

STEALING CINDERELLA

HOW I BECAME AN
INTERNATIONAL FUGITIVE FOR LOVE

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PREVIEW 2

*Above Kimpo International Airport
Eighteen months earlier*

The plane's "nighttime" had ended maybe 90 minutes ago, and now it was starting to descend. I tried to wake myself up by playing a cassette tape. Most of my own stuff was pretty downbeat, but I had a B-52s tape that a college roommate had abandoned, and "Roam" was a peppy song about exploring the world.

The flight attendant recited the bit about the seat belts and tray tables over the PA. I craned my neck to look out the window but saw only clouds.

"Korea your final destination?" the guy in the window seat asked me.

"Yeah."

"Mine too. DOD?"

"Huh?"

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“Oh. I thought you were a DOD contractor. Department of Defense.”

“Ah,” I said. “Nope. I’m coming to teach English.”

“Ooh, don’t get caught, man,” he said. “If you’re not with a Korean company, you’re like an undocumented worker or whatever. This close to North Korea, people are always suspicious of foreigners. They take immigration pretty seriously. Come to think of it, they’re pretty fuckin’ hardcore about everything else, too. Not easygoing people, Koreans.”

“I’ll be with a Korean company,” I said. “Got a visa and everything. And I know what you mean about Koreans being hardcore. This guy who’s meeting me today at the airport once let me ride along as he and his friends, all Koreans, drove to a bar in a different town to watch two other Koreans play *Galaga* for a thousand-dollar bet.”

“Yeah, see? They’re intense.”

“Oh, that’s not even the story. I was in the back seat on the way there. A carload of black guys passed us, making chinky eyes at them and giving them the finger. My car of Koreans and another carload of Koreans coordinated with car phones and brought them to a full stop at the side of the highway. Then they got out and started kicking the car and spitting on the windows. When the black guys tried to get out of the car, the Koreans kicked the doors closed on their shins.”

“Yep, that’s what they’re like,” he said. “Whole country of that. One of those guys is meeting you here?”

“For a couple hours. I have to take a domestic flight to Taegu from here.”

“I don’t spend much time in Taegu,” he said. “It’s a big city but there aren’t many foreigners there at all. Couple of bases.

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Camp Walker, and I think Camp Henry is there. I guess as a civilian you can't check 'em out, though."

"Not unless I want to get shot."

"Who knows what you'll feel like after some time teaching English in Taegu?"

He gestured out the window. "Mountains everywhere. Korea looks weird from the air at night. Bright lights, with big dark patches where the mountains are."

I leaned back in my seat so I could see more of the landscape. Obscured by smog, the mountains looked dark already.

"There's your new home, man!" the guy said.

The plane approached the runway and a mess of flat concrete roofs became visible, most edged with glossy brown ceramic tiles. "Those yellow plastic tanks are for water," he said. "Water pressure's unpredictable so everybody has one on the roof." Through the thick haze that stretched to the horizon I saw countless squarish little buildings and intermittent taller structures with backlit plastic signs. All had water tanks on top.

"Do you speak Korean?" the guy asked.

"No. I had Japanese friends and roommates in college, and I picked up Japanese okay. Not fluent, but I can get by. I'm hoping to do the same with Korean."

"Sounds like you had a lot of foreign friends in college."

"Yeah. Just curious about the world, I guess."

Curiosity had been part of it. A bigger part had been the fact that international students were clearly not cops.

The plane touched down and the guy disappeared. I had to look for my guide. Jae Won had been my first contact with Koreans, introduced to me by one of my Japanese roommates who had met him in English class. He was a perpetually calm

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graduate student in engineering, friendlier and more outgoing than most of his countrymen, which wasn't saying much. Even among the international crowd at school, the Koreans tended to stick to themselves.

Jae Won was waiting for me at the gate. He wore frameless oval glasses and business casual clothes with some logo on them to prove they cost a lot of money. If my parents had ever shown any interest in who my friends were, Jae Won was the type they'd have liked. My bag was checked through to Taegu, so I was free to leave the airport with him and find a nearby bar.

Jae Won drove, which I had never seen him do before. His car was a piece of shit that must have been several years old. As he was parallel parking, he scraped the side of another car that was trying to pass. Both drivers continued doing their thing without acknowledging that there had been an accident.

"You don't have to stop when you hit another car?" you asked.

Jae Won shook his head. "Korea traffic very bad," he said. "Korea is number one for traffic death in world."

We went into some restaurant and sat on the pale-yellow linoleum floor, in front of a low table.

Jae Won had a habit of restarting his English sentences. "I can't believe, I can't believe you are here in Korea," he said. He raised a hand toward the back of the restaurant and called out, "*Ajuma!*"

"What's that mean, *ajuma?*" I asked.

The waitress came over. She was about 50 years old, with permed but thinning hair dyed an unnaturally flat shade of black, and was dressed head to toe in black polyester. He said

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something to her in Korean and she went away again. “That is *ajuma*,” he said. “Old, married woman.”

We talked about my flight, and about how long Jae Won had been home in Korea. He would be heading back to Iowa City for the start of the new semester in about a week and a half. The *ajuma* brought successive liter bottles of beer, which we drank from little glasses like juice might have been served in back in the United States.

“Why did, why did you get job in Korea?” he asked.

“So I could see you!” I said. We both laughed as if the joke had been funny. “Really, I’m here because it gets me out of Iowa City, and I think maybe I can be one of the first Americans with contacts here as Korea’s economy really takes off. I’ve spent enough time with foreign people in school that I think I’ll do okay at teaching English. Hopefully I’ll be able to identify some opportunities.”

“That is good plan,” Jae Won said. “Korean economy growing very fast now.”

“Yeah, I know. A lot of Americans are going to Japan these days, but I’m here so I can get in on the ground floor. Do you know what that means, get in on the ground floor?”

He waved his hand just over the surface of the table. “First level. Lobby.”

“Yes, that’s right. But when I say I want to *get in on the ground floor* in Korea, and we’re talking about business, it’s an idiom that means I’ll be here at the beginning.”

I held two palms to the tabletop and slowly raised them. “Korea is growing into a skyscraper. I’m here early, so I can ride with it as it grows. Businesspeople call it getting in on the ground floor. Usually they mean a business, though, not a country.”

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“Oh, okay. In on a ground floor.”

“*The* ground floor,” I said. “I’m getting in on *the* ground floor.” I shrugged. “Besides, to get this kind of job in Japan, they require a teaching background and credentials in teaching English. I don’t have those.”

“But you must be good here,” Jae Won said. “Not get in trouble.”

He said this because of the way he saw me: Having provided him some weed so he could show off to his friends a few times, I was officially a serious American criminal. To the Koreans back in Iowa City, I was an authentic *Miami Vice*-style bad guy.

“Uh-huh,” I said. “So, did you get to spend a lot of time with your girlfriend while you’ve been home?” I couldn’t remember her name.

“No,” he said. “I . . . I break her.”

“Um,” I said. “Oh! You broke *up* with her. I’m sorry about that, man.”

“My older, my older brother, he getting married. His wife is younger, his wife is younger than my girlfriend. So I must . . . break up.”

“Really? Is that a Korean thing, where you have to pay attention to everyone’s age like that when you get married?”

“Of course. In Korea, in Korea we pay attention many things to get married. Age, school, job, father’s job, brothers . . . Many, many things.”

“Wow. That sounds complicated.”

“Yes,” he said. “Many rules.”

My glass was empty so I grabbed the bottle to fill it again. Jae Won took it from my hands. “I pour you,” he said.

“Oh, okay,” I said. “Thanks.”

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“In Korea, do not pour yourself,” he said. “I’m sitting ... I’m sitting across you?”

“You’re sitting across the table from me?” I asked. He nodded.

“I’m sitting across table,” he said. “I must pour you. If you pour yourself, Koreans say it’s bad for me.” He smiled.

“Like, bad luck, you mean? It’s bad luck if I pour for myself when you’re sitting across from me?” I walked two fingers along the edge of the table. With the index finger of my other hand I traced a jagged line down through the air to the ambulating fingers. “Would you be struck by lightning?”

He laughed. “No. I will have a daughter. In Korea, always pour for older man, always pour for across table man. Never for you.”

“Okay,” I said. “Thanks, Jae Won.”

“When older man pour you, it is honor. Drink is, drink is gift from man of higher status. You must drink. Must.”

Jae Won’s glass was empty so I filled it for him, Korean style. He took the bottle from me and filled mine. “Do you remember, do you remember Michiko?” he asked.

“Yeah.” Michiko was a Japanese girl in English class with Jae Won. I had often seen Jae Won and Michiko taking study breaks or going to lunch together. She was tiny, sweet, and very quiet. Even her wardrobe—thin, fuzzy sweaters in neutral colors—seemed chosen so as not to draw attention. She was so shy that she had barely spoken to me at all.

“Michiko went, Michiko went to party with my friend.”

“Oh, on a date? Michiko is dating your Korean friend? Like a girlfriend.”

“No, no. We see Michiko at party. Michiko drank, Michiko drank too much and sleep.”

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“Oho! She passed out, huh?”

“Yes. She passed out.” Jae Won nodded quickly a few times, smiling. “So my friend, my friend, he fucked her.” He beamed proudly, as if he were telling me his friend was a Nobel Prize winner.

“I thought Michiko was your friend,” I said. “You let some guy do that to her?”

He didn’t understand the question.

“What time is it?” I asked. “I think I’d better check in for my flight.”

“Yes, your flight. *Ajuma!*” He said something in Korean and the woman said something back.

“I got this one, man,” I said. “How much is it?”

I opened my wallet and saw the single American twenty-dollar bill there. “Shit,” I said. “I forgot to change this at the airport.”

“That’s all?” he asked, looking into the wallet. “You came to Korea with just twenty dollars?”

I shrugged. “It’s what I have.”

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