

STEALING CINDERELLA

HOW I BECAME AN
INTERNATIONAL FUGITIVE FOR LOVE

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PREVIEW 16

The taxi let me out on a street lined with little carts. Each was tended by an *ajuma* in black polyester selling some kind of Korean street food: deep-fried fish cakes on sticks, rolls of *gimbap*, and paper cones of wok-fried silkworms called *bundaegi*. Major Byun had given me the address of a restaurant, which at eleven at night still had a decent crowd.

I had pleaded on grounds of genetic weakness to forgo soju and drink beer instead. He had promised that he would do so if I showed up.

I scanned the room for him but saw no Korean Air Force uniform. Major Byun, now dressed in civilian clothes, found me instead. “Mark! Mark!” he called.

Three other men sat with him in short black vinyl lounge chairs, all dressed in business casual clothes in patterns of black and brown, all middle-aged. There were beer bottles on

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the table. Hopefully they'd stick to beer all night. They waved at the waiter and got him to bring me a glass.

Since they were all clearly older than I was, I could immediately tell that my assigned place was at the bottom of the hierarchy. I shook hands with each as he introduced them, always taking a single hand with both of mine. He slurred their Korean names and I didn't catch any of them, but it didn't matter much when I could only speak through Major Byun, anyway.

"He is owner of this restaurant," Major Byun said of the first one. "He have one wife and one girlfriend." He introduced the next one, who he said had a delivery company, and added, "He have one wife and two girlfriend, like me." His voice changed in tone as he introduced the third friend, which seemed to indicate particular admiration or awe on Major Byun's part. Perhaps this guy was merely the eldest of the group, but the major showed more deference around this last one than he had with the others. "He own grocery store—no! Supermarket. He own supermarket."

"Does he have a girlfriend, too?" I asked. Since to these guys it was so prestigious, asking seemed the polite thing to do.

"For him is different," Major Byun said. "He find old women." The major's face contorted into hideous disgust and he raised his fingers up by his face as if they were claws. "Ugly. Nobody want them. But he say, 'Oh, you are so beautiful, you are so sexy.' Oh!"

Noticing that his friend's glass was empty, he filled it, and mine. I quickly put both hands around my glass, showing respect as he poured. Then I took the bottle and poured for him.

"It take a long time, weeks, or maybe months, but then they go to bed. He fuck them, the ugly ones. Then he say them

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they are bad women and he will tell their husbands. He keep fucking, every week, and make them give him money. Then he find new woman, and keep doing again. Now he is rich and have big supermarket. He is very respected in Taegu.”

“Ah,” I said. “I see.”

Major Byun translated a few questions from the friends, the same ones I always got, and then they talked to each other in Korean. From time to time, one or another of them would exchange bows with someone passing by the table. Eventually, Major Byun said, “These guys know everybody. We look important with an American here!”

I drank quietly, watching them, picking up a word here and there. Major Byun, as my elder and superior, leaned in from time to time to give me advice about issues like using two hands to accept anything from anyone older, not smoking in front of older men, and proper procedure for pouring drinks.

He looked around the restaurant and I followed his gaze. He pointed out the few women in the place, one by one. “They are bad girls,” he said. He said something to his friends, and they all looked at the women too. Each one sat at a different table, fawning over some man next to her. “If a woman is out after 10:00 p.m., she is bad girl. Dirty girl. They like everything. If you see woman out at night like this time, you can do anything you want to her, it’s okay.” He explained to his friends what he was telling me. The delivery guy said something and Major Byun translated. “Or smoking. Smoking woman very bad, very dirty.” The restaurant owner contributed something else. “He say chewing gum. This kind of girl is very low. Man don’t have to worry about her family. Anything is okay.”

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The blackmailer spoke up and they all nodded deeply in acknowledgement of his wisdom. “He say worst is when you see girl with American. That mean she is garbage, have no family at all. Girl like that, she want to be fucked, any time. Anybody can do whatever he want to her and she gonna like it, because she know she is garbage shit. Shit girls, they want be punished.”

They drank more and smoked more. Major Byun got drunker. After a long while, everyone drained their last glasses, and Major Byun stood to escort me out. He took me through some back streets and eventually to a place that looked a lot like the restaurant we’d just come from. “It’s room salon!” he said, marching me up to the door.

“Wait!” I said. “Major Byun, I don’t—”

A neckless Korean bouncer in a black suit stopped us. He and Major Byun exchanged words, and then Major Byun turned away. “You can’t go there,” he said. “I take you your apartment. My car is near here.”

“Can you drive, Major Byun?” I asked. “I think maybe you had too much.”

“Don’t worry. Don’t worry, Mark. I’m Major in Korean Air Force. Police won’t arrest me. They treat me same as executive of big Korean companies. It’s okay.”

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