

STEALING CINDERELLA

HOW I BECAME AN
INTERNATIONAL FUGITIVE FOR LOVE

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PREVIEW 1

*Kimpo International Airport in Seoul, South Korea
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We stood close together, hiding our faces and pretending to look out the window, resisting the temptation to look over each other's shoulders. There was no reason to make ourselves more conspicuous by raising our eyes. What could we do if we saw one of them, anyway?

They were not above ambushing us as we boarded a plane, or even above using violence in an airport. If they spotted us, we'd never escape. There were cameras and cops everywhere.

The garish yellow and red satin baseball jacket made a decent disguise for Jennifer, or maybe I just hoped it did. It was a dramatically different look from her usual designer suits, in any case. Even with the clashing pink cap and my black plastic wrap-around sunglasses, too much of her face could still be seen. Bruises were still visible on her cheeks and neck, though she'd tried to conceal them with makeup.

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As for me, a white American, I would stand out no matter what.

We chatted quietly, without looking at each other. Talking seemed less likely to draw attention than standing in silence. It also kept the two of us connected, akin to holding hands, in a place where actually holding hands in public came with the threat of being beaten to death.

Jennifer turned her passport over in her hands, twice. I had never before seen her fidget. “Lucky I tried to change my major in college,” she said.

“Yeah.”

I tugged at my sleeve to make it billow out around the bandage Jennifer had affixed at my elbow, in case it had soaked through.

She looked exhausted. We had now been running and hiding for five days. If they found us, there would be more violence. If we missed the flight, we would soon be discovered and separated, and we probably would never see each other again after that.

“They’re boarding,” Jennifer said.

We kept our faces down, but everyone stared anyway.

This was where they’d cornered us before: at an airport gate, as we’d prepared to board a flight.

The trick we’d used, giving the ticket agent only a first initial instead of a full name, wouldn’t be much help, at least not for me. My last name stood out as much as the rest of me did, and they would surely know my last name. Our former employer had only contempt for our privacy.

I slid my boarding pass out from my passport and examined it for the hundredth time, pinching it tightly between my fingers and white-knuckled thumb. It was smudged with

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ink from my new visa stamp. "If we have any chance of avoiding them, it's because we bought these after the counter was supposed to have closed," I said quietly.

"They could be checking right now," she said.

Ordinary Americans, lining up for ordinary flights, would probably look bored, so that was how we tried to appear as we shuffled toward the door. One passenger after another presented a ticket and made it onto the jet bridge. A gate agent motioned to Jennifer, took her ticket, and let her pass.

"Hello," a different one said to me, extending an open palm. "Boarding pass and passport, please."

I gave her the documents. The gate agent looked them over, and went to get someone else. Together they scrutinized the paperwork, especially the new stamp. Finally, they accepted the ticket and I proceeded into the tunnel.

I had almost caught up to Jennifer when someone pushed me against the wall.

I spun toward the offending hands. I would not go down easily.

It was an *ajuma* with a thinning perm, dyed coal black except for a quarter inch of gray roots, clad in thick black polyester. She shoved past me and continued down the walkway, using her elbows and shoulders to part the crowd. Two other *ajumas* followed in her wake, wearing the same hair and clothing. A Korean Air flight attendant stopped them at the front of the line, and passengers crowded behind them, waiting to board.

"She's asking for their tickets so she can show the *ajumas* where to go," Jennifer said. "They don't want to sit in their assigned seats."

The *ajumas* argued. The crowd at the end of the jet bridge

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swelled. It took four flight attendants to coax them from the door and into their correct seats.

We crossed the threshold. Jennifer was at the window and I was in the middle seat next to her. "It's a little cramped for a four-hour flight," I said. "And to think, just yesterday we were business class to Guam."

Together we watched as person after person stepped through the open door. What would we do if someone boarded the plane to get us? My mind ran through a possible scenario involving activating the emergency slide, running across the tarmac, and being gunned down.

Not easygoing people, Koreans.

It was the best plan I could come up with. If they got onto this plane, I would put an arm around Jennifer and dive for the emergency slide.

A man in a suit paused at our row. A fist in the gut would bend him over, and I could hit him in the jaw with the top of my head as I stood up to fight. I waited for a word or a grab, but none came. He placed his briefcase in an overhead bin and sat down next to me. A few minutes later, the plane door closed and a flight attendant stood up at the front to give her spiel about the exits and seat belts, first in Korean and then in English.

The plane taxied. I gestured out the window. "Want to take one last look?" I asked. "You may never see it again."

She gazed out at the concrete and glass, the tower, and the mountains in the distance. "I won't miss it," she said.

I didn't know it then, but more than two decades later, she still would not miss it.

The plane sped down the runway.

"The last time we thought we got away by airplane, it didn't work out so well," she said.

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Our flight to Cheju-do had been just last week.

They would soon learn where we were.

“We may just be leaving one set of troubles for another,” she said.

I took her hand as the plane accelerated, pushing us back into our seats, lifting off. Beneath us, the landing gear whirred and retracted, and I felt machinery clunking under the floor. Like taut rubber bands allowed to go slack, we collapsed against each other.

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