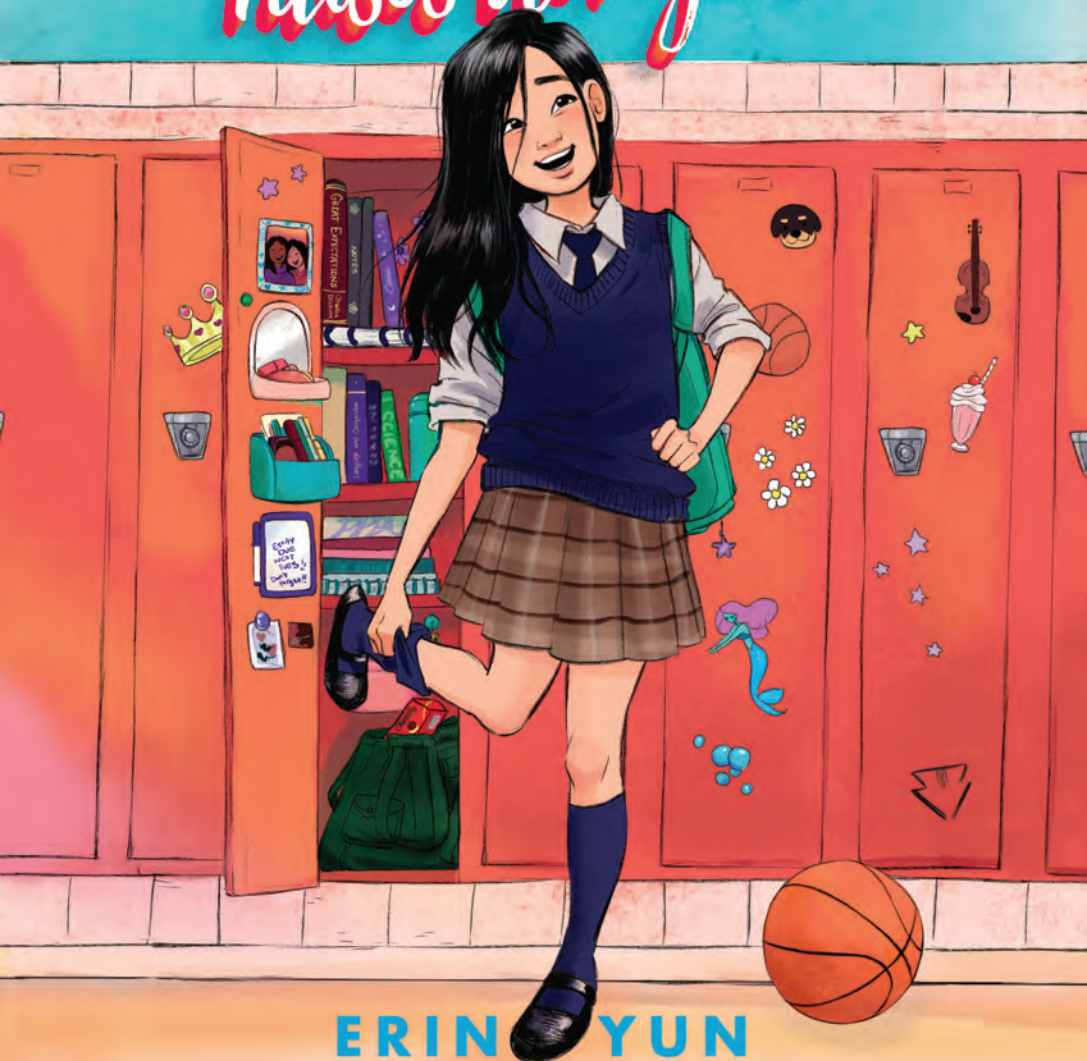


PIPPA PARK

raises her game



ERIN YUN

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RAISES HER GAME

Erin Yun

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"That was a memorable day to me, for it made great changes in me.
But it is the same with any life."

—Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*



*To those who opened this book:
I am happy you are here.*



THE STRANGE ENCOUNTER

I was the only person in the park.

Tucking a damp strand of hair back behind one ear, I surveyed the abandoned slides and empty benches. It was just past six p.m. on a Friday, but it looked like nobody else wanted to be out in the rain. As I strode briskly forward, icy wind numbed the tips of my fingers, making me clutch my basketball tighter. Even though we hadn't officially left summer behind, the cold front that had settled over Victoria, Massachusetts, didn't show any signs of leaving.

So . . . empty court. Lousy weather. And things at home were just as dismal.

My older sister, Mina, had just grilled me for nearly an hour after finding out about the "unacceptable" grade I had received on my latest algebra quiz. When she finally finished, I stormed out of the apartment, making sure to grab my basketball and a water bottle; I planned on being gone awhile.

Now I kind of wished that I had taken a warmer jacket, too. Or at least a hat. But rain or shine, I wasn't ready to go home yet.

I headed past the playground equipment, where the swings swayed back and forth, their rusted metal chain-links creaking in the wind, a chilling noise that made me look twice over my shoulder as I passed them. The basketball court was just up ahead, hemmed in by the line of dense trees that marked the start of Grey Woods. The woods were named for some rich guy who had given the land to the town back in the last century, but on a day like today the name was eerily appropriate. In the drizzle and fog, the shadowy, thick trunks made me uneasy.

Rotating the ball between my stiff, raw hands, I stepped onto the centerline. I inhaled deeply and felt my back muscles start to relax. Basketball did that for me every time. I dribbled my ball toward the hoop. As I concentrated on the way the ball felt bouncing against the tips of my fingers, thoughts of impossible algebra problems and my nagging sister faded from my mind. Every movement felt natural, like the ball wasn't something outside my body but a part of it.

I headed to the free-throw line, dribbled twice, and sent the ball arcing toward the hoop. *Swish*. Nothing but net. It was one of the most satisfying things in the world to watch the ball whoosh through that hoop—and, not to brag or anything, but I was good at it. Actually, I was more than good; I was great.

Which was why I needed to get back on the school team. I had managed to make it on my first try—a big deal for a sixth grader—and by the end of last year, I'd been on the starting lineup for every game. My plan for this year had been to become the team's star player. But that dream had died quickly after my math grades dipped last spring, and Mina barred me from rejoining the team.

Her husband, Jung-Hwa, had gently tried to talk her out of it—but Mina nearly bit his head off. The best I could do was get her to agree that if I got better grades this year, she'd think about it. But a D on my first quiz today had sealed my fate.

Swish, swish, swish.

Not to mention, she had Omma on her side. That's my mom, Ji-Min. Although I had been born in the U.S., my mom wasn't a citizen, and she hadn't been able to renew her work visa when it expired around my fifth birthday. So she'd left me here with my sister and Jung-Hwa. But even though she lives back in South Korea, Omma still rules my life with her strong Korean fist. When Mina tells her about my latest scholastic failure, I'll definitely get a brutal lecture. No distance, not even 7,000 miles, can make Omma any less intimidating.

At the thought of that phone call, my concentration broke, and the ball rebounded off the edge of the rim at a wild angle and bounced into the woods. There went my streak.

With a sigh, I peered into the darkening trees. The rain clouds made it hard to tell how late it was, but I thought I must have been playing for at least an hour.

A gust of wind swept across the desolate court and whipped at the swings, which began screeching once again. I frowned; I should call Mina. I had left without telling her where I was going or when I'd be back, and that was never a good thing, especially when she was already mad at me.

I reached into my left pocket for my phone, but it wasn't there. It wasn't in my right one either. Of course. In storming out, I had forgotten to bring it. What else could go wrong? I took a long swig from my water bottle then set it down and headed after my ball.

I jogged across the court, but at the edge of the woods I skidded to a stop. A tall, hooded figure lurked among the trees.

The stranger took a step toward me. And then another. And another. My mouth opened and I felt a scream welling up, but all that came out was a little squeak.

People always say that in situations of high stress, you're supposed to have a fight-or-flight reaction. Not me. The stranger came closer but instead of sprinting in the opposite direction, I froze. Apparently, in addition to struggling with algebra, I was also screwing up the "stranger danger" lessons Mina had been drilling into my head since kindergarten.

There was a state prison right outside town . . . what if this was an escaped convict? A murderer? Was I going to be the next victim of an escaped convict murderer?

The man's forest-green hoodie shadowed his face. He held my basketball in one hand and a bulky black case—narrow at the front and wider at the back—in the other. What did he have stashed in the case? The remains of his last victim?

"Please don't hurt me," I blurted out. "Mina would kill me if I, well, died."

The stranger stopped short. And then, with an annoyed *huff*, he held out my ball to me. That's when I realized that the mysterious figure was a teenage boy—and probably too young to be a seasoned killer. Underneath the green hoodie, there was a slight roundness to his acne-scarred face that made me think he couldn't be older than seventeen.

"Take your basketball," he commanded as he set the black case on the ground. His voice sounded a little froggy, like he had a cold.

For the first time, we locked eyes. By this point, my vision had adjusted to the dark, and I could see that his eyes were an intense hazel shade.

"Thank you," I said automatically. Mina had always taught me to say please and thank you, and although I wasn't sure what the rules on politeness were regarding mysterious strangers, some habits were hard to shake. Still slightly wary,

I took the ball and clutched it against my ribcage.

Meanwhile, now that his hands were free, Green Hoodie jammed one of them into the pocket of his jeans. What was he reaching for? I leaped back.

He gave me a sour look as he pulled out . . . a cell phone. I started to breathe normally again.

"You play for one of the middle schools around here?" he asked.

"I used to. For Victoria Middle. My sister made me quit because of my grades."

The words were out before I could stop myself. Why was I even talking to him?

"That's a shame. You're good."

"Do you play basketball?"

What was wrong with me? Now I was the one keeping the conversation going.

Instead of answering, Green Hoodie scowled down at his phone and gave it a little shake. He patted his pockets. Wrinkled his nose.

"You don't happen to have a portable charger on you, or something?"

I riffled through my pockets even though I one hundred percent knew I did not have a portable charger on me; I didn't even own one. I did, however, discover a crinkled packet containing one semi-squished Happy Promise Custard Cake. I

looked at the packet and then, for some reason, I handed it to him. It was not remotely close to what he had asked for, but I guess I thought he looked hungry. Or maybe just sad.

"No charger, but I have this," I said. "It's a Korean snack. From Lotte—the best brand. They're really good."

Green Hoodie stared at me, then at the Happy Promise Custard Cake, then back to me again. He pressed his lips together like he was suppressing a frown. Or maybe he was contemplating killing me after all. I gulped.

But then his lips softened into a smile. "Thank you," he said, taking the cake. He paused, and then said it again. "Thank you . . . er, what's your name?"

"Oh. Pippa. Pippa Park."

Oh man! I definitely wasn't supposed to tell him my name. I wanted to hit my palm against my forehead. Idiot!

He squinted as a pair of headlights lit up the street outside the court. He took a step back toward the woods, and his eyes darted in every direction. "If anyone asks, I was never here, okay?"

All right, now that was definitely sketchy.

"Not a problem," I said, "since I don't even know who you—"

"Thanks, Pippa. Pippa Park."

With that, he disappeared. And I was back to standing in an empty park—still cold, still damp, still alone, and

now bewildered as well. For a minute, I stared into the woods, replaying our conversation in my mind and wondering where he was going with his black case in this chilly rain. Then the drizzle began to turn into a heavier rain, and thunder rumbled. I shook myself. What was I doing? What time was it? Mina was going to kill me!

Inhaling sharply, I clutched my basketball and started jogging home. As my sneakers thudded across the damp pavement, I pushed any lingering thoughts of Green Hoodie from my mind.

After all, it wasn't like I would ever see that guy again.

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Bonus Content

Discussion Questions for Your Book Club

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 BFA in English from New York University and is currently pursuing her Masters in Creative Writing at the University of Cambridge. Erin is a member of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators and has written reviews and articles for BookBrowse. She developed the Pippa Park Author Program, an interactive writing workshop, which she has conducted in person and virtually at schools, libraries, and bookstores. This is her first children's book.

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