORT LEE, NEW JERSEY**

CHAPTER 1

ARE YOU THAT UNICORN?

Four Months Earlier . . .

One of my greatest talents in life is ‘air-bowing’. It’s the orchestral equivalent of lip-syncing, except it’s not a cool skill and never will be. There will never be a TV show called *Air Bow Battle*.

The Fort Lee Magnet Symphony Orchestra is kicking off the Spring Performing Arts Showcase with a rousing rendition of ‘Spring’ by Antonio Vivaldi (a bit on the nose, I know). I keep my bow hovering a centimetre above the strings while I sway my body back and forth, curling my upper lip as if I’m smelling something nasty, all to give the *impression* that my whole body is overcome with the swelling emotions of the music – even though I’m not actually making a sound. It’s better for everyone if I air-bow. If I can’t be heard.

If it were up to me, I’d blast my viola up into space. It was Umma’s idea, when I was five years old, for me to take it up. Since

not that many kids choose the viola, she thought it would be easier for me to stand out and get accepted to the prestigious youth orchestras, which would look great on college applications.

Well, the joke's on her. Ten years later, I'm at the very back of the viola section with my equally untalented stand partner, Chris DeBenedetti. And let's be very real: violas are already the backup dancers of orchestras. We're essential, but no one's checking for us. The violins are the glamorous lead singers who get all the best parts, all the money notes. The cellos are the sexy, mysterious, brooding ones with the most Instagram followers.

Violas are the Michelle Williams of Destiny's Child of string instruments . . . except not iconic or best friends with Beyoncé.

It's only when we all stand up for our bow after the song is finished that I can see Umma and Abba in the audience. Abba is clapping frantically, giving a standing O, while Umma is taking tons of flash photos of me in my hideous orchestra uniform (a frilly white blouse and green ankle-length skirt). I smile miserably, getting blinded, until we can all sit back down to watch the glee club performances, which are what the audience actually came for.

Unlike every high school movie stereotype, the glee club is actually full of the coolest kids at Fort Lee Magnet. It's considered the easiest of the required arts classes, so it's packed with popular girls and jocks, including my older brother, Tommy.

The glee club has so many members that for this showcase, they've broken up into performance groups. For the opening number, Tommy and twenty of his bro friends strut on to the stage in neon tank tops, sweatbands and high socks; the students in the audience, especially the girls, go nuts. The dudes give an

ironic performance of the boy band classic ‘What Makes You Beautiful’ by One Direction.

The dudes aren’t good singers; they’re making a joke out of it, shouting off-key while doing all the standard boy band moves, like tracing hearts in the air, pointing at girls in the audience, putting their hands on their chests and winking. But they’re so unselfconscious about looking stupid that I have to admit it’s legitimately pretty cool. Tommy and his friends from the baseball team stand out at the front, Tommy in the centre. I see my best friend Imani in the front row, literally swooning – she’s always said my brother is her ‘primary thirst object’, which is too gross and cringey for words.

I don’t know what it is about seeing Tommy and all those guys up there, but I’m suddenly balling up my hands into fists. A fantasy of breaking my viola against the floor flashes in my mind.

It’s all so unfair. *I’m* the one who can sing – at least I think I can, even though I only ever sing alone in my room. So why does Tommy get to jump around in silly clothes, getting cheered on by the whole school, while I’m hidden away in the back of the orchestra?

No matter how many times I’ve begged Umma to let me quit viola and focus on singing, she won’t budge. The last time I brought it up, she shouted ‘*Bae-jjae-ra!*’, which literally means ‘*cut my stomach open and let me bleed to death!*’ Super dramatic, but basically, it’s the Korean equivalent of ‘over my dead body!’

What’s even more unfair is that I’m pretty sure I’m not allowed to do glee club *because* she knows I’d take it seriously, unlike Tommy. ‘Singing is something you can do on your own

time,' she once told me. 'Singing is not a dignified art. You have to bring the sound from inside of you with so much effort – everyone can see how hard you try.'

Umma's bias against singing is so weird – she's actually a good singer herself. Umma and Abba both went to a prestigious music college back in Korea, which is how they met. Abba was studying to become a conductor and Umma was studying vocal performance. But I also know neither of them finished and they moved to America soon after they dropped out. Neither of them works in music now – they run a convenience store in Fort Lee – so I know Umma's music dreams went wrong somewhere, but she'll never talk about it. It'll remain one of those Family Secrets, probably for ever.

I put my viola on the floor – a big no-no according to Mrs Kuznetsova, the orchestra conductor – and slump in my seat. Will there ever be a time when I'm the one singing and jumping around onstage, not worried what anyone thinks? Probably not until after high school, when I'm somewhere far from my family. In the meantime, I'll just have to bide my time for a few more years, playing the role of the quiet Korean girl who takes all Advanced Placement classes and gets good grades and plays a classical instrument and never complains.



After the showcase, Imani and Ethan come over. It's a Friday night and we're doing what we love most: hanging out in my room, stuffing our faces and watching YouTube vids.

It's not like we're total rejects, even though we *are* in all the Smart Kid classes together. It's just that, more than parties or football games, we prefer hanging around each other, reacting in extra ways to all the weird things we're obsessed with: *RuPaul's Drag Race* clips we rewatch over and over, *mukbang* videos, beauty vloggers we make fun of but secretly love. ('A little goes a long way,' Ethan likes to say, pretending to dab highlighter on his cheekbones. 'And don't forget your cupid's bow!')

After we watch a tiny *mukbanger* demolish eight packs of Nuclear Fire Noodles in under four minutes, Imani commandeers my computer. I know what she's about to pull up: SLK's performance of 'Unicorn' from last week's *Saturday Night Live*.

'I love, love, love SLK!' says Ethan, as the host, Jennifer Lawrence, introduces them.

'Duh! What excuse for a human being wouldn't?' says Imani.

I shrug. 'I guess they're all right.'

'OK, *this* excuse for a human being.' Imani flashes me a shady look. 'Dude, sometimes I think I'm more Korean than you are.'

I mean, Imani *is* literally slurping kimchi straight out of the jar at this very moment. Not even I can eat kimchi like that – I like it with food, especially curry rice or black bean noodles, but it's too funky for me to eat it by itself.

'I'm super glad that an Asian group is so popular and on magazines and all,' I say, 'but their music seems a little . . . manufactured?'

'Girl, bye,' says Imani, closing the jar of kimchi and moving back to my bed to hug my giant whale pillow, MulKogi. (*mulkogi* means 'water-meat', or 'fish' in Korean). 'Like American pop

music *isn't* manufactured? Anyway, each of those SLK guys can really sing and rap – One.J wrote a ton of their biggest hits himself. And that choreography is *banging!*

'Yeah, look at that, Candanista,' says Ethan, totally transfixed. 'One Direction used to just stand onstage and, like, *maybe* jump around – these guys *serve* it.'

OK, so I'm not sure why I'm lying to my best friends right now – I probably need to go to a therapist to get to the bottom of it – but I'm actually a *huge* SLK stan in secret. I've watched hours of their Korean **music show** performances and their reality show, *SLK Adventures*, on YouTube. And ever since SLK made it big in America, I've started following other K-pop groups, especially QueenGirl, who are touring with Ariana Grande right now. Nothing would make Imani, the biggest K-pop stan I know, happier than being able to obsess over it with me. But for some reason, I'm self-conscious about it. Isn't it so *expected* for the Korean girl to be super into K-pop?

On-screen, the five boys of SLK move in perfect sync, even when they're doing literal backflips. Each guy rocks a different shade of brightly coloured hair – they clearly spend just as much time on make-up and wardrobe as any girl group. In their own way, they're all really hot, especially One.J, the member who's always front and centre. Everything about his face seems created in a lab to be as telegenic as humanly possible: his brooding eyes; his candy-coloured lips; his chiselled, V-shaped jaw. Somehow, none of his moves seem rehearsed. When all the boys run their hands through their hair, it looks as though One.J is doing it spontaneously, just to feel himself, and the other four boys saw

how awesome it looked and decided to copy him.

The *SNL* crowd totally loses it when the boys break into the Unicorn dance. ‘Unicorn’ is amazing, even though the chorus, the only part of the song that’s in English, doesn’t completely make sense: ‘Baby, now I believe in unicorn/You’re the girl I been searching for/Searching under all the ra-ainbow/Baby, all I know/You’re my one-in-billion unicorn.’

By the end of the song, the three of us are dancing around, singing at the top of our lungs. Imani whips her hair back and forth, Ethan does a duckwalk and I move my body with no regard for rhythm or dignity.

‘OK, fine,’ I pant when the song is over. ‘This song is super catchy.’

Right after the *SNL* performance, ‘Unicorn’ starts back up again. We’re ready to shriek out the song all over again, but it’s not the music video – it’s an ad (so many ads, YouTube). The words ‘ARE YOU ONE IN A BILLION?’ flash across the screen. Then:

**S.A.Y. ENTERTAINMENT
THE COMPANY THAT BROUGHT
YOU THE NO. 1 GLOBAL SENSATION SLK
IS LOOKING FOR ITS FIRST-EVER GIRL GROUP**

Cut to a clip of the SLK boys smouldering directly at the camera, the light glinting off their shimmering cheekbones.

**WE’RE SEARCHING FOR THOSE GIRLS
WHO CAN SING, DANCE AND RAP LIKE SLK**

ARE YOU THAT UNICORN?

Each of the SLK boys says into the camera, seductively, ‘Are you my unicorn?’ I get a warm, queasy feeling in my stomach when it’s One.J’s turn.

GET DISCOVERED AT THE S.A.Y. GLOBAL AUDITIONS

ROYAL OAK THEATER IN PALISADES PARK, NEW JERSEY

19 APRIL

I burst out laughing. ‘Are they auditioning singers or looking for dates for the guys?’

Imani isn’t laughing; she’s staring at me. ‘You should audition, Candace.’

I don’t dignify this with a response. ‘And Palisades Park? Is that a glitch? Why would a K-pop label recruit in *Jersey*?’

Ethan isn’t laughing either. ‘Well, Jersey *is* where the suburban Korean kids live.’ He gestures to me as if to say, ‘Exhibit A.’

‘You should audition,’ Imani repeats, all serious.

‘Ha ha.’ I roll my eyes. ‘Could you see *my parents* letting me quit school to be in a K-pop group? Besides, do I look like an idol to you?’

Imani runs her eyes over my busted bare feet, holey jeans and oversized black hoodie. ‘No, not at all. But you’ve got something to work with under . . . all of that. Besides, do you even know how big this is?! S.A.Y.’s the most powerful entertainment company in K-pop right now because of SLK. A girl group version of SLK would be *lit!*’

‘And you can *sang*,’ says Ethan. ‘Even with “Unicorn” just now, your vocals were low-key slaying.’

‘Dude, I’ve always told you,’ says Imani, ‘you have the voice of an angel. You need to share that with the world.’

Imani has said stuff like this to me before. It’s a sweet compliment, for sure, but for some reason, my eyes get a little moist.

There’s something about K-pop’s popularity that scares me a little bit. I have no problem openly fangirling over my favourite American artists, like Ariana and Rihanna, because they’re nothing like me – I can love them from afar. But now that SLK has graced the cover of *Vanity Fair* and QueenGirl has performed with Cardi B at the VMAs, it’s all become a little too real. Maybe kids who look like me *can* become stars too, if they’ve got the talent and can put themselves out there. Deep down, I think I could be talented enough. But brave enough to go for it? Definitely not.

I glance at the Barbie-pink guitar in the corner of my room. It was my dad’s gift to me for my twelfth birthday, which he bought in that dad-ish way of thinking all girls love hot pink (and I kinda do). Abba taught me a few basic chords and, unlike the viola, I learnt the guitar immediately, as if it were a long-lost part of my body – I think maybe it’s because I’ve always thought of guitar as a tool for singing. I watched YouTube tutorials on fingerpicking and learnt how to play early Taylor Swift songs. Now my guitar is my prize possession, the first thing I’d grab in a fire.

I only ever play it in the privacy of my room though. I sing tons of covers, plus a couple of my own original songs. I sometimes film myself, and I’ve even considered posting a couple of videos to YouTube – like me singing an acoustic version of ‘Here

With Me' by Marshmello featuring Chvrches – but those videos are just files on my computer, sitting on my cluttered desktop among AP Lit papers and Bio lab write-ups.

'Hmm,' I say. 'Maybe I'll think about it.'

'Dude,' says Imani, opening a bunch of new tabs on my computer, 'I think you're seriously underestimating how amazing K-pop is. It's not just one kind of thing. Let me be your girl group tour guide.'

Imani shows us music videos – or 'MV's', as they're always called in K-pop – featuring all sorts of girl groups, like Queen-Girl, Blackpink, Twice, Red Velvet, Everglow and ITZY. I've watched tons of SLK MVs, but I haven't paid as much attention to the female groups. Not like this. The visuals and the choreography are mind-blowing, and the girls are out-of-control beautiful, but there are all kinds of genres and influences, including hip-hop, reggae and EDM.

As she shows us all these videos, Imani explains the difference between **Girl Crush** versus **Cute Concepts** in K-pop girl groups.

She also explains the rules of K-pop like she's explaining the kingdoms of *Game of Thrones*. There are only four big entertainment companies in K-pop, S.A.Y. being one of them, and they recruit all over the world – Korea mostly, but also Japan, China, Thailand and the States, usually in Los Angeles. They're looking for talented kids, for sure, but talented kids who play a particular role that every K-pop band needs.

'So it's all a formula?' I ask.

'I mean, that's not *all* of it,' says Imani, 'but yeah, K-pop is kind of an idol factory. The companies hit up schools, auditions, malls

and, lately, YouTube and social media. If the kids they recruit aren't super talented when they're recruited, the companies will make sure they *become* super talented. There's this whole hardcore "trainee" system they have to go through before they debut, usually for years. The vast majority of trainees *never* debut after spending their whole childhoods training. It's totally *Hunger Games*.'

Umma pokes her head in. When Ethan's in my room, I'm not allowed to close the door, even though Umma knows there's nothing to worry about. 'Are you kids having fun?'

'Yes, Mrs Park!' Imani and Ethan pipe up.

'Imani is just tutoring us in Advanced Placement K-pop,' cracks Ethan.

'I *will* be quizzing you both,' Imani jokes.

'How fun,' says Umma. I can see a smidge of disapproval in her face. 'Imani, your sister is here to take you and Ethan home. I'll pack some kimchi to take with you.'

'Thanks, Mrs Park!'



After Imani and Ethan leave, I can't stop watching more girl group MVs. I never knew how many types of girls you could be as a K-pop idol – a cutesy girl, a rebel, a fashion queen or all three in one. Why have I never thought of it as a possibility for myself?

Well, that's a dumb question. There are so many obvious reasons I could never dream of being a K-pop idol. For one, my Korean is horrible; I never had to go to Korean language school on Saturdays like the Korean kids I know from church. Secondly,

I definitely can't dance. Like, I can't even pump my fist, *Jersey Shore* style, to a basic beat – it's that serious.

And of course, my parents would shut down any talk of being a singer before it even started. Umma's drilled it into mine and Tommy's heads that there are only three, maybe four, respectable fields we can go into as adults: medicine, law, business or academia – in that order. Being a singer is far down the list, probably between murderer and drug dealer.

I finally click out of YouTube and grab my guitar, making sure my door is closed. I hit record on my laptop cam.

I know this video will just clutter my desktop like all the others, never to be uploaded. I still like to record though, because – this is weird and super dark – I think if I ever got hit by a school bus or something, I'd want to leave these videos behind, so people would know: *Candace could really sing. Candace had something to say all along.*

I play the opening chords of a song I've been writing for a while, called 'Expectations vs Reality'. I sing softly:

Expectation:

I don't do confrontation

I don't get invitations

I live in my imagination

Reality:

You think you know me

But there's a lot you don't see

Wait till I become who I'm meant to be

OK, I know the lyrics are corny, and my rhymes might not be tight like *Hamilton*, but I'm baring my soul here.

*I'm not the girl who speaks up
But one day I'll really blow up
One day you'll hear this song
And know that you were wrong
Cuz your expectation's not my reality*

'Wow, how beautiful!'

I shriek and almost drop my guitar. Tommy's head is poking into my room. He's wiping away fake tears.

'Go away!' I scream, throwing MulKogi at him.

Tommy catches MulKogi easily. 'No one understands Candace! Candace is so deep!'

I shove Tommy's face out of my room and shout into the hall. 'Umma! Abba! Tommy's spying on me again!'

'So sorry, so sorry,' Tommy says in a Korean accent, bowing to me and cracking up. 'I'll be *really* sorry when you "blow up" and your song is number one!'

I slam the door and apologize to MulKogi telepathically for throwing him. MulKogi responds telepathically, 'Well, Tommy deserved it. *He* gets to be in glee club and you don't?!'

Steaming, I text Imani.

OK. I wanna audition.

I sit down at my computer and edit the video of my singing, cutting off the very end where Tommy so rudely interrupted. I

click the mouse angrily, as if it were Tommy's face, and open my YouTube account. For the first time ever, after all the thousands of videos I've viewed in my life, I upload my first video to my channel. There I am, CandeeGrrrl0303 (don't judge me, I created this account in junior high), with a single video of me singing and playing a guitar.

Just because Umma is afraid of her own voice, based on some failure she had back in Korea before I was even born, doesn't mean she can silence mine.

I click publish.

When I look at my phone again, Imani has already responded to my text.

YASSSSS!!!!!!!!!!!!