



a novel

# PARK AVENUE

Renée Ahdieh

#1 *New York Times* Bestselling Author



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*For anyone who left home hoping for a better life in a new land*

*For the children of immigrants, who spend their lives  
straddling two worlds*

*For Victor, Cyrus, and Noura, always*

*If you're going to tell a lie, make it a good one.*

My mother used to say this all the time. She claimed we were given a handful of good lies in life, and we should take care not to waste them. Once we wasted our lies, no one would believe us, even when we needed them to.

Even when our lies were the truth.

# THE MOST BEAUTIFUL BAG IN THE WORLD

In order to understand Jia Song, it is necessary to begin at the beginning.

Not in a tedious, *David Copperfield* kind of way. After all, Jia remembered nothing of when she was born. Who did, save for the sort of Dickensian male worthy of his namesake?

The beginning for Jia Song could have been any number of formative moments in the life of a child from an immigrant family. It could have been the time in fifth grade when she was chased at recess by three boys tugging the corners of their eyes and yelling “Ching chong ching,” their cackles ringing through the schoolyard like racist hyenas ... right until Jia spun on her heel and hawked Korean hot sauce in their eyes with the precision of a spitting cobra. They cried like babies, and Jia was suspended from school for her role in the Gochujang Caper, as she liked to call it. She was in a Nancy Drew phase.

Her mother had been embarrassed, her father amused. *Chal haesuh*, he’d said under his breath as he’d squeezed her shoulder. *Good job*. Then he’d offered her a single, emphatic nod. Like she’d handled her shit and he didn’t have to worry about her anymore. Her mother had whirled on him, Korean

words flying from her lips. A litany on the importance of decorum and good character and setting a proper example and on and on and on.

Not that Jia's punishment mattered. There would never be a minute of any day when it was not worth it just to recall the memory of their swollen faces, snot dribbling down their chins as one of them wailed for his mommy.

But no, that occasion wasn't the beginning.

Nor was it the night Jia's grandfather died of a heart attack when she was thirteen. She had been the first to know he'd left this world for the next. Why? Because Harabugi's ghost had come to tell her—in a calm, rational manner—that it was up to her now to make sense of this mess.

In retrospect, Jia supposed that night was as good as any to call a beginning.

Still, that was not quite it.

The beginning for Jia Song was a January in the early aughts, the day Alexandra Niarchos came into the Song family's Lower East Side bodega carrying an Hermès Birkin bag.

At the time, Lexi Niarchos ruled over Manhattan's social scene, her bladed cheeks and glossy lips framed by that season's most coveted style of bedhead. The young socialite's white teeth and huge Oliver Peoples sunglasses gleamed from the pages of the gossip columns and fashion magazines fifteen-year-old Jia devoured.

But Jia was unprepared for the impression this chance meeting with Lexi Niarchos would leave on her. That lone interaction of no more than three minutes would alter the course of her life.

It was freezing that January morning. Cold in a city kind of way. Bracing and metallic, the chill rumbling around iron bars and whistling through steel grates. It was still dark outside, smoke and radiator exhaust unfurling against the sky. Jia had decided to go with her mother to work so that she could study for her biology exam later that day. When the brass bell chimed above the door to their bodega, Jia barely glanced up from where she sat beside the cash register, her textbook resting on her lap. From the tiny stockroom, the faint strains of her mother's endless argument with Medicare



over Halmunni's insulin harmonized with the Korean drama playing on their ancient tube television behind Jia to form a twisted symphony. A fucked-up soundtrack for their exceptionally ordinary life.

A strange scent wound through Jia's nostrils. The scent of oiled leather. Something expensive and *extraordinary*, like polished hunting boots at Balmoral Castle. It mingled with the faint perfume of rose petals and melting sugar. Jia looked up just as Lexi Niarchos plunked down a large tan bag on the cracked Formica countertop. Lexi's French-tipped fingernails gleamed as she twisted open her glass bottle of green tea with a loud *pop*.

Jia couldn't speak. Couldn't muster a blink.

It wasn't the canary yellow diamond on Lexi Niarchos's ring finger, which meant her latest Greek shipping heir beau had *finally* bitten the bullet after an interminable eleven months. Nor was it Lexi's theatrical fur coat, dangling from one shoulder as she stood before Jia with a blasé expression, as if this were not the most ridiculous thing to happen to Jia in her entire life.

In fact, it wasn't even that Lexi Niarchos had deigned to grace the Song family's bodega on her way to Teterboro or wherever the fuck she was going at 6:30 a.m. on a Tuesday in full makeup and a floor-length chinchilla coat. It wasn't this celebrity that managed to suck the air out of the tiny space and narrow everything around Jia to a single, solitary focus, like a missile homing beacon.

Signal locked. Loaded. Ready to fire.

It was the Most Beautiful Bag in the World.

Jia had never seen anything like it. Smooth caramel. Immaculate white stitching with gold embellishments. Encased in a halo of gilded light. Embossed by the Midas touch itself.

*Hermès.*

One side of Lexi's glossy lips kicked up. She dropped a stack of bridal magazines in front of Jia and raised her eyebrows. "Don't forget the tea, hon," she said, wagging the bottle between her fingers before taking an unhurried sip.

In slow-moving horror, Jia watched the condensation from the bottle drip toward the Most Beautiful Bag in the World. It landed on the tan leather, darkening the caramel as if it were blood seeping from an open wound.

Jia screamed.

Lexi startled, then laughed, the sound filled with air and ease. “Holy shit, you scared me.” Her canary diamond flashed around the bodega, prisms bouncing off the plastic-wrapped cigarettes and carefully arranged packs of gum. “Don’t worry, it’s Barenia leather. It’s okay if it gets wet. In fact, they say Birkins only get better with age. Then they really begin to tell their own story.” Another round of airy laughter flitted through the bodega, like its own inside joke. “Isn’t that great?”

It sounded like total bullshit. Under normal circumstances, Jia would have gathered every detail of this encounter to share with her best friends, Nidhi and Elisa, to be analyzed and dissected like a tarot reading, so that they might laugh and mock Lexi Niarchos into the wee hours of the morning over their customary bowl of ramyun and dumplings.

But that damn bag. It possessed some kind of dark magic, like Snow White’s apple or Sleeping Beauty’s spindle. And just like those foolish princesses, Jia felt herself lured into a glittering spiderweb.

As Jia rang up Lexi’s purchases, she could not take her eyes off the Birkin. The smell of Barenia leather intoxicated her, beckoning her closer with the promise of a story yet to be told. Any story.

Her story, perhaps.

Long after Lexi Niarchos glided out of the bodega into the early dawn light, Jia sat immobile on her stool.

For years, she’d admired people with nice things. Envied them. Mocked them, even. Once or twice, she’d considered saving up money to buy herself or her mother something expensive. Last year, she’d found a tester bottle of Chanel Chance at an outlet mall in New Jersey and had bought it for her mother, who’d promptly declared the scent too overpowering. So Jia took it and saved it for special occasions. Whenever she wore it, she felt herself

standing a little taller, as if that single spray of perfume were a kind of armor or an invisible shield.

She laughed to herself. Then she stared at the words of her biology textbook until they swam.

Why not her? Why should only the Lexi Niarchoses of the world know what it felt like to glide through life with beautiful things and invisible shields?

With bags that told their own stories.

Jia remembered her father the day of the Gochujang Caper. His single, emphatic nod. Like she had handled her shit. Her harabugi's glistening eyes as his ghost had prophesied that it was up to her now to make sense of this mess.

The story of that Hermès bag—and all it meant—promised a future where Jia Song took care of everything and no one would need to worry about her. A future beyond the walls of this bodega.

A future kissed by the Midas touch.

# CAVEAT EMPTOR

Now for a brief interlude.

This author—who, alas, is not as charming as Jia Song and wishes to remain anonymous because of unresolved legal proceedings—asks for your indulgence while we step forward some twenty-odd years. Take a deep breath. In through the nose, out through the mouth. Settle in for the journey.

At your leisure, please select your favorite piece of classical music. Let its melody fill your mind and ease your body into a deeper sense of relaxation. Perhaps the song you’ve chosen is the lovely “Berceuse and Finale” from Stravinsky’s *L’oiseau de feu*. Or Debussy’s “Clair de lune,” the piano chords soft and luminous, like snow falling against a night sky. For those inclined to the melancholic, the adagietto from Mahler’s Symphony No. 5 might be more in keeping with your sensibilities.

And if your medicine of choice is chaos? This author is not one to offer judgment.

Rage against that machine.

★ ★ ★

There is an art to buying a Birkin.

In all seriousness. Take a bite of the apple. Touch the spindle.

It's a whole new world.

Purchasing a brand-new Birkin is not as simple as clicking a “Buy” button or walking into any Hermès boutique and flourishing a black Amex like a magic wand.

Those in the know understand that it can take years of networking and thousands of dollars before any Birkin—much less a specific type of leather and color combination—is offered to even the most well-heeled buyer.

Ludicrous, non? After all, the customer is always right, and money talks. Alas, not in a world where purses appreciate at a greater rate than gold. Yes, it's true. With an average annual return of more than 14 percent over the last thirty years, a well-kept Birkin is a better investment than actual gold. Indeed, a serious argument can even be made that Birkins perform better than the stock market. Impossible, you say?

Should we step into the ring and trade factual blows, mon ami?

Another day, perhaps. Another dollar.

First and foremost, a potential purchaser must choose a physical store. This might seem preposterous, but nothing about buying an upward-of-five-figures handbag should come as a surprise. The store's location is of immense importance. Certain boutiques receive prime selections befitting their clientele and allure. Dubai, for instance. Until humans wise up or Mother Nature decides to chew us up and spit us out, oil money will forever be en vogue. Seoul, Tokyo, Beijing, and Singapore, of course. Asian wealth epitomizes the ideal mix of old and new. Elegant with a dash of outrageous. Paris, sans question, for Paris is never a question. Madison Avenue, naturally. These are places where money not only talks but sings with unmistakable gusto.

Alas, popular locations such as these can be double-edged swords. The best sales associates—SAs, as they are known in common parlance—have handfuls of top-tier, cutthroat clients. Husbands and wives and assistants to wealthy power brokers and celebrities, itching for their next Himalaya Niloticus crocodile fix.

It's simple economics. By keeping the tightest of reins on their supply, Hermès controls global demand like a gifted dominatrix. A small allotment of so-called quota bags is offered to stores and then filtered to the salivating masses. Many Birkin collectors swear that boutiques in less-frequented locales are the perfect place to score a coveted quota bag, such as a Birkin or a Kelly. Others claim the best way to gain access is through a well-established relationship with an SA.

And the secondary market? That would necessitate a chapter all its own.

Suffice it to say: caveat emptor on all counts.

Buyer, beware.



# FIREBREATHER

“Are you sure it’s a Birkin 30 in Barenia Faubourg? You know I’m not interested in another—” Before she could finish her sentence, Jia Song’s wet snow boots slid across the slick granite floor of the skyscraper housing Whitman Volker, one of Manhattan’s most prestigious law firms. The metal art installation flashed into view above her, a thousand scalelike discs soughing on silk strings like whispered threats. *Hic sunt dracones.*

*Here be dragons.*

“Fuck.” Jia braced herself for the humiliation of a fall. First thing at work. On a Friday.

Just in time, the tip of her umbrella struck the floor, catching her on a precipice. The second she managed to steady herself and regain her composure, her phone slipped from her grasp, clattering to the granite in staccato bursts of sound. Jia squeezed her eyes shut, her thoughts pounding in her skull. The champagne. Richard. Everything about last night.

Regret was a stale cracker on her tongue. Salty. Dry. Unsatisfying.

“Jia?” the muffled voice of her SA, Anka, cried out in the distance. “Are you all right?”

Cold wind gusted at Jia’s back, the revolving doors behind her hissing.

“Jia Song.” This time the voice was louder. Just over her shoulder.

She spun around, recognition flushing her skin. “Mr. Volker?”

Benjamin Volker. The biggest, baddest fire-breather of them all.

What was her firm's managing partner doing at work so early on a Friday?

Benjamin Volker's weathered features crinkled at the edges. Ten years ago, he would have been a silver fox. Now he'd aged into that perfect blend of powerful and wise. Gandalf in a three-piece suit. Zegna. Always Zegna. "Here before seven," he said. "Good to see that making partner hasn't gotten to your head yet."

"*Junior* partner." It wouldn't hurt for Ben Volker to know Jia was hungry for more.

"With your work ethic, I have no doubt you'll make senior partner one day." His polished brogues resumed their strides across the gleaming granite. Unlike Jia—who'd been a public-transit peasant since moving to Brooklyn seven years ago—he'd been dropped off outside the revolving doors by a chauffeured Maybach. Jia wondered if Ben had ever worn boots to trudge through the grimy snow while carrying his good shoes to work.

She doubted it.

"Hope you have a great day, Mr. Volker," she called after him, grimacing as the words escaped her mouth. Trite. Insipid. Worst of all, forgettable.

Ben paused, then turned back toward her. "Pardon the"—he *almost* smirked—"impolitic question, but your family is Korean, correct? Candace thought they might be Japanese, but I'm fairly certain you're Korean."

"Yes." Jia kept her quip in check. "We're—I'm—Korean American." She wouldn't waste another chance to impress him. Besides, she'd learned the hard way that lighthearted jokes about microaggressions didn't land well on the overlords.

"Do you speak Korean?"

"Er ... yes. But I'm more comfortable in English. I can understand everything that's said to me in Korean and can converse well enough to get by, but from a business standpoint, I"—Jia wanted to fold in on herself, as if she were a note being tucked into an envelope—"prefer English." Such a shit time for honesty.

Ben Volker nodded once, his head canting to the left like it was hinging on a decision. A bubble of eagerness gathered in Jia's throat. She swallowed it, hating how much being a middle child had screwed her for life. A people pleaser, they called it. The human equivalent of a goddamned labradoodle.

"I believe I have a client for you." Ben nodded again, his decision made. "It would be a favor to me, as this is a referral from a personal friend."

The bubble threatened to burst in Jia's throat. "Of course."

"Clear your desk and report directly to me. Pass your current caseload on to a few first years." He paused a moment in thought. "Tell Kim to help you dole out the work."

She mirrored his crisp nod. Keep it simple. Like one of the guys.

"Good. Come to the conference room beside my office at nine. I'll be along soon after."

"Yes, Mr. Volker."

"Ben," he corrected. "In the meantime, I want you to read everything you can on the family of Chilsoo 'Seven' Park. They live in Lenox Hill on Park Avenue, and they own a cosmetics company called Mirae."

"I will." Jia refrained from offering him a firm handshake. "Thank you, Ben."

Without another word, Benjamin Volker continued toward the elevator bank, leaving Jia frozen in his wake.

A personal favor to the firm's managing partner. A chance to further distinguish herself from the pack of hungry wolves at her firm. To become the kind of awe-inspiring attorney Jia had always dreamed of being. A vested senior partner, sharing in the profits. Whitman Volker's next Emily Bhatia, the youngest senior partner in the firm's sixty-year history, with the highest billables for the last four years running. Emily Bhatia, who'd never given Jia more than a passing glance, despite Jia's countless attempts to garner her attention.

Never mind the celebratory champagne hangover and the visceral memory of Richard's pale backside as he snored in Jia's bed this morning. A lesson she still refused to learn.

Regret was the last thing on her mind now.

Her first official day as a junior partner at Whitman Volker, Jia Song was shedding the lizard skin of her former life—one of M&A drudgery and black holes of legal minutiae—to become something bigger and badder.

A fire-breather in her own right.

She glanced up at the ceiling's flashing scales once more, refraining from raising her right fist to the sky in triumph.

*Hic sunt dracones.*

"Jia Song!" a muffled voice shouted with exasperation from beside her foot.

"Jesus!" Jia stooped for her long-forgotten phone. "Anka, I'm so sorry. Now, about that Birkin. Are you sure it's a Barenia Faubourg with gold hardware? And what size is it, again?" She resumed her walk toward the elevator bank. "I can be there tomorrow."

★ ★ ★

Mirae. The Korean word for future.

Jia liked it. It sounded hopeful. A tad optimistic, with just the right dash of ego.

As far as stories went, the tale of Mirae epitomized the sort of American Dream that resonated in the ears of immigrants around the world.

But Jia knew there was a sinister underbelly to many American Dreams. She'd been there in the nineties when the only lenders who would give her parents reasonable lines of credit for their bodega had been ones who looked like them. She'd stood firm when a roofing company had accosted her mother for payment, trying to blame Umma's "bad English" for their poor bookkeeping. In 1998, her father's cousin in Queens had been beaten by her ex-husband. The police had done nothing, despite numerous recorded incidents of abuse. In one of the reports teenage Jia had read in secret at night, she'd seen an offhand comment about it being "difficult to understand the victim." As if it were a challenge to interpret the meaning behind a black

eye, a fractured nose, and a broken jaw. Her father's cousin and kids had slept on the floor of the Songs' apartment for two months until the rest of the community found a place for them.

Jia had witnessed firsthand the struggles her family had experienced with their business. The constant worries about making payroll and the endless supply chain issues and broken refrigeration units with thousand-dollar parts and indecipherable inspection notices and harebrained schemes to sell Spam kimbap and Halmunni's kalbi sauce under the table in an attempt to become New York's Next Big Thing.

Three months ago, a white man had come into their bodega in the middle of the afternoon carrying nothing but a bat. Without warning, he'd started trashing the shelves and shouting racial epithets at Jia's father and their part-time employee, Yung Hee. Her father had defended them with a box cutter until the Syrian florist across the way could call for the police. The man was carted away in handcuffs and sentenced to a year in a mental rehabilitation facility. His attorney claimed he'd suffered a psychotic break after Yung Hee had ended their relationship.

He was released from the facility two months later.

The Syrian florist, Amna, had *tsked* when she heard. "The more things change, the more they don't," she'd said to Jia.

Jia wondered what the underbelly of Mirae's fairy tale looked like.

On the silvery surface, Mirae's story began in the early eighties as Mirae Dry Cleaning with just two employees, Chilsoo and Jeeyun Park, the son of a fishmonger and the daughter of a haenyeo, one of South Korea's famed diving women. Seven and Jenny, as they were known to their American friends, had immigrated to Flushing, Queens, and started with a single dry cleaner, which had become two and then five, all within a handful of years. In the midst of building an empire, they managed to have three children: first twin girls and then a boy. All three were now in their thirties, like Jia and her brothers.

Seven had a head for business, while Jenny proved excellent at managing the day-to-day affairs. Together they parlayed their success into nail salons

in Queens, followed by hair salons and spas in Manhattan. In the midnineties, they created a company that began selling Korean beauty products by mail, the first of its kind, complete with proper catalogs catering to Western consumers. No more of the indecipherable English translations that had made teenage Jia cringe. Jenny made sure to hire workers fluent in both Korean and English, which opened their fledgling online business to the world of global commerce. When the Hallyu wave crested, Jenny and Seven were poised at the exact right place and time, their website brimming with the best in Korean beauty.

Conservative estimates now valued Mirae at almost a billion dollars.

Mirae. The future. One of power and promise, even for Korean immigrants who'd arrived on the shores of America unable to speak a word of English, with only four hundred dollars to their names.

The question of what the future might hold was something that had consumed Jia from the age of thirteen, the year her grandfather had put her in charge of their family's destiny. An honor, of course, but also a lofty responsibility for a young girl with Jonathan Taylor Thomas posters and Baby-Sitters Club paperbacks strewn across her bedroom floor.

It wasn't that Jia had some sixth sense-ish ability to speak to the dead. This was a very specific, onetime occurrence. Her grandfather's ghost had sought her out, probably because he and Jia had always shared a special connection, like their passion for late-night Oreos with crunchy peanut butter or the way they both shuddered at the sound of someone eating a banana. As if their souls had been aligned from the beginning.

It happened on a blustery fall night. Jia woke from a deep sleep with a start. Bare tree branches scratched at her window, hail plinking against the roof. Lightning cut across the purple sky, followed by a crackle of thunder.

It was then that she saw him sitting there, at the foot of her bed.

"Harabugi?" she said. "What are you doing?" Jia should have been frightened. After all, he was a ghost, and ghosts were supposed to be scary. But she wasn't afraid. Maybe it was because Harabugi didn't look different.