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# The Gangster Princess of Beverly Hills

Heiress, actress, singer, model – Lisette Lee wanted everyone to think she had it all, but beneath the bling were secrets, lies and private jets filled with weed. By Sabrina Rubin Erdely

‘**W**HAT’S GOING ON HERE? I’M A *MODEL*,’ LISETTE Lee shouted, flinging open the door of her Escalade and assuming her most indignant expression. Her Chanel heels clicked on the tarmac, police lights flashed and sirens blared, as she faced down federal agents swarming in with guns drawn. Behind Lee, the two other cars in her convoy – a van and a Suburban – had also halted, its passengers emerging with their hands in the air.

The agents who had been waiting for her at the Columbus, Ohio, airport regarded Lee with wariness and curiosity, taking in her expensive-tart look – false lashes, lavender eye shadow, tight black pants, lace-trimmed fuchsia satin camisole – and imper-

ILLUSTRATION BY SEAN McCABE

ious demeanor, all befitting a woman who had just arrived from Los Angeles via a Gulfstream jet now idling in the twilight.

There was also the Hollywood-worthy entourage: a six-foot-nine, 300-pound bodyguard; and two personal assistants, one a 24-year-old woman in a prim blouse and pencil skirt, the other a tall, dark-haired man in a sports jacket whom agents had earlier watched press a lingering kiss on Lee's pouty lips.

From the moment they touched down minutes ago, the group had been in motion, hurrying down the jetway to unload their cargo: 13 huge suitcases so heavy that the two men had struggled to carry them, even the big guy. When confronted by the agents, Lee impatiently explained that she was bringing supplies to a horse farm. Before the night was over she would amend her story, confessing she'd been given \$60,000 in expenses for the trip, and while she didn't know *what* she was transporting in those suitcases, she blithely figured it had to do with "weapons and money laundering or something."

Lee would go on to tell federal authorities a lot of things about herself: that she was a famous Korean pop star as well as the heiress to the Samsung electronics fortune; she was so emphatic on this last point that on police paperwork agents listed "heiress" as her occupation. Back at home in L.A., Lee called herself the "Korean Paris Hilton" and played the part of the spoiled socialite, with two Bentleys, a purse-size lap dog and, especially, her commanding, petulant personality that kept her posse of sycophants in check. It was as though Lisette Lee had studied some Beverly Hills heiress's handbook: how to dress, how to behave, how to run hot and cold to keep people in her thrall – in short, how to be a modern celebrity. But all of that would begin to unravel – amid the crowd and confusion on the Columbus tarmac that June 2010 evening – once a drug-sniffing German shepherd padded over to the van and sat down, signaling a hit.

Agents threw open the van doors. Inside the suitcases were more than 500 pounds of marijuana in shrink-wrapped bricks. In Lee's crocodile purse were three cellphones, \$6,500 in cash, a baggie of cocaine and a hotel notepad scrawled with weights and purchase prices totaling \$300,000: a drug ledger.

The Drug Enforcement Administration would ultimately uncover the scope of Lee's trafficking operation, estimating that in just eight months she and six co-conspirators moved 7,000 pounds of weed from California to Ohio, pocketing \$3 mil-

lion in profits. Incredibly, they'd pulled it off in plain sight. "It was all pretty elaborate," says Tony Marotta, DEA assistant special agent in charge of Ohio, amazed at the plot's brazenness. "Look at the way she did it – she came in here like a queen! It's like there was something romantic about it in her mind. The whole thing is bizarre." The most baffling part, however, was the mysterious figure standing at this nexus of glamour, thugs and drugs. When later that night one of the DEA agents informed her that she was under arrest, Lee looked dumbfounded.

"But what will I *wear* in jail?" she asked.

**I**T HAD ALL BEGUN SO INNOCENTLY four years earlier, in 2006, with two young women on a giddy blind girl-date. Twenty-year-old Meili Cady had only just met the young woman whose opulent \$1.2 million West Hollywood apartment she was now sitting in, sipping vodka while snuggled into the cream-colored couch, but it was already clear their friendship was written in the stars. At least, that's what Lee was telling her.

## WHEN DEA AGENTS TOLD HER THAT SHE WAS UNDER ARREST, A DUMBFUNDED LEE ASKED, "BUT WHAT WILL I WEAR IN JAIL?"

"You're everything Alex told me and so much more," Lee said. "I just know we're going to be best friends."

Cady gazed fondly back at Lee, who looked every inch the haughty heiress she expected – in purplish contacts, eyebrows waxed to tapered arches and a mole penciled onto one flawless cheek. They'd been introduced by a mutual acquaintance who'd told Cady that his longtime friend Lee was bored of the rich, jaded brats with whom she typically kept company, and was seeking "a breath of fresh air."

Cady was an aspiring actress fresh from the small town of Bremerton, Washington – a pretty, friendly and goofy oversharer. "He thought it could be a yin-and-yang friendship," she says. At first Cady was skeptical; she'd seen Lee's MySpace page, decorated with luxury cars, jewels and unsmiling headshots, and figured they had little in common. But Cady was lonely. Since moving to L.A. a year earlier, she'd encountered little but the pain of fruitless auditions. She agreed to see Lee.

When they met that day, Cady was relieved. Lee, in a form-fitting velour sweat-suit, greeted her with a hug. The girls spent the afternoon browsing funky shops along Melrose and instantly opened up to

each other. Speaking with rapid-fire confidence, Lee told Cady all about her much older live-in boyfriend, Christian Navarro, a dashing wine entrepreneur nicknamed "the sommelier to the stars," who curated the cellars of Hollywood celebrities. Lee said she was an heiress to Samsung on her mother's side, and that her father, whose family founded Sony, had made a fortune in casinos. Lee's pedigree didn't stop there. She said she'd gone to Harvard, where there were statues in her family's honor, and attended a London finishing school. Before that, she'd been enrolled at the tony L.A. prep school Buckley, where Lee and her mean-girl friends – "my army of skanks," she called them – had taunted schoolmate Paris Hilton, who'd begged for her friendship. But mostly she talked about how she had grown disgusted with her glamorous life stocked with privileged phonies, like that "fat Armenian" Kim Kardashian.

Cady and Lee became remarkably tight in a short time span, their friendship blossoming over their cocktail hours in Lee's condo. Lee was particular about setting the terms of their bonding. She insisted

the two friends seal themselves away with no distractions – Cady's cellphone turned off and no music or TV playing; even the curtains were drawn. "I'm a vampire," Lee joked. Cady was flattered by Lee's jealous attention. In that safe space, they talked and laughed for hours, getting silly – Cady cracking jokes and doing impressions, Lee deadpanning quotes from her favorite movie, *Scarface* – and confiding every thought and feeling, including their affection for each other. "I love you so much. I'm so glad we're best friends," they drunkenly effused. Lee told Cady she wanted to someday be the godmother to Cady's children.

Looking back, Cady can't believe how easily Lee reeled her in – and how she fell for it. "We're so different that it makes us special," Lee told her. "We can understand each other in ways that other people can't. You're so nice and friendly, but I know you're smart," she added. "And people think I'm a bitch, but you know I'm a good person. And that's our bond." Cady beamed. She was grateful to have finally met someone genuine in L.A.

The persona Lee unleashed upon the wider world, however, was that of a contemptuous goddess primed for worship. Take the way, a few months before meet-

Contributing editor SABRINA RUBIN ERDELY wrote "School of Hate: One Town's War on Gay Teens" in *RS 1150*.

OPENING SPREAD: PORTRAIT IN ILLUSTRATION COURTESY OF LISETTE LEE



### BREAKING BAD

Lisette Lee, who claims to be a Samsung heiress and called herself the “Korean Paris Hilton,” was busted for running an elaborate pot smuggling ring.

ing Cady, Lee appeared on the set of the low-budget indie film *The Doorman*, in which she made a cameo as herself (“Lisette Lee, model-socialite”). Lee was pure spectacle from the moment she arrived, with a fur coat and Chanel purse draped over her arm, her enormous bodyguard Frankie Edwards by her side. The film crew was prepared to cater to a VIP – everyone was whispering *Samsung* – and treated her with deference as they filmed her visiting a Mercedes dealership, shopping along Rodeo Drive and dropping by her boyfriend’s high-end wine shop. “She had this sense about her that she was spoiled and in charge,” remembers director Wayne Price. Finally, they wrapped at a Holmby Hills mansion, and everyone packed to leave. Lee, however, was eyeing her fellow castmate, 35-year-old aspiring actor Scott Brian Cooper. “I’m staying,” she instructed her bodyguard. “You can go home now.” The crew scurried out. Lee and Cooper climbed into bed.

“She was a cocktease,” says Cooper now; to his dismay, they never had sex. And

yet for the next three years he was at her beck and call: “She’s a person with tremendous control over other people. That’s how she got her entertainment.” Cooper was a party boy with a talent for glomming onto L.A.’s wealthier denizens, like oil scion Jason “Gummi Bear” Davis, in whose apartment Cooper lived off and on – and who, coincidentally, Lee said had been a schoolmate of hers at Montclair Prep, another school for the rich and famous she claimed to have attended. Lee flaunted her wealth, driving a fleet of cars including a purple Mercedes, two Bentleys and an Aston Martin. Over sushi dinners followed by coy games of Truth or Dare and cocaine, Lee told Cooper that she lived off of Samsung dividends, and promised him a job at the company someday.

But as much as men were drawn in by Lee’s money and beauty, they were just as entranced by her demands for subservience. And no matter how outrageous her antics, Lee never failed to stun others into submission, as when Cooper introduced her to his friend, record producer Bradley

Spalter, who’d worked with Aaron Neville and the boy band O-Town and was interested in recording her – after all, she’d said she was a *Vogue* model and a pop singer with hit singles in Asia. A handful of people were there to greet Lee as she strutted into Spalter’s studio, her eyes hard as she scanned the group, homing on the biggest presence there: A black, six-foot-three, 400-pound aspiring rapper. She tossed him her keys.

“Nigger, park my car!” she ordered. The room froze, then exploded in laughter.

“This girl’s a star!” exclaimed Spalter. Lee never even cracked a smile.

**L**EE MADE SUCH A STRONG impression that it became easy to overlook certain inconsistencies. Like the fact that Jason Davis didn’t recall her from Montclair Prep. “She said she went to school with me, but I never knew the girl,” Davis says. However, he shrugged it off, explaining, “I don’t start trouble.” Her age was elusive, too. At 25, she passed herself off to most people – including her boyfriend – as 21. Three years later, she’d aged only a single year, telling everyone she was 22. There was also her occasional British accent, which Lee attributed to the influence of her “mum.”

Her name was also shifty. Growing up in Beverly Hills, she’d first been called “Diana,” after the Princess of Wales. But despite any regal aspirations, Diana Lee had failed to make an impression as much more than a smart underachiever. As a teen she’d rebranded herself as “Chantel” before deciding upon the mellifluous, pan-ethnic “Lee Locascio Lee.” Yet Lee still took liberties. Sometimes she went by her modeling name, “Lisette Locascio.” When she was photographed at charity benefits, she was “Lisette Lee Morita.” For a time, she even carried a fake California driver’s license (earning her a 2006 forgery conviction) with the name Lisette Morita, along with a ritzy Bel Air address on Bellagio Road.

“Morita, she said that was her dad’s name,” remembers Cady. “She said he was some kind of gangster.” Lee had dropped that fact casually, using the same nonchalant tone as when Cady once opened the wrong drawer of Lee’s hall table and was shocked to find a gun. “Well, what if someone breaks in? I have expensive stuff,” Lee explained, adding, “Don’t worry, I know how to use it.” (Lee says the gun wasn’t hers.) Although Lee’s glamorous stories didn’t add up, she spun them deftly enough that nobody seemed to catch on, especially Cady. All Cady could see was a young woman who had everything yet still complained of being terribly unhappy.

For one thing, Lee’s love life was a mess. Her relationship with fiance Chris-

tian Navarro was crumbling. Although Navarro was successful, handsome and rich – “good for business,” Lee told Cooper – the pair fought constantly. Navarro sensed their days were numbered. He’d later suggest to the court it was due to their near-two-decade age difference and her wealth. Though he never knew for sure, he figured that the allowance she got from her parents was “very substantial... a lot more than I make.” He was convinced he’d never meet her material needs. Still, he was doing his best – like when she needed help with the down payment on her \$200,000 white Bentley, he paid it for her.

Lee also complained to Cady about her demanding work life, attending Samsung meetings on behalf of her mom. She felt stifled, too, by her overprotective parents, who’d hired a bodyguard to keep her safe, and micromanaged her life; according to three of Lee’s friends, calls were often intercepted by a male voice – the family “valet” – who’d inquire in a Continental accent, “Bellagio Estates, how may I help you?” Given how intrusive her folks were, Cady understood why Lee wasn’t keen on introducing them. One day, though, Lee offered to show Cady her family’s grand Bel Air home. “You can’t come in, but I’ll show you,” Lee said, driving them deep into the hills in her Bentley nicknamed “Diablo” after a Biggie Smalls lyric. The girls stopped at the gates of a sprawling mansion. “Wave!” Lee sang out, saying there were cameras everywhere. Just then, her phone rang. Lee looked rattled, but answered calmly; afterward, she told Cady that it was her family’s house manager demanding to know what she was doing and who was in the car.

While Lee seemed to resent her family’s hawklike attention, she was also eager to drink up their love. The only times Lee seemed genuinely excited was when one parent or another would call and Lee would girlishly cry out, “Mummy!” But, in fact, she was harboring a heavy secret: A dysfunctional family narrative right out of some convoluted art-house film – or as Lee herself wryly called it, “the Asian Cirque du Soleil.”

**L**IKE HER FICTIONAL HERO Tony Montana, Lee maximized her power over those around her. She surrounded herself exclusively with obedient sidekicks and avoided situations where people weren’t prepped to be wowed by her presence, as when Cady once invited her to a party at actor Jeremy Renner’s house: “Does he know who I am?” Lee asked, declining. Cady soon found their relationship shifting from friendship to master and servant as Lee tightened her leash, especially after Cady acquired a boyfriend. Lee made her

break plans at a moment’s notice, scrolled through Cady’s phone “just to see what you’ve been up to,” and bought Cady a three-carat diamond ring, instructing her to display it on her engagement finger – a symbol of the girls’ emotional betrothal.

But the more power Cady ceded, the more Lee treated her with public disdain. “This is my little desperate whore” is how she introduced Cady to Cooper. As for lovesick Cooper, Lee arranged to “accidentally” bump into him while dining at Spago with Navarro, stoking both men’s jealousies. So complete was Lee’s hold that when playing Truth or Dare with Cooper and Cady one night, Lee ordered the two to make out, and they complied without hesitation. “It was cruel,” remembers Cooper, who still ached for Lee’s withheld affections. But no matter how much Lee’s minions toed the line, she wasn’t satisfied.

Then one night in 2009 while partying at Spalter’s house – where Cooper was then living – a new diversion presented itself in the form of a coke-dealer acquaintance of Cooper’s. David Garrett was a laid-back 27-year-old Hispanic street

**W**HEN WE ORIGINALLY got involved, it was purely sexual, you know what I’m saying?”

says Garrett now. Garrett was a grocery-store cashier’s son, a Culver City High School dropout who’d gotten his GED and worked briefly at Home Depot before becoming a full-time drug dealer. Now, here he was, dating the granddaughter to Samsung – someone *famous*, he bragged to a friend. Their relationship seemed like proof that in America, anyone can rise to become a Somebody, so long as he strived hard enough. Garrett was intent upon impressing Lee. He told her he had a supplier who could provide him tons of pot, and that he knew of buyers in Ohio. Lee was interested – way more interested than he expected, he says.

“It was weird, ‘cause you wouldn’t think someone in her position would want to be anywhere near that type of lifestyle,” Garrett says. “But I took from it that maybe she was one of those rich girls that was bored. I think she watched too many movies.”

## LEE SAID SHE HAD GROWN DISGUSTED WITH HER GLAMOROUS LIFE STOCKED WITH PHONIES LIKE THAT “FAT ARMENIAN” KIM KARDASHIAN.

thug with tattoos snaking up his neck and a swagger as easy as his laugh. Before long, the heiress and the dealer were making out. “Go get me a bottle of Grey Goose,” Lee instructed Cooper, throwing \$100 at him. He returned to find Lee and Garrett chatting in a bedroom. He handed her the vodka bottle.

“Keep the change,” she told Cooper and slammed the bedroom door in his face. Their courtship was over.

Cooper stewed for weeks, then yelled at her: “I can’t believe you hooked up with that thug! I’m gonna e-mail Samsung and tell them what their little heiress has been up to!” Soon afterward, according to Cooper, Lee sent a black Escalade to pick him up to hang out. Instead, Cooper says he found himself in the back seat between two tough guys in a headlock, while the driver recited into a phone, “Yes, boss, we have the package.” The goons relieved Cooper of his Rolex, wallet and sneakers before leaving him by the roadside. (Lee denies Cooper’s account: “Anything that comes out of that piehole is seriously damaged.”) That night Cooper got a text from Lee.

*Nobody talks to me like that, it read. Now you see.*

He was wary at the idea of doing business with someone from the straight world, but it seemed too good an opportunity to pass up. From his supplier in Arizona, Garrett could buy weed at \$500 a pound, which would sell in Ohio for at least \$1,000 a pound – a 100 percent profit margin – if only they could figure out a way to transport the pot to the Midwest. Lee’s lavish lifestyle held the answer: They’d use a private jet, which was fast, discreet and would allow them to move so much weight that they’d easily recoup the \$50,000-a-pop chartering cost. But Lee’s participation was key. A *vato* like Garrett would arouse suspicion as lead passenger on a private aircraft, but not Lee, who knew no one questioned her when she acted the part of the entitled star. Lee and Garrett agreed to split their responsibilities, with Garrett overseeing the buying and selling of drugs, and Lee arranging travel logistics, including hiring a staff. She knew just the person to start with.

“I know I’ve been pretty much an abusive friend and taken you for granted. I want to change that,” Lee told Cady. “An opportunity has come up and I’m going to be able to hire you now. Even though you *are* underqualified,” she added, “it’s some-

# THE INNER CIRCLE

A master of deception, Lisette Lee lied and manipulated her friends, confidants and lovers into doing her bidding.



## THE BEST FRIEND

Small-town girl Meili Cady was drawn to the glamorous front Lisette presented, and now finds herself under house arrest for her role in the smuggling ring. "From the definitions I've read of 'sociopath,'" Cady says, "Lisette's picture might as well be on Wikipedia."



### THE WINGMAN

Christopher Cash helped Lee arrange private jets before becoming her boyfriend. Following her patterns of deception, Lee told the ring that he was her assistant, "Richard."



### THE DEALER

David Garrett was a streetwise drug dealer who became Lee's lover and weed connection. "Everything that's come out of her mouth was a lie," he says today.



### THE FIANCE

Christian Navarro, a "sommelier to the stars," was Lee's long-suffering boyfriend – she described the relationship as "good for business." He was not in on the weed deal.



### THE DRIVER

Henry Hernandez worked as a doorman in Lee's building before she seduced and persuaded him to become her chauffeur, helping her look the part of a high roller.



### THE BOY TOY

Hollywood wannabe Scott Cooper fell under Lee's spell. He had no role in the trafficking, but says, "She has tremendous control over people. That's her entertainment."

thing I want to do for you." The put-down glanced off Cady, who was grateful both at the prospect of making money and to still be in the graces of her best friend. She didn't know what the job was, exactly – Lee said Cady would be her traveling "personal assistant," paid \$1,500 per trip – but by now, Cady was so used to relinquishing control that she didn't ask many questions. All she knew was that she'd sometimes be invited out to dinner with Lee and Garrett, then have to wait outside while the cou-

ple discussed "business" in the car. Cady took in stride the fact that Lee had yet another man in her life; Lee also told her she was seeing Leonardo DiCaprio and Channing Tatum. And then there was Navarro, with whom she'd moved into an expensive condo on the supertony Wilshire Corridor. But Lee was already looking for a place of her own, reportedly telling a real-estate agent she was a former law student and a model, e-mailing a photo of herself on the cover of a European edition of *Vogue*.

Lee told the same stories about her social life to her building's doorman, a stocky 22-year-old named Henry Hernandez, who also believed she'd dated soccer god Cristiano Ronaldo. Then again, Hernandez would believe anything Lee said – because *they* were secretly dating too. Hernandez was a gentle, churchgoing soul who'd dropped out of college to work at the Regency Wilshire for lack of funds; to his surprise, Lee had befriended him until the two became romantically involved. It was then Lee suggested that since Hernandez wasn't earning much as a doorman, he should accompany her on a brief trip as her driver, for which she'd pay \$3,000. Hernandez chalked up the fee to her feelings for him, which she'd also shown by giving him a titanium ring, worn on his left hand. He was in love.

By November 2009, the scheme was up and running. Lee took care of the travel plans using a chartered-jet broker, wiring hundreds of thousands of dollars in payment through Cady's pitifully small bank account – something Cady expressed reservations about until Lee shut her up. "Babe, I could throw a stick out the window and hit a girl in the fucking head who'd do this in a second for what you're getting paid," she snapped. "It's fucking insulting when you don't want to work for it."

The day before a "trip," the crew would assemble at Garrett's apartment for "wardrobe," when up to 17 off-brand suitcases would arrive packed with marijuana. They'd added two more people to the roster: Lee's longtime bodyguard, Frank Edwards, 39, who'd later say he always figured himself a prop to pump up Lee's prestige since he never saw any threat from which to protect her; and Young Ko, 36, a friend of Garrett's who'd been laid off from a security company. Lee dubbed the group "Team LL" – as in Lisette Lee. Everyone would head to Van Nuys – the small airport celebrities prefer to LAX for its anonymity – and, hauling the heavy luggage, board a Gulfstream jet. Upon touchdown in Ohio, stretch limos would whisk them to a hotel. A few days later, they'd return to the airport with their suitcases considerably lighter.

As Lee's lackeys rolled onto the tarmac in a luxury-car convoy, they created a convincing illusion of a celebrity's entourage; Lee had expertly costumed them in professional dress – the men in jackets and ties, Cady in glasses with her hair worn up. No one was more convincing than Lee, however. Having cast herself as the diva, she would step out of the car – Tupac blasting from the stereo – in oversize Chanel sunglasses and a fur coat, carrying her Chihuahua and barking orders at everyone. This was more than method acting at its finest. This was the role she was born to play: a true gangster princess. "She want-

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: ALEX MARTINO; COURTESY OF YOUNG AMERICAN ROYALTY; COURTESY OF MEILI CADY; BECKY SAPP/WIREIMAGE; U.S. MARSHALS SERVICE; DEA

ed to be bigger and badder than anybody," remembers Cady.

The more Lee inhabited the role, the harsher she became to those around her. Cady asked Lee to take it easy on them. "I've seen you be so kind, I know you're a good person," Cady encouraged.

"No, I am a *bitch*," Lee snapped. "I shouldn't have to pretend to be something I'm not."

**T**WO TRIPS IN NOVEMBER, two in December, three in January – in no time, Team LL's stage-managed drug runs became routine.

It didn't take long for everyone to figure out what they were transporting, what with the odor of marijuana filling the cabin of the jet. "We need to do something about the fucking smell. This is not safe," Lee complained, after which they habitually stuffed the luggage with scented dryer sheets and doused the bags with Febreze.

Not that Lee openly discussed the contents of those suitcases with her underlings; their willingness to sit and pretend that they weren't sharing an aircraft with a quarter-ton of pot was yet another exercise in Lee's authority. But it was also as though Lee hadn't fully thought out some basic elements of the scheme. Like the flimsy cover story she provided the group: "If anyone asks, we're shooting a music video," she told them, despite having zero film equipment. There was also the element of dramatic play, as when Lee assigned everyone "double-0" code numbers so they could safely refer to one another over the phone; her own number was 007. It was as though Lee was disengaged from the reality of their actions – with no real sense of the risk, or consequences – and instead was focusing her energies upon maintaining her mastery over others. Granted, managing her peons was becoming messier, now that their cargo had become an open secret, spooking everyone, and also given the inconvenient fact that Lee had two lovers as her traveling companions – a challenge even with Lee's considerable skills.

When the truth finally dawned on Cady, around the fourth trip, she panicked: "That's definitely illegal, that's moving drugs! I was a drug trafficker and I had just gotten the news." But she worried she was in too deep to back out. And she was too fearful to discuss the matter with Lee, who had taken a dark turn. On their flights she'd swig Bombay gin from the bottle, sometimes emptying half a liter by the

time they landed. She would fire her employees on a whim so they could prove their loyalty by begging for their jobs back. Everyone was on edge, bracing for Lee to berate them. "She treated people like dogs," remembers Garrett. More ominous were her threats. "I'm gonna bury you," she'd warn anyone who pissed her off. Lee talked about having a hit man on speed dial, of hiring private investigators, tapping everyone's phones, and putting Garrett's condo under video surveillance.

Around the 11th trip, in April 2010, Garrett was through with Team LL. "We had a



### CANNIBUST

The DEA estimated Lee's crew moved 7,000 pounds of weed from L.A. to Ohio, pocketing \$3 million.

bad breakup, but it wasn't personal, more of a falling out on a professional level," he says. "It was a trust issue." Garrett regretted being involved with amateurs. He bailed from the scheme, as did Young Ko. Despite Garrett's departure, however, Lee was determined to continue. She immediately recruited a man she introduced to Team LL as her assistant of six years, "Richard," who joined them on two trips – and, perhaps not coincidentally, also signed on as Lee's newest boyfriend. Second-string lover Hernandez, finding himself unceremoniously dumped, sat in the back of the plane, looking miserably out the window.

In reality, "Richard" was Christopher Cash, a 32-year-old jet broker who'd arranged some of their flights and, having deciphered what they were doing, agreed to join them. He'd actually known Lee for five months. "She had told each one of us to lie about how we knew her," says Cady, who, following instructions, had been telling everyone that she and Lee were childhood friends.

By this time, Cady knew that Lee wasn't everything she seemed. Back in L.A., a

close friend of Cady's who'd grown up wealthy was introduced to Lee at a dinner – one of the rare times Lee met anyone from Cady's world – and told Cady she had doubts whether Lee was really an heiress. "She looks cheap. Her Chanel necklace looks fake. She has no social graces," the friend told Cady. Not long afterward, in Lee's new condo at the Remington, one of the Wilshire Corridor's poshest buildings, Lee showed Cady two new paintings she'd acquired, explaining at length that they were gifts from her mother, and that the artist was a family friend in Paris. Cady was suitably impressed. The following week, Cady saw both pictures for sale at Bed Bath & Beyond.

Cady chose to say nothing. "I loved her, I couldn't believe it was all fake," she remembers. There was another reason Cady remained in denial. If she admitted that Lee was a liar, she explains, "That would open up too many possibilities, like, 'Am I in danger?'" When it came time for another trip, Cady tried to find an excuse to stay behind, but Lee shamed her into going, saying, "I went out on a limb to hire you. If you fuck this up, then good luck to you in life!" Wrung out after all of Lee's emotional beat downs, Cady couldn't see a way out.

Finally, on June 14th, 2010, while the Gulfstream departed Van Nuys for Columbus with its four passengers – Lee, "personal assistant" Cady, boyfriend Cash and bodyguard

Edwards – the DEA in Ohio was fielding a call about the highly suspicious flight. Turns out, Lee didn't realize that she had been assigned the same pilots more than once, and she'd given the same fishy stories to explain the trips. Airport personnel took note that it was the second or third time she claimed to be moving to Columbus from L.A., as well as of the surprising volume and weight of the baggage. By the time the plane landed in Columbus, agents were waiting. And as a DEA agent snapped the cuffs behind Lee's back, her arrogant expression crumpled into one of defeat.

**L**EE'S REAL STORY, WHICH emerged in court, turned out to be, if anything, even stranger and harder to believe than the version she had been telling in L.A., a soap-opera-worthy biography that began with a tale of forbidden love. Lisette was born out of wedlock in Seoul in 1981, with the name Ji Yeun Lee. Family members testified through an interpreter that her mother, Corine Lee, was a daughter of the late

Samsung founder, Byung-Chul Lee, making her a member of one of Korea's richest and most reticent families. Her father's background, however, wasn't so illustrious. Yoshi Morita was a casino mogul; one of Lisette's relatives described him as a "gangster" before clarifying that in Asia, people in the casino business are often referred to this way and Morita is simply a businessman. Complicating matters further, Morita was Japanese, and owing to Korean cultural norms that condemn interracial relationships, marriage wasn't an option for the couple. The baby's very existence would be a stain on the name of the prominent Lees. Lisette was informally adopted by Morita's close friend Bum Geol Lee, a sixth-degree black belt known as "Master Lee," whom Morita had met while they were in martial-arts training together. "He had to look for a friend to take care of his family," Master Lee explained to the court.

Master Lee and his wife, Lauren, took the child to live with them in the States, where Master Lee took up work in Beverly Hills as a private tae kwon do instruc-

tor for film-industry clients, and Lauren was a stay-at-home mom. As Lisette grew, Master Lee sent her not to the costly L.A. private schools she had claimed, but to the local public school, Hawthorne Elementary. After her eighth-grade year, says Lisette from prison in Northern California, he was loath to send her to Beverly High, worrying about drug use there. Instead, seeking to shield Lisette from the corrupting influence of the outside world, he enrolled her in Laurel Springs, a home-schooling program that provides online courses and private tutors for child stars like Hayden Panettiere and Kristen Stewart.

Through it all, Lisette's biological parents remained in the picture, lavishly funding a life of excess. Lisette milked the arrangement for all it was worth: "If I couldn't get something from Master Lee and Lauren, I would run to my mom and dad." Lisette said Morita supported her with cash payments of as much as \$100,000 a month – a figure so astronomical that during a court hearing, discussion erupted over whether it could be a typo. Master Lee would claim the number was closer to \$50,000 annually. Lisette says she traveled the globe as a teen with her family and was spoiled by her birth father, who for her 16th birthday bought

her a Mercedes convertible and a Ferrari 360 Modena Spider. Master Lee didn't approve. "He really thought that was unnecessary," Lisette remembers. Morita's ostentation was undermining the humbler values of Master Lee, whom Lisette describes as virtuous. "Master Lee and my father are yin and yang. My father's the dark one, Master Lee's the light," she says. And as Lisette matured, the two men clashed. Master Lee testified that he threatened he'd only continue caring for Lisette if Morita left the picture altogether. "I was always worried about her," Lee testified. "That's why I just wanted her to have one father and one father only. That's why I told him to stop contacting her."

Lisette Lee, caught in a tug of war between her fathers, had been resolving her daddy issues the same way she'd been handling her love life: She was seeing one behind the other's back. And she was trapped in a classic rich-kid existential crisis. Swaddled with too much money, she was not spending her days in Samsung boardrooms, as she'd led others to believe.

the day before her final drug run. Maybe Lisette was preparing to climb back onto the straight and narrow by stepping into the other role tailor-made for her, and assume the crown of Samsung royalty.

In June 2011, Lisette Lee faced a Columbus federal judge, having finally thrown in the towel with a guilty plea. "I believe, Ms. Lee, that you were naive," said Judge Algenon Marbley. He revealed that her psychological evaluation had described her as having a significant "narcissistic dimension," which had underscored her crimes. "You knew it was wrong, but there was a certain fascination," the judge mused. "It almost appears that you believed that you were playing a role." He sentenced her to six years.

There was just one more wrinkle. As word of the Samsung-heiress-turned-drug-trafficker splashed across newspapers around the world, the Samsung corporation had something to say on the matter. They denounced the press release found in Lee's apartment as a forgery. Lee never worked for Samsung; on the witness stand, even her own family denied she was an employee. And Samsung dropped another bombshell, via a statement: "Lisette Lee is not an heirless of Samsung and is not a member of Samsung's Lee family."

## "I THINK OF MEN AS COMMODITIES," LEE SAYS. "AND THE PRETENSES I GIVE PEOPLE HAVE TO DO WITH HOW MUCH VALUE I GIVE THEM."

OF ALL THE STRIKING things about meeting Lee, the greatest surprise is the thick, affected British accent she's using today. "This whole 'I was trying to create an identity' – I don't know who in their right mind wants to create an identity as a drug *traahn* sport mule," she says, as she recalls the courtroom strategy presented by her lawyers, who she tells me were "bumblefuck incompetents." "So let's nix that."

At federal prison in Dublin, California, wearing regulation blues that match her colored contact lenses, Lisette Lee would like to set a thing or two straight. But getting a straight answer out of Lee is difficult. Leaning forward in her chair, her heavily made-up eyes staring unwaveringly into my own, she's a slippery talker with a gift for open-ended answers, lending themselves to misinterpretation in ways that burnish her mythology. Like when she's sifting through a stack of photos she's brought as proof of her modeling career – speaking vaguely of "fashion houses," a "campaign" and an "ad-vert-isement" for a Korean cosmetics company – and I interrupt to ask about one picture.

"That was actually for a promo," Lee says.

A promo for...

We look at each other for a beat.

"You know, a promo for – my portfolio." She looks momentarily deflated.

Lee now reluctantly admits that she never went to Harvard, [Cont. on 84]



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## GANGSTER PRINCESS

[Cont. from 73] or Buckley, or Montclair Prep, and that she was never on the cover of *Vogue*. But like all great liars, Lee insists she never *really* lied to anyone. If while cultivating her mystique she happened to omit certain truths, and the people around her happened to fill in the gaps with their own imaginative leaps, that was the fault of their own stupidity. She couldn't be bothered correcting such people, since they weren't worth the effort. "You have to understand that a lot of the pretenses that I give out to different people have a lot to do with how much value I give them," she says. And yes, fine, she may have told an occasional whopper, but that was to fend off people's intrusive curiosities. Lee says her proclivity to stretch the truth is due to "carelessness" – literally, she couldn't care less. She is simply too indifferent about others to be honest with them. Though branded a socialite, Lee has practically no friends.

"I never really got along well with girls, so I always liked boys better," she says, although boys don't rate too highly either: "I think of men kind of like a commodity." That Lee evaluates others strictly through the lens of their usefulness is key to understanding her otherwise senseless lies. Utterly self-absorbed, as narcissists are, and hollow of empathy, Lee seems to only know how to further her own needs. And her singular desire was to seal herself in an echo chamber of adoration. Her acolytes existed to further that vain fantasy; in all other respects, they were expendable. Just ask the trail of manipulated people whom Lee left in her wake, still trying to make sense of what happened – especially her co-conspirators, who all pleaded guilty and were given prison time.

"When you sit in this place and have all this time to think, it just...man," says David Garrett from prison, where he's serving 10 years. "I've come to find out that everything that's come out of her mouth was a lie." Frank Edwards, Young Ko and Chris Cash got one, three and four years, respectively. Henry Hernandez got nine months in prison followed by nine months in home detention; when he and Cady glimpsed each other in court, they collapsed, crying in each other's arms, with Hernandez whispering, "She fucked us up." Cady, who after a month in prison is spending a year under house arrest, is distraught over the notion that her friend turned out to be a cipher who lied about virtually everything. "From the definitions I've read of 'sociopath,'" Cady says, "her picture might as well be on Wikipedia."

Lee sees her own story through a different prism. Because in blending fantasy with reality to script her own narrative, she in many ways resembles any other Hollywood story. "People make them-

selves up to be whatever they want to be, especially in Los Angeles," Christian Navarro pointed out on the witness stand. "It's the city of dreams." In a place where everyone re-creates themselves anew – new names, new noses, new backstories – and little is expected to be authentic, Lee's reinvention isn't all that different from the rest. In her mind, she simply took her game of pretend a few steps farther.

The ride isn't over yet. In a recently filed 40-page motion asking that her sentence be vacated or reduced, Lee claims that, far from being a leader of a drug conspiracy, she was an unwilling victim. She says she was forced into the plot by Garrett, who she didn't realize was a drug dealer until it was too late; that he threatened her until she was afraid not to cooperate. The motion adds that Lee's delicate upbringing made her ill-equipped to handle Garrett, "as Lee is an Asian heiress."

Yes, an heiress – because Lee's not about to let someone else dictate her story. Despite Samsung's denial, Lee insists, her gaze drilling into mine, that internally the company not only acknowledges her lineage but gives her star treatment. (She doesn't explain why Samsung would say otherwise, although Cooper suggests it's to avoid bad publicity: "They can't admit to their little illegitimate heiress.") Similarly, Lee also contends that she did grow up in Bel Air, even though Master Lee reported to pretrial services that their long-time residence was actually a first-floor apartment on a busy Beverly Hills street – a claim supported by residential records. Lee would love to be more specific in clarifying that point, but needs to exercise discretion, owing to the "cloak and dagger" nature of her father's business, which she refuses to discuss.

The only truths that continue to matter to Lisette Lee are the ones she cultivates. She expects her prison sentence to be shortened by a judge any day now. When she's free again, she plans to follow her father into the casino business. She also plans to marry Navarro, to whom she's still "kind of" engaged, although their wedding plans have been "put on abeyance." (Navarro responds, "We're not together. We have no relationship other than I'm a very good friend and I wish her well.") Until then, Lee is making the best of her incarceration, where she laddles meals onto inmates' trays while wearing a hairnet – the first job she's ever had. She's trying to think of prison as a "low-end boarding school." Lee tells me she's having a great time. "A.M.s are spent with iced cappuccinos, walking the track and discussing politics. P.M.s are 'mocktail hour,'" she writes in an e-mail, assuring me that her new inmate friends are all A-listers. "I am utilizing this 'vacation' at the government resort as a learning experience, and polishing up my tennis and yoga. I'm truly loving it." ©