

PIPPA PARK

CRUSH AT FIRST SIGHT



ERIN YUN

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Erin Yun

Fabled Films Press
New York

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Book 1 in the Pippa Park Series

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THE BEST TIME OF THE YEAR

25 Days Until Christmas

I didn't know what Omma was telling my older sister, Mina, over the phone, but from Mina's expression, it couldn't be good.

As I shoveled off-brand cornflakes into my mouth, Mina glanced at me from across the kitchen table. There was a disgruntled frown on her face, but since this was more or less her usual appearance, I didn't know how concerned I should be. *Mina could make sunshine seem tragic*, I reminded myself.

She caught me staring at her, and her frown deepened. She pointed at the clock on the wall. *Oops*. The school bus would be here in fifteen minutes, and I was still in my pajamas. I spooned up the last of my cereal and carried the bowl over to the sink, where Mina's husband, Jung-Hwa, was

setting some soup on to simmer for the evening.

"What do you think Omma is telling Mina?" I whispered. "I hope she's not asking for gift ideas for me." Mina's idea of a good Christmas gift was a six-pack of socks and flannel underwear. I, on the other hand, was hoping my mom would bring me a particular Mixxxmix dress I'd been strategically bringing up in conversations.

"Oh, they're probably just comparing prices for flights," Jung-Hwa said.

My mom lives in South Korea. I was born in America, but when I was little, Omma's work visa expired and she had to go back. She decided I would have better opportunities in the U.S., so I stayed here with Mina and Jung-Hwa, and they basically raised me. I still missed Omma, though. A lot. She always comes to spend a month with us at Christmas, and I couldn't wait to see her.

"Pippa!" Mina raised her voice. "Get dressed now!"

"I'm going," I grumbled and hurried back to my room to change.

I pulled on my khaki skirt, white blouse, and Lakeview blazer in less than a minute. The good thing about wearing a school uniform is that it never takes too long to get ready. I did have to hunt down a fresh pair of knee-highs, but by the time Mina yelled my name again, I looked every bit the part of a Lakeview student.

I had been going to Lakeview, a private school, for

nearly three months now, and I still felt an electric thrill just thinking about it. Don't get me wrong—Victoria Middle School wasn't bad, but after I got a basketball scholarship to Lakeview, my life completely changed. I was on track to becoming the best basketball player in the world (and the humblest one, too), and I was also hanging around with the popular kids.

Okay, there had been some rocky patches during the last three months. It turned out, telling lies about yourself to seem rich and cool could backfire in a big way. But after coming clean about the real me and helping my team secure a major win in our first basketball game, I was finally settling in. It probably didn't hurt that I'd scored major points in our next two games either. So far we were 3–0. Now I just had to make sure I was careful and didn't wreck things.

As I checked my hair one last time in the mirror, my phone vibrated in my pocket. It was a text from my friend Buddy. Buddy went to my old school, and if there was one downside to going to Lakeview, it was not seeing him every day.

Meet you at the Lucky Laundromat party tonight, he had written. Does Mina want me to bring anything? We have those rainbow goldfish you like.

Mina owned the Lucky Laundromat, and tonight was its annual Christmas party.

I was about to reply when Mina called my name again,

louder this time. I grabbed my backpack from the floor and was heading for the front door when she stopped me.

"Om妈 wants to talk to you," she said.

"But I'm late for school," I reminded her.

"It will only be a minute. Don't worry."

Mina telling me not to worry about being late? Major red flag. I swallowed, and the cornflakes in my stomach sloshed around uneasily.

Even though Om妈 was 6,935 miles away, she still had an uncanny amount of control over my life. Whenever a teacher so much as shot me a dirty look, somehow Om妈 knew about it. So as I took the phone, I couldn't help but wonder, What had I done now?

"Om妈?" I said. When she didn't immediately answer, I knew that she wasn't calling to berate me.

"Om妈, are you okay?" I asked.

"Gwenchana," Om妈's voice crackled from the other side of the world.

She claimed she was fine, but I knew something was up. I saw my mom so rarely that I had gotten good at deciphering the little changes in her voice.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

The silence on the other end made my heart beat faster.

"Om妈?" I pressed, struggling to keep my voice even.

It had been only a short while since my mom was in a near-fatal car accident. Mina had flown to Korea to take care of her, and the laundromat had shut down for several weeks. We lost a lot of customers. But Omma had made it through all right. Or at least, I had thought so. Now my hands went slick with sweat. Was she getting worse instead of better?

"Omma, are you okay?" I asked again.

"I won't be coming for Christmas," she finally said. My grip on the phone loosened, and my fear slowly turned to indignation.

"You're not coming? But, Omma, you're always here for Christmas. It's the only time I see you. You have to come."

My mom started talking about the cost of traveling and the fact that she was still in a hip-high cast from the accident, but I could barely pretend to listen. She started to apologize, but I didn't want to hear her say sorry. I just wanted her here.

Mina plucked her phone from my hands. "You'll miss the bus," she said. "We'll talk about this later."

I opened my mouth, but before I could get out a word, she held up a hand and said, "Later." Her voice was so steely I knew it was no use protesting. As I stomped out of the apartment, I wondered why people always said, "We'll talk about this later" when they knew those conversations would never happen.

I reached the curb just in time to see the bus on the corner rumble away. *Perfect.* As if my morning wasn't already off to a horrible start.

I headed to the bike rack at the side of our building, dug out my key, and unlocked my ride. It was technically still fall, but it was freezing in Massachusetts. As I cycled down my street, the wind slapped hard at my face, numbed my fingers, and turned my earlobes cherry red. I hissed in a breath, clenched my hands harder around my bike's handlebars, and thought some more about Omma.

This is no big deal, I tried to convince myself. Honestly, the holidays are overrated anyway. And Omma will come later.

But she wouldn't be here to make *hotteok* with Jung-Hwa on Christmas day or to take Buddy and me ice-skating or even to go through my drawers and shake her head at how messy they were.

I pedaled harder, trying to escape my miserable thoughts, and turned the corner, crossing into the downtown area. Here, everything was fully decked out for Christmas. Vast swaths of artificially green garlands connected the old-fashioned lampposts, while fresh holly wreaths on every door filled the air with a sharp, wintry scent. Not to mention, there were so many lights strung up, I was surprised they hadn't short-circuited the town's electric grid. It was all so pretty, so cheerful . . . and so totally unbearable right now.

I sighed. Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without Omma.

...

"Push it, girls, push it!" Coach Ahmad hollered. "Give it a hundred and ten percent! And remember, you're not just running—you're in a race against yesterday's time!"

Gasping for breath, I tucked my elbows in tighter to my body and summoned up the last dregs of energy from my spent muscles. Sweat coursed down my temples and trickled into my open mouth, but I didn't let myself slow. *Give it a hundred and ten percent*, I echoed Coach's words in my mind. *Until you can't give anything else.*

Coach Ahmad blew her whistle just as I finished another lap around the gym. I skidded to a stop and immediately put my hands behind my head so that I could get as much oxygen into my lungs as possible. Somehow, it still wasn't enough.

Next to me, my friend Helen clutched her stomach and moaned. "I think I'm going to hurl."

"Just make sure to face the other way," I panted.

Coach Ahmad scanned the room. Her commanding brown eyes took in our drenched uniforms and trembling legs. I guess she decided we'd had enough torture, because

she finally released us. We all staggered to the locker room, breathing hard. There were twelve of us on the team, but Helen, Starsie, Win, Bianca, and Caroline were my friends off the court, too. They were known as the Royals—the most popular group at Lakeview. I wasn't one of them, not quite. Not yet.

I tugged off my sweaty clothes and pulled on my school uniform, then slumped down onto the bench closest to my locker. Helen plopped down next to me and towel-dried her smooth brown skin. Then she handed me a water bottle. I took a grateful swig.

"Sometimes, when it gets too hard out there, I just imagine Coach Ahmad running, and all of us blowing whistles at her, and it's a lot easier," she said.

"I don't know why she's working us so hard," Win joined in. She finished adjusting the knot on her tie and tugged the golden scrunchie from her hair. All the Royals wore a golden scrunchie, either in their hair or around their wrists. It was like their logo. I know it sounds ridiculous, but I dreamed about that scrunchie. About officially becoming a Royal and wearing one, too.

"We don't have any more games till after Christmas. Winter break is in . . . what? Three more weeks?" Win slumped down on the other side of me.

"Really? It's that soon?" I gnawed on the inside of

my cheek, thinking about all the exams and papers I had due before then. I would definitely have to text Eliot and ask to squeeze in at least one extra math-tutoring session. Mostly because of all the work I had to turn in . . . but also because—even though I knew it was a little pathetic—I wanted to sneak in as much Eliot time as possible before I had to go cold turkey for winter break.

At the mere thought of him, my heart thumped unevenly. I had met Eliot Haverford before I met anyone else at Lakeview. He was both my math tutor and the cutest boy in the entire universe. I'd had a huge crush on him since the first day I met him, but after he made it abundantly clear that he didn't date seventh graders, I was trying to move on. So far, I was doing an okay job . . . only, did I mention how cute he was?

"Speaking of which . . ." Caroline sauntered over to us. "It's almost time for our Christmas party!"

Caroline said "our" like we had all been planning a party for weeks now, but it was the first time I had heard any mention of it. I tried not to look too concerned, but of course Caroline noticed my expression immediately.

"Oh, right, Pippa," she said. "You wouldn't know. I keep forgetting about you."

True story, I thought.

"Last year we hosted a party on Christmas Eve," Helen explained.

"*The afternoon of Christmas Eve,*" Caroline corrected her. "Our parents always insist that Christmas Eve has to be reserved for family." Caroline rolled her eyes.

"Right," Helen said. "Christmas Eve afternoon. We had a holiday lunch with music and cool games and other stuff. Anyway, we went all out—decorations, fancy outfits, the whole shebang. It was so much fun we decided to make it a tradition. Last year's party was at Bianca's house, but we sent out invites from the Royals."

"For the select few lucky enough to snag an invite," Caroline said.

I tried not to look too eager, but a tiny glow warmed me from the inside out. Even though I ate lunch with the Royals every day, I still felt like I was hanging on to the edges. Especially considering how rocky things had been between me and Bianca when her guard dog Caroline found out Bianca and I were both into Eliot. Helping my team win the game against my old school had calmed Bianca down a little. And now the Royals were including me in the Christmas party. That had to be a good sign, right? I was inching closer to the inner circle.

"Anyway, it's now the most anticipated party of the year," Helen was saying. "And this year, it's Starsie's turn to host."

"About that." Starsie shut her locker. She tugged on a strand of her freshly dyed pink hair, avoiding eye contact

with any of us. "Don't hate me, but I have to bail. My parents are forcing me to go on this ski trip with them. We leave for St. Moritz the day after school gets out. I know I should I have told you guys earlier, but trust me, I'm already getting my punishment. I mean, I am so bored of Switzerland." She finally glanced up and shrugged.

I started to laugh, until I realized Starsie was being serious. Before she could notice my mistake, I quickly disguised the chuckle as a cough. Still, Win caught my glance and rolled her eyes. Both of us were on scholarships, and holiday trips to Europe weren't an option for our families. I smiled at her, glad to have someone who understood. I mean, Starsie was fun and all, but how was it even possible to get bored with an entire country?

"Anyway," Starsie swept on, "Bianca can just host the party this year, and I'll take the next two. Right, B?"

Starsie shut her locker and swung an arm over Bianca's shoulders. Bianca stiffened and her lips pressed into a tight line. Considering how sweaty Starsie's arm probably was, I couldn't blame her.

"I just wish I could be there," Starsie continued, oblivious to Bianca's pained look. "Your parties are always legendary."

"Like the gingerbread-house competition last year," Helen added.

"Yeah." Starsie giggled. "There was frosting on the ceiling for a week!"

All the Royals dissolved into laughter, including Bianca, and I didn't know whether it would be worse to stay the silent odd-one out or to laugh at something when I clearly had no clue what they were talking about. I chose option C—pretending I forgot something in my locker. I didn't turn back around until I heard my name.

"Huh?" I turned to Caroline.

"I said, I can lend you a dress for the party, Pippa." Caroline gave me a smile, but her eyes weren't very friendly. "My mom got it for me. It's cute but I've never worn it, because it's like three sizes too big. Should be perfect for you."

The hairs on the back of my neck prickled with embarrassment, and for a moment, I had the urge to run over and scrutinize my hips in the big full-length mirror in the corner of the locker room. I had been eating a fair number of Choco Pies and drinking a lot of hot chocolate in the last week. . . . Was that why Caroline was calling me fat?

I took a deep breath and told myself to snap out of it. I wasn't fat. I was two inches taller than Caroline—of course I wore a bigger size. Besides, I had watched Mina torture herself about her weight over the years; I knew that stressing over the number on a scale wasn't worth it.

Regaining my calm, I shut my locker without even slamming it.

"Thanks so much," I said politely. "But I actually went shopping last week. I saw an outfit I had to have, and now I have the perfect occasion!"

It was a lie that I was sure would come back to bite me at some point, but it was worth it to see the way Caroline's nostrils flared. She had been hoping for a more heated reaction from me. I honestly had no idea why. Caroline and Bianca had been slow to accept me, but ever since the game against my old school, Bianca had backed down from actively hating me. In fact, she now seemed to regard me almost with neutrality. So why couldn't Caroline leave me alone?

Starsie and Bianca finished packing up their things, and we headed out of the locker room. As Caroline and Bianca talked dresses, and Win and Starsie argued about some television show I had never seen, Helen linked arms with me.

"I need someone to hold on to," she told me. "At least until I can feel my legs again."

"I think I actually prefer not feeling them."

Helen laughed. "Wanna come over? My mom is making coconut cake for dessert."

"That sounds amazing, but my sister is throwing a holiday party. At the laundromat," I added, remembering I

didn't have to hide my non-glitzy real life from the Royals anymore. "It's for the customers."

"Right," Helen said. "Buddy mentioned that."

"Oh," I said. I didn't know what else to say. It was still supremely strange to me that my best friend from my old middle school was now dating my best friend from my current middle school. But not wanting to be weird about it, I opened my mouth again, fishing for something to say.

I still hadn't come up with anything by the time we reached the parking lot.

"Anyway," Helen said, just as the silence was about to turn awkward, "tell Buddy I say hi."

"Will do."

"Oh, and make sure you say it really enthusiastically, like, 'Helen says to tell you HI!' Or . . . hmm, actually, maybe tone it down just a little." Helen tapped her chin thoughtfully. "Tell him 'hi!' with an exclamation point, but no caps. Does that make sense?"

"Absolutely not," Win said, looking over at us.

"What? It makes total sense to me," Starsie protested. "Clearly, it means that Helen is in l-o-v-e loooooove."

"Starsie! It's only been two dates." Helen groaned but couldn't stop smiling.

And really, I was truly happy to see my friend happy. So why was there a bizarre knot in my stomach right now? I

loved Helen, and I loved Buddy, but whenever I thought about them together, it made me feel odd.

I waved goodbye to the Royals, but they were all too preoccupied with singing, "Helen and Buddy sitting in a tree, k-i-s-s-i-n-g" to notice me.

I walked over to my bike, my thoughts returning to the Royals' Christmas party. It didn't make up for Omma not coming, but at least I had something to look forward to. And it could change my whole Lakeview life. Other kids would see me at a Royals' party, which would mean I'd have the Royals' stamp of approval.

To be honest, I'd always struggled to fit in. I definitely didn't do a great job of it in my old school, so Lakeview was my fresh start. And if the Royals liked you, everyone liked you.

And if they didn't . . . well, that was one thing I didn't think I had to worry about anymore.

Content TK

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Q&A with Author Erin Yun

Glossary of Korean Words

**About the Author:**

Erin Yun grew up in Frisco, Texas and used to play basketball as a middle grader. She received her BA in English from New York University and is currently pursuing her Masters in Creative Writing at Cambridge. She developed the Pippa Park Author Program, an interactive writing workshop, which she has conducted in person and virtually at schools, libraries, and bookstores.

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