

# STEALING CINDERELLA

HOW I BECAME AN  
INTERNATIONAL FUGITIVE FOR LOVE

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PREVIEW 12

**M**y 102 ended at noon. Most of its members were free to stick around, and they offered to take me to lunch. I dropped my class materials at my desk and came out to join them in the lobby.

One of my students, Sally, was standing there talking to my coworker Jennifer, in Korean. Sally said something to the rest of the class and they all agreed with her. Especially the men seemed particularly enthusiastic in their support of whatever she'd asked.

"She will come to lunch, okay?" Sally asked.

"Sure," I said to Sally. "Hi," I said to Jennifer. I decided against telling her I hadn't known she could speak Korean.

"Hi," Jennifer said. "So, where are we going?"

A discussion ensued, in Korean, as everyone headed for the elevator. They came to a conclusion about where to go,

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and all eight of us walked down the street together. A few passersby still watched me, but this time it was probably clear that I was an English teacher with a class. The scrutiny felt more forgiving than usual.

Taegu Mondu was a typical Korean restaurant, with glaring white walls, overly bright fluorescent lights, and gray laminate tables. Our group arrived at the start of the lunch rush, but the tables were long enough that we were able to sit together comfortably. A mother sat at the next table over, with a little girl about four years old and a little boy who might have been five. Sally sat next to Jennifer, across from me in the middle of the group. “Mondu” is the Korean word for “dumpling,” and dumplings were all that were on the menu, in at least a dozen forms, including steamed, fried and soup varieties.

A woman next to me who called herself Silver pointed to a photo on a laminated menu. “This one Taegu style. Only we have in Taegu.”

The one she’d pointed out was called *bi bim mondu*, which was fried dumplings covered with a mound of shredded raw cabbage and sticky hot red pepper paste. The dish vaguely reminded me of Mexican food, which I was already starting to miss.

“Thank you for telling me, Silver,” I said. “I always like to try foods the local Taegu way. I’m going to get that one today.”

We all ordered and waited for the food to come. The little boy at the next table climbed up on top of it and leapt onto the end of ours. He jumped up and down, causing the legs to bang loudly against the linoleum, and then leapt to another table. His sister tried to get out of her seat, but the mother grabbed her shoulders and slammed her back down, hard, chastising her.

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“Why does she let the older one do whatever he wants, but yet act so strict with the little one?” I asked, knowing the answer. At least they’d practice English.

Jennifer spoke. “Because one is a boy. Korea treats boys and girls differently.”

“We Koreans say women must be calm,” a student called Kevin said.

The food came. Mine had crispy brown dumplings that gave a slightly spicy smell. Everyone took metal chopsticks from a can at the center of the table. I snatched up a dumpling and a little cabbage with chopsticks and dipped it in sauce. I bent to take a bite when Jennifer raised a couple of fingers at me. It had the effect of raising a palm, like a policeman stopping traffic, and I got the hint. This class, too, had an Old Man, who might have been forty-five. Everyone sat frozen, waiting for him to take a bite of his dish, which was coincidentally the same one I had ordered. He did, and time started again.

“But what if a girl is just naturally active?” I asked. “Like a female athlete?”

“No,” Old Man said. “Korean woman not active. Always calm.”

“Nobody like women athlete,” Kevin said. “They are like men.”

“What do the rest of you think?” I asked. “Do you feel boys are born to be more active than girls?”

Most did.

“It doesn’t matter,” Jennifer said. “Boys get to run around when they’re little. Then in high school they’re just as controlled as girls, and then they all have to go into the army. Girls are kept still even when we’re really young, but boys get

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beaten into compliance later.” She smiled slightly. “Everybody ends up calm here. Nobody escapes.”

So, the princess was smart. It was an astute observation.

“I am sorry,” Sally said, putting her arm around Jennifer’s shoulders. “I am sorry for my friend,” she said. “We go high school together. She always like this.”

I looked back at Jennifer. “You two went to high school together? Where was that?”

“Here,” Jennifer said. “Taegu.”

“You’re...*from* Taegu?”

“Of course I’m from Taegu.”

“Korean women are more independent than American women,” a guy with big eyeglasses called William said. “When Korean women get married, they keep their same name. American women get married and get husband’s name.”

“That’s an interesting point,” I said. “In fact, many American women now say it’s a sign of independence to keep their maiden names—their names from before they were married.”

“But that’s not very accurate, about Korean women keeping their names,” Jennifer said. “Nobody calls them that name anymore after they’re married, except maybe official papers. Married women are always just called *so-and-so’s wife*, or *so-and-so’s mom*.”

“Korean woman like that,” a female student calling herself Maria said. “For Korean woman, pleasure is take care of baby, husband, house. When Korean woman hear ‘hey, you, somebody’s mom,’ it make her very proud.”

“If it’s such a wonderful pleasure to take care of babies and do housework, shouldn’t we let men enjoy it, too?” Jennifer asked.

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“No,” Maria said, scrubbing her hand through the air in front of her as if erasing a white board. “Men are different. To men, most important is respect. Way to get respect is to be a manager. When every man is manager and every woman is mother, then everyone is happy.”

Some of the class began talking in Korean.

“So where did you learn English?” I asked Jennifer. “Did you live in the States?”

“Right here,” she said. “SNM Academy. I started taking classes here about three years ago.”

“So ... You didn’t speak English at all until you were, like twenty years old?”

“Right. I’m the success story. If other young ladies come here to study, and they practice hard, maybe they can get a job making less than half of the money you do, too.”

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