

STEALING CINDERELLA

HOW I BECAME AN
INTERNATIONAL FUGITIVE FOR LOVE

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PREVIEW 4

It was lunchtime on my first day. Leo and I were sitting in the lounge.

“The bar at the *yogwan* has these same seats,” Leo said.

Each seat was like a free-standing individual section of a couch, much narrower and a little taller than American sectional pieces, and upholstered in black vinyl. The current configuration had four of them lined up into something resembling a sofa, with two more crammed into the corners of the triangular room and a last one sitting next to the television, facing the others. The space was so small that the corner seats were inaccessible except by climbing over or sliding sections out of the main four.

AFKN was showing an episode of Jerry Springer, and it cut to commercial. Instead of the ads for laundry soap and maxi pads that would’ve come on back in the United States, it was

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a guy in a monkey costume being lectured by another in an army uniform on the importance of staying home when he was sick. “I don’t want to work with a sick monkey like you!” he said into the camera.

Leo grimaced. “I guess the military makes its own commercials,” he said.

“You are watching the Armed Forces Korea Network,” an announcer said. Another commercial came on, this one showing two soldiers sitting in a restaurant, talking about their recent assignments. “Operations security is everyone’s business,” a voice said. Over the restaurant scene, the words OPERATIONS SECURITY appeared on the screen, then shortened and combined to form a single word: OPSEC. “Friendly communications can be used by the enemy to determine our capabilities, limitations, and activities. Always remember to practice good OPSEC.”

David’s red mop of hair appeared at the door. He and his wife Sue had come here from Seattle. “We’re going to lunch,” he said. “You guys want to come along?”

Leo and I walked with David, Sue, and James Lawson toward a Chinese restaurant near the school. People on the street stopped to watch as the little cluster of white people passed by.

“Looks like it might rain,” Leo said.

“It always looks like it’s going to rain here,” David said. “Taegu is in a basin, between mountains like Los Angeles. They don’t seem to have any pollution controls, so there’s always this gray haze. You don’t even notice it after a while, except that jackets and coats start to turn black a few days after you wash them.”

“Maybe that’s why I’m not feeling well,” Leo said, placing a hand over his stomach as he walked.”

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“You didn’t drink the tap water, did you?” Lawson asked. “That shit’ll turn you inside-out.”

“No. They gave us bottled water at the *yogwan*.”

“Uh-oh,” Sue said. “Was it frozen solid?”

“Yeah. Did you guys stay there when you first arrived, too?”

“Yep,” Sue said. “And that frozen water they give you there is tap water, which you’re probably already noticing.”

What she said was true. My own guts were threatening to make me one sick monkey.

“Buy your own water while you’re staying there,” David said. “Once you’re in company housing, you’ll get big bottles of purified water delivered regularly. They deduct the cost from your pay, of course.”

“That’s a solid idea,” Leo said. “Does this place we’re going have a bathroom?”

“I think so,” Sue said. She and David were both very fair-skinned, but her short dark hair and porcelain complexion made a stark contrast to David’s freckled Raggedy Andy look.

As we walked down the narrow street, we saw a collection of riot police on the opposite side. They were surrounding a charcoal gray building that was covered in brightly colored paint splatters. Most of the windows had been painted over with gray paint, and roughly a third of them had been cracked and broken, apparently by rocks or other thrown objects. About thirty officers stood in small clusters of four and five, leaning on their gray metal shields and smoking cigarettes. Above the entrance to the building was a black sign with steel letters reading “TAEGU AMERICAN CENTER.”

“Most of the huge riots happen on the college campuses,” Sue said. “But a lot of the anti-American stuff happens here. Sometimes when you walk by, there’s tear gas wafting around.”

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“American Center?” I said. “What does this place do?”

“Officially it’s called the American Cultural Center, and it’s supposed to help people visit America,” David said. “It offers college brochures, study guides for the SAT and the TOEFL, and probably some pamphlets for tourists, but I’ve never seen anyone go in or out. I think the United States maintains it so the protesters come here instead of demonstrating outside the military bases.” He pointed a finger at the holes and craters. “If someone pulled that shit at Camp Walker, guys with machine guns would cut him in half. Much better to draw all the malcontents here. It’s convenient for them, too.” He nodded toward a grouping of round signs with Korean letters and times. “See the different bus routes?”

“Who are the protesters?” I asked. “What do they want?”

“They’re college students,” Lawson said. “They want us to get the fuck out of their country.”

“Many of them are *our* students,” Sue said. “They want all kinds of stuff, including more democracy. But they often protest American policies, too.”

The Chinese restaurant had four tables, none of which was big enough for our group. We crowded around the only open one, our shoulders touching.

Suits were required for our jobs, and apparently for most other occupations, too. About half the restaurant’s patrons were wearing business suits, all gray, with neckties in muted colors. The other half, non-management types like clerks and bus drivers, wore uniforms, which were basically suits as well, also in muted grayish shades. Most of the *ajumas* wore nearly identical black polyester outfits, and even the schoolkids I’d seen wore uniforms in blue and brown.

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“Oh, another thing you probably wouldn’t know if someone didn’t tell you,” Sue said. “If you’re trying to save money to take it back home, start changing it to dollars right away. Korea is super strict about controlling its currency. You can only change what you make from SNM Academy, and only with documentation and your passport.”

“It’s a pain in the ass,” David said. “They actually stamp your passport every time you change won to dollars, and write in how much you change. They’re paranoid about it and the bank tellers give you dirty looks if you bring in too much at once.”

“Are you guys saving a lot here?” Leo asked.

“Not as much as we thought we would,” Sue said. “But some. There’s not a lot to spend it on here unless you’re into Korean designer clothes. Transportation is the biggest expense—taxi fares.”

A Korean man appeared at the table, just staring at us. “Oh,” David said. “We should order.”

“What’s good?” Leo asked.

“Chinese food is different here than at home,” Lawson said. Short and jowly with a buzz cut, Lawson gave the impression of being someone who liked to eat. “But you can get some things that are the same. *Chopchae* is an easy one to remember because it sounds like chop suey, which is pretty close to what it is, and there’s another called *tangsooyook* that is basically sweet and sour pork.”

“And everyone is proud of their regional differences in the way they eat, too,” Sue said. “They’ll show you what they do, like making a dipping sauce or mixing in this or that condiment, like vinegar or soy sauce or what have you, and say, ‘In Taegu we do it this way.’”

I decided to go for the *chopchae*.

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“Betty was trying to come along,” Lawson said. “I told her the group was too big. She’s super clingy.”

“Well, she likes you,” Sue said.

“Is this the same Betty I saw in Karen’s class this morning?” I asked. “Perky, with short hair and wide eyes?”

“Yeah, that’s her,” Lawson said.

“You know if you have sex with her you have to marry her,” David said. “That’s the rule here.”

“Yeah, okay,” Lawson said. “Sure, I do.”

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