

Prologue

Emily Chan had already agreed before she fully understood what agreement meant.

There had been no threats.

No raised voices.

No moment she could point to later and say: *that was when it happened.*

Only a series of small decisions.

Each one reasonable.

Each one narrowing the path ahead.

By the time she boarded the plane, she was no longer being recruited.

She was being managed.

Emily Chan was born to Chinese immigrant parents in Busan, Republic of Korea, on January 30, 1987.

Mandarin at home.

Korean in school.

English from American movies.

Language depended on the audience. She learned early that fluency was less about vocabulary than calibration.

At home, she was Chinese.

But there were objects that did not fit that simple label: a ceramic tea set wrapped carefully and never used, and a small silver pendant her grandmother insisted was from "*the other side of the water,*" a phrase no one ever asked her to explain.

At school, she was Korean.

In private, she practiced English—first from films, then with a tutor whose lessons were structured and exacting.

Pronunciation corrected.

Idioms memorized.

Tone adjusted.

She became careful with words.

Careful with silence.

She studied business management in Seoul. Her academic record was strong. Her applications precise.

When she became eligible, she applied for permanent residency in the United States.

The process took years.

Background checks. Interviews. Forms resubmitted. Waiting.

Nothing about it was unusual.

When her citizenship was finally approved, she did not celebrate. She collected the passport, reviewed the visa stamps, and placed it in a drawer.

Her official story was uncomplicated.

Immigrant parents.

Multilingual education.

Ambition.

Opportunity.

It was a version of events that satisfied every form she had ever completed.

By the time she landed in the United States, her path appeared entirely self-directed.

That was the design.

CHAPTER

1

Los Angeles International

Emily gathered her thoughts and belongings as her plane taxied to the Gate at LAX. Her flight from Seoul had been uneventful apart from the tall lanky American in the seat next to her who could not get comfortable.

After waiting in line it was her turn to approach the Customs and Immigration Officer.

Passport taken. Scanned.

"Are you visiting the United States or staying?" He stared at her, eyebrows raised.

Emily swallowed. "I am staying."

That made him look up. Not sharply. Just enough.

"You're a U.S. citizen," he said. "But this passport doesn't show any prior entries." He scanned it again to make sure.

"Where are you staying?"

"In Los Angeles with friends."

"What will you be doing here?"

"Consulting," she said. Then, after a beat, "Business consulting. Freelance."

He nodded. Typed. Stopped typing.

"How did you get a U.S. passport without living in the United States?"

Emily felt her pulse in her throat.

"It took many years," she said carefully. "I applied through the U.S. Embassy in Seoul. I received a Green Card first. Then citizenship."

The officer leaned back slightly. His chair creaked.

He looked at her face, then back at the screen. Typed again.

The line behind her seemed to pause.

Finally, he stamped the passport.

"Your documents are valid," he said, sliding it back.

Emily took it with hands that did not quite feel like her own.

"Next," he said.

"Thank you," she muttered. She almost stumbled as she collected her carry on and purse and moved on.

She collected her luggage and passed through the green line at customs. No one stopped her.

Her name was on an iPad held high by a short man with a Mandarin accent in the Arrivals area. After formal greetings he led her to the waiting vehicle—a large black Chevy Suburban.

It was warm and sunny with no clouds as her bags were loaded and she settled into the soft back seat.

The journey through Los Angeles took longer than she expected. The driver patiently waited while bogged down in seemingly endless traffic jams. She opened the window and smelled the mix of car exhausts, hot pavement and concrete.

The roads were wider than she expected. Cars were everywhere. As they drove she noticed Chinese strip malls with typical Chinese bakeries. The pleasant familiar smell of cooking wafted in.

In spite of the clear weather the air seemed murky and the hills in the distance were partially obscured.

Finally, they entered a residential area with narrower streets lined by palm trees and gardens with a faint smell of jasmine and jacaranda.

They entered a parking garage adjacent to a nondescript apartment building. Their destination was on the second floor.

She was jet lagged and hungry as she was shown to her room. Her bags were brought up shortly after. Food would be available in the kitchen.

After partial unpacking, a refreshing shower and a change of clothes she met her handlers in the kitchen.

There were two male handlers—medium build, in their 30s, around 5ft 8in and 5ft 10in. Neither was interested in chatting. Neither seemed friendly. No smiles. One ate without looking at her. The other was engrossed on his phone.

Then he said: “You have an appointment with a Dr. Lambert tomorrow at 10am. I will take you there. We leave at 9am. I have a cell phone for you. Tennessee area code as requested.”

She had lost track of time. She was tired. She went to bed.

CHAPTER

2

**Dr. Lambert's Plastic Surgery Office,
Beverly Hills, Los Angeles.
Thursday Evening**

Jack Lambert closed the door behind him before sitting.

He leaned back in his chair and read the operative report one last time before signing it.

Procedure: Open rhinoplasty, dorsal hump reduction, tip refinement.

Outcome: Uncomplicated.

Estimated blood loss: Minimal.

He added his electronic signature, closed the chart, and logged out of the system.

The office was quiet in the way it only ever was at the end of a surgical day. Not silence. There was still the low hum of the building, the distant elevator chime. But a settled quiet—the sound of things being finished properly.

He rested his hands briefly on the edge of his desk.

It was a good desk. Solid wood. Nothing flashy. He'd bought it secondhand when he first moved into the building on Rodeo Drive, back when he'd been sharing an office and wondering how long it would take before the referrals came. The surface was clean except for a single legal pad, neatly aligned, and his laptop, closed.

On the wall behind him hung his credentials: FRCS (Eng.), UCLA, Board Certification from the American Board of Plastic Surgery. Framed uniformly. Evenly spaced.

There was nothing from his medical school, St. Bartholomew's Hospital Medical School in London. British medical schools do not make a fuss over graduation. He had transitioned to the United States a little late and completed his plastic surgery residency at UCLA.

Three surgeries today.

Two breast augmentations in the morning. Both straightforward, both within the sizes he was comfortable with. A rhinoplasty after lunch.

Then follow-ups and a new patient. Busy, but not frantic. Not like some of the surgeons down the hall who stacked cases until their patients blurred together.

He preferred this pace.

Jack stood and walked once around the room. The habit of a man checking that nothing had been overlooked. The visitors' chairs were pushed in, unused. Patients did not come into this room. He saw them in one of the three exam rooms down the hall. Photographs were taken in a separate space altogether. This room was for paperwork, decisions, and quiet.

The blinds were half-drawn against the late afternoon glare. The faint smell of disinfectant lingered—clean, not sharp.

A knock at the door.

"Come in."

Tricia stepped inside, tablet tucked under her arm. Patricia, officially, though nobody had called her that in years. She had been with Jack since the beginning, before Beverly Hills, before the reputation, when the waiting room had been quieter and the schedule manageable. Her husband ran a large warehouse operation, and her son was already drawing attention as a high school football star. Life, by most measures, was going well.

"We're all set," she said. "Deposits are in. All credit card and one CareCredit. No cash today."

Jack nodded. He preferred it that way.

She glanced down at the tablet. "One breast augmentation booked—three weeks out. Paid in full. The consult from today sounds very interested. I expect we'll hear tomorrow."

"Good."

"Three new patient calls came in this afternoon," she went on. "All booked. Next week's almost full now. Tuesday's tight, but manageable."

"That's fine," Jack said. "We'll keep it where it is."

She smiled faintly. "I figured you'd say that."

She hesitated, then added, "Tomorrow morning—ten o'clock—you've got a new consult. Emily Chan."

Jack repeated the name once, committing it to memory.

"She's flying in from Tennessee," Tricia said. "Asked a lot of questions on the phone."

"About?"

"Implant size. Recovery. Scarring." A brief pause. "Didn't ask about price."

Jack filed that away without comment. Nothing strange about out of state patients flying in. Beverly Hills has a certain cache, and Jack's reputation is growing.

“And you’ve got two more new patients in the afternoon,” Tricia added. “Both routine.”

“Thank you,” he said.

Tricia nodded and left, closing the door quietly behind her.

Jack sat back down. Emily Chan. The name meant nothing to him, as it should. He checked the schedule for the next day—neatly spaced, no surgery, clinic only—he closed the file.

Outside, the late California sun softened against the glass across the street.

Another day finished properly.

Tomorrow, at ten o’clock, he would meet a new patient.

For now, that was all she was.



Friday morning

Emily Chan arrived at the plastic surgery office by Uber.

The building receptionist guided her to the elevator and entered the code for the 3rd floor.

She was happy to find that Dr. Lambert’s office was clean and well-appointed with a fresh scent. The small waiting room had only six chairs, and she was the only patient present.

She wondered what Dr. Lambert would be like. She had chosen him for his Chinese connections—his childhood in Hong Kong, his relative youthfulness, and his international training.

When she checked in Tricia asked her to complete the registration form. Emily signed for a HIPAA disclosure form. She observed Tricia’s polite competence and impeccable attire, and she was impressed by the quiet efficiency of the professionally run office.

She completed the form but left the address and social security fields open. Date of birth was June 18th, 1987. There were no questions about nationality. She entered “business consultant” for occupation. She entered her Tennessee telephone number—arranged to facilitate approaching the senator from the Tennessee.

Tricia showed her into exam room #3 without comment. Exactly on time.

Emily was pleased to see the room was clean and tidy. The exam chair was similar to a dental chair. It was more comfortable than she expected in a doctor’s office.

Jack knocked on Room 3 and entered.

A young woman sat alone on the examination chair. Slim. Well dressed. Composed. She appeared confident and entirely at ease.

He smiled.

“Hello. I’m Dr. Lambert. You must be Emily Chan.”

“Yes, I am. Nice to meet you, Dr. Lambert.”

Her English was excellent. Had he spoken to her on the telephone, he might not have guessed she was foreign. But years of listening to patients had trained his ear. Beneath the polished fluency he detected a faint Mandarin accent.

He pulled up a stool and sat down.

“What can I do for you today, Miss Chan?”

Emily noticed his accent immediately.

English.

Not American.

She had expected someone different. Despite his Chinese background and Chinese mother, there was nothing visibly Asian about him. He wore a white coat and tie—formal attire that had largely disappeared from Beverly Hills medical practices.

Most surgeons dressed casually.

Jack Lambert did not.

The white coat was immaculate. The tie neatly knotted. Everything about him suggested order and discipline.

"I'd like to discuss breast implants, a tummy tuck, and something for my eyelids," she said. "To make them look less... Asian."

Jack nodded.

The request did not surprise him. He was particularly familiar with Asian eyelid surgery and performed it regularly.

"I can modify the appearance of your eyelids," he said. "But tell me why you want to do that."

Emily held his gaze.

"I'd like to fit in better. Not stand out so much."

"Fair enough."

He briefly explained the procedure and what could realistically be achieved.

As he spoke, Emily studied him.

Clean-shaven. No beard. No fashionable stubble. Thick dark hair, carefully brushed. Professional without appearing vain.

Early forties, she guessed.

Perhaps a little older.

"Are you generally healthy?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Any significant medical problems?"

"No."

"Good."

Jack smiled, as he often did when speaking with patients.

"How much do you know about breast augmentation, tummy tucks, or eyelid surgery?"

"Not very much."

"Well, you've come to the right place."

His smile widened slightly.

"Breast augmentation is a very safe and predictable procedure these days, but there are a lot of details worth understanding before we discuss specific options. We have educational videos that explain the procedures, the recovery process, and the potential risks and benefits."

Emily listened without comment.

Jack continued.

"Before we get to that, tell me why you've decided to pursue breast implants."

She answered immediately.

"I want to feel better about my appearance. I also work as a business consultant. Men often judge women by how they look."

Jack made no comment on that.

"What size are you now?"

"An A cup."

"And what would you like to become?"

"A significant change."

"That's a fairly common answer," he said with a small smile.

Then he glanced at her chart.

"And your abdomen? I see you've never been pregnant and your weight appears normal. What bothers you there?"

Emily looked down briefly.

"I'd like to wear a bikini without a small tummy pooch."

Jack nodded.

"I understand. We'll examine you, but based on what you're describing, you may simply need a little liposuction rather than a tummy tuck."

He stood and picked up an iPad.

“Let's start with the videos. They'll answer many of the common questions and make our next discussion much more productive.”

He handed it to her.

“Just touch the screen here to begin.”

She accepted it.

Jack then handed her an examination gown.

“After you've finished watching, please change into this. Open in the front. Leave your underwear on, but remove your bra.”

Emily nodded.

“I'll come back when you're finished and we'll discuss your options.”

Jack left the room, quietly closing the door behind him.

As Jack gently closed the door and returned to his office he remarked to Tricia, “Looks like a nice patient.”

He didn't have another patient to see right away. So he looked at his schedule. It was Friday. He studied next week's surgery schedule.

Practice management is for the weekends. Finances. Reconciliation. Bills. Marketing. Not social media. That was Mary's strength.

He glanced at the ceiling, letting the moment stretch.

He had built a quiet, ordered life here. Patients. Colleagues. Acquaintances. No one who truly knew him. England was still eight thousand miles away, his parents even further in temperament. Jack had been born in Hong Kong in 1982—an only child.

His mother would have sensed Emily's differences immediately. Shanghai was not Hong Kong, and Beijing was something else entirely.

He pushed the thought aside as Mary knocked and stepped in. She had joined the practice to help manage his growing surgical schedule. Younger than Tricia, Mary was married to a police officer and had two small children. Most days her mother watched them, though occasionally they had to spend the day at a daycare center.

"Emily is ready to see you now, Dr. Lambert. Her vitals are normal and she has seen the videos, but I must tell you that she refused to sign the 'Permission to Photograph' form."

Jack frowned and said nothing as he rose to follow Mary.

Mary knocked and opened the door for Dr. Lambert. She sat in front of the computer while Jack faced the patient.

Jack said, "Did you manage to see the videos?"

"Yes."

"What did you think of them?"

"They were quite detailed. I didn't realize there was so much to know about breast implants."

Jack said, "I agree. That's why we have a video. It helps to go over everything without forgetting important points."

Emily nodded.

"One of the first things the video says is that I'm going to be doing an in-depth measurement and examination of your breasts. This will help me decide what size and style of breast implant would fit you and look best. I'm going to ask you to stand up. I will be placing some markings on your breasts and then doing some measurements. Mary will be entering them into the computer for me."

She said, "OK" and stood up.

Jack noticed that her breasts were small. 'A' cup. No breast ptosis. Symmetrical.

"No abnormal masses or tenderness felt within either breast today," he said for Mary's record.

He marked her chest and took precise measurements, dictating them aloud as Mary entered them into the system. The process was practiced. Methodical. Unhurried.

When he finished he said, "Can I take a look at your tummy?"

Emily opened her gown. Just a small excess of fat of the lower abdomen. No excess skin. Good quality skin. No signs of a previous pregnancy. No scars.

Jack told her she was an excellent candidate for liposuction and saw no need for a tummy tuck. She was relieved to hear it and appreciated his practical honesty and lack of pressure.

Jack remembered that she had not signed the photograph consent form, but said nothing.

"Based on your measurements," he said, turning the catalogue toward her, "three hundred cc, moderate profile plus."

Her expression hardened. "I was expecting something much larger. Six hundred."

He didn't smile. "That isn't possible. And even if it were, it would fail you over time."

They negotiated. Reluctantly, she agreed to get four hundred and fifty—larger than he wanted, larger than he recommended, and documented as such.

He said, "The larger I go, the heavier the implant, and the sooner you'll be back for corrective surgeries."

Emily looked at Jack. Paused. Nodded. This guy is honest, she thought.

"Liposuction for your tummy can be done at the same time. There will be three tiny punctures, one on each side of the lower abdomen and one at the umbilicus. My preference is the tumescent technique using the hand syringe suction technique.

Many plastic surgeons like to use a machine, but I prefer the delicate, more refined results I can get when I use fine cannulae and manual suction."

He explained that a transverse piece of skin would be removed from the upper eyelids to create a Caucasian double lid and rotate tiny flaps to eliminate her oriental fold. He explained that the scar will be hidden in the fold when her eyes are open. Jack is precise, detailed—maybe too much detail at times.

"Before you get dressed, it is time to get the before pictures."

"I don't want any photographs taken."

Jack paused. "Then I can't operate."

He explained it once—clearly, without apology. The images were essential. Encrypted. HIPAA compliant. Non-negotiable.

He took them himself.

She resisted.

Then she signed.

Pictures taken. Emily dressed. Mary escorted her to discuss dates. Costs. Jack never discussed money with his patients.

Mary offered a date a month out. Emily rejected it. Eventually, Mary found space at the end of a surgery day—about ten days out.

Emily needed blood work and a mammogram before then. The imaging center was fully booked, but Mary solved that as well. Jack's office referred enough patients to have influence. An appointment was secured within four days.

The Chevy Suburban took Emily back to the apartment.

She was both excited and uneasy about the upcoming surgery, but she trusted Jack—his honesty, his skill.

As the day approached, anxiety grew.

She bought the post-operative bra he had recommended. Soft. Stretchy. Front closure. No underwire.

Eventually, the day arrived.

She was the only afternoon case on Jack's schedule.

CHAPTER

3

Surgery Center

Jack shared the surgery center with the other plastic surgeons in the building. Ground floor. Large, modern, clean. Polished linoleum floors that caught and reflected the light. A pervasive sterile smell—clinical, unmistakable.

Emily arrived having had nothing to eat or drink since midnight.

The receptionist recognized her immediately but still asked for ID and verification of her details. Emily presented her U.S. passport; she did not have a driver's license. It caused a brief delay. The receptionist photocopied it and recorded the number without comment.

The nurse who took her back was calm and reassuring. Familiar with the procedure. Efficient.

She led Emily to the pre-op area, where she changed into a hospital gown.

Vitals taken. Allergies confirmed. IV started with quiet precision.

Emily felt reassured. By the staff. The environment. The professionalism.

The room was cold. The nurse placed warm, thin blankets over her. They helped.

Jack entered with his usual ready smile—but he was focused now. No small talk.

He marked her breasts and abdomen.

“Don’t forget to put at least 450cc implants in there,” Emily said.

Jack didn’t smile.

“I said I’ll try to reach that size,” he replied evenly. “It’s not a promise. Your tissue may not accommodate it.”

A pause.

“I’ll take good care of you.”

The anesthesiologist arrived shortly after. A middle-aged man with a mustache and a reserved manner. He introduced himself. Reviewed her history. Allergies. Vitals.

He was confident. Controlled.

“I’ll be with you the entire time,” he said.

Then something entered the IV.

Warmth spread quickly.

The edges softened.

Emily didn’t remember anything after that.

Recovery room

“Emily—are you having any pain?”

The world returned in fragments.

Pressure in her chest. Tightness in her abdomen.

Nausea.

Where am I?

Voices. Close. Calm.

She surfaced slowly.

A nurse leaned over her. Ice packs on her eyes. Her chest. Her abdomen. Heavy. Cold.

She tried to move.

"Relax. Everything went well. You're doing fine. We're giving you something for the pain."

Her breathing steadied.

The head of the gurney was raised. The ice shifted slightly. She could see shapes now.

Curtains. Nurses. Movement. Routine.

Everything in order.

She let go again.

Slept.

—

"Wake up, Emily."

She opened her eyes. Sat up slowly.

"Time to go."

The nurses dressed her. Efficient. Practiced.

Two Chinese men were waiting.

"I'm Nurse Nicole. Who are you?"

"Emily Chan caregiver," one replied, his accent pronounced.

They helped her into the car.

A little too roughly, Emily thought.

She spoke to them in Mandarin.

Then drifted again.

—

She woke in the apartment she recognized from the day before.

On the bed.

Her clothes folded neatly on a chair.

The room sparse. Familiar.

A faint, lingering smell.
She swallowed.
Nausea still there.
Pain—present, but manageable.
Anxious to see the results.



Dr. Lambert's Plastic Surgery Office
Beverly Hills, Los Angeles
Three weeks post op.

She was always on time for all her follow-up appointments.
One day. One week. Two weeks.

She was never accompanied, Tricia noticed disapprovingly.

Jack said she was doing very well.

Eyelid sutures were out. No bruising. Minimal swelling.

The tummy looked good. Mild swelling but no bruising.

The breasts were high and firm. No pain.

Emily was upset when Jack explained that the largest implant size he could get in was 400cc high profile. She gave him a hard time—testing his limits, but she actually liked the size and the unnatural look.

She asked for the Botox and fillers. Jack's protocol is four weeks after implants, but it is now three weeks. "I need to start my new job," insists Emily.

Jack relents. Emily won.

Jack is not as rigid as she expected.

Emily received Botox for her frown lines and crow's feet.
Voluma to enhance her cheekbones. Vollure for fuller lips.
Carefully applied. Not overdone. She liked it.

Now she is ready to go ... to Washington DC.

CHAPTER

4

Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport

Emily's plane touched down at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport at 5:32 p.m. local time—5 minutes late. It was still light. Cool. No rain.

She had expected a large sprawling airport, but what she saw first was the water of the Potomac, the typical golden evening light and a city waiting just beyond the runway.

The air outside was thick as if the city was breathing directly on her skin. Her clothes quickly felt heavy and sticky.

A large black Chevy Suburban was waiting for her. She did not know the Chinese driver. He held a sign high.

He collected her single suitcase from baggage claim after a perfunctory greeting and confirmed the destination, which he already knew. It was his way of confirming her identity.

He led the way to the car. Loaded the luggage.

She was immediately grateful for the air conditioning.

Once seated the driver handed her a large, rather heavy leather purse similar in size to a man's briefcase.

She mused about the Chevrolet Suburban. Same car as in Los Angeles. Same color. Same cleanliness. It could almost be the same one, but the driver was different.

The streets were different. The traffic was different.

This was Washington, DC.

As they drove the street lights and building windows began to glow as evening settled in, making the city feel both busy and slightly distant.

She turned her attention to the leather bag she had been given and smiled. Apartment keys. iPad mini with a typed sheet with passwords. Money. Credit cards. Burner phone for emergencies. She hoped she would never need to use it.

The uneventful ride to her new apartment in Kalorama/Woodley Park was shorter than she expected.

As she neared her destination, the car entered a well-maintained tree-lined street with opulent houses with impressive driveways on both sides.

The opulence gave way to apartment buildings. They stopped. She guessed there were fewer than ten apartments, and hers was on the ground floor.

The key found in the bag opened the door. The driver placed her travel luggage inside the door and left.

The furnishings were understated, not new but in good condition. It was clear that the apartment had been used before but was thoroughly cleaned for her arrival. She collapsed onto the plush leather sofa and looked around. She was curious. Tired. Hungry.

A large flat-screen television on the wall. Dark prints in earth tones. Nothing personal anywhere—like a hotel that was meant to be lived in for years.

She got up to explore the kitchen. There was a breakfast nook. No formal living room. No dining room. One bedroom with a bathroom on the right as you enter. No second bedroom. Ample dresser with drawers for clothes. The bed was large—probably king size. Emily approved. Usual bedside tables—both with a free-standing lamp. They seemed strangely new.

She returned to the kitchen. She saw a good-quality oven. Stove. Microwave. Refrigerator with a large freezer drawer at the bottom.

Two smoke detectors in the kitchen. Faint red blinking behind a vent. Not standard placement.

She examined the views from all the windows and made sure the blinds were drawn. She checked the door and window locks.

She was not surprised—just felt trapped.

She opened the refrigerator and was pleased to see it was fully stocked. Someone had just gone shopping—like someone already knew her preferences. There was a fresh loaf of bread on the sideboard.

She carefully wrapped her passport to resemble frozen food and put it in the freezer.

She placed the iPad and burner phone beneath clothes in a bedroom drawer.

She expertly boiled ramen noodles with frozen peas while diced cabbage sizzled in soy sauce and a splash of rice vinegar. Then she tossed everything together. It was a satisfying meal for someone tired after a long day's travel.

Then, feeling satisfied, she sat down with her laptop to research Senator Morrison and make notes of his schedule. A sheet included in the bag provided links for her to quickly get the information she needed.

Before meeting the Senator she needed to purchase the necessary conservative clothing.

She went to bed with a plan forming in her head—not for how to meet Senator Morrison, but how to become the sort of woman he would think he'd discovered himself.