

STEALING CINDERELLA

HOW I BECAME AN
INTERNATIONAL FUGITIVE FOR LOVE

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PREVIEW 6

Our contracts stipulated that the company would give us two hundred bucks spending money, in Korean won, just for showing up in Taegu. Richard had handed us each an envelope containing a short stack of *mon won* bills, denominated 10,000 won, which meant they were worth roughly twelve dollars each. This cash had turned out to be essential, because while the contract provided for housing, the apartment they gave us had no dishes, cooking utensils, or bedding. Leo, a granola-type from Colorado, had arrived with camping stuff, including a sleeping bag, but I had been sleeping on a bare mattress.

Leo had recruited a student who called himself New Clip to help us shop for things we'd need. New Clip's long, narrow face reminded me of an Easter Island head. He'd brought us to Taegu's crowded outdoor market, a jumble of

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tents, open-air tables, carts, and people sitting on blankets surrounded by their wares. Now we each carried big plastic bags full of sheets, pots and pans, towels, and other household items. Leo had found umbrellas, offered in varying plaids of muted blue, gray, green, and black. Like everything else we'd seen here so far—suits, uniforms, upholstery, buildings—the umbrellas only came in dusty, washed-out colors.

The chaos of the marketplace was nice. It felt like we were no longer in the spotlight, though clearly still on stage.

“Think about it,” I said. “When you go home to Colorado, are you going to stuff your suitcase with a giant soup pot? Not me. If anything, I might take some of those shitty little beer glasses we have that someone stole from the bars. You could almost call those legitimate souvenirs, but yet they're the only things the foreigners from our place decided to leave behind? No way. It's either Mr. Shin or the landlady, taking all that stuff when people move out.”

“The landlady takes them, definitely,” Leo said, “and uses them to clock her husband in the face.”

“She does just fine beating the shit out of him without weapons.”

“I see what you mean, though,” he said. “A lot of people probably already have all that back home, anyway. I have my entire college apartment boxed up in my parents' basement.”

“Yeah, see?” I said. “I actually don't own anything back in the States, but even to me, it seems weird to drag pots and pans back to the other side of the world.”

“Nothing?”

“Everything I own is here with me in Korea. Contents of a suitcase and garment bag, and now this.” I held up the plastic Santa Claus bag with all my new junk inside.

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We approached a tent with handbags spread all over tables and hanging on poles. I managed to find a cheap vinyl briefcase with a zipper. Like everywhere else I'd shopped so far in Korea, there was no checkout line. People shoved and elbowed each other to get through the crowd. The *ajumas* were by far the worst because they would actually strike anyone who got in their way, sometimes punching with closed fists, instead of just pushing. One shoved me sideways by digging her fingernails into my shoulder and arm, leaving little red indentations. When I finally reached the counter, New Clip helped me negotiate for the bag, and I ended up getting it for a single green *mon won* bill.

"Thanks for all your help today, New Clip," I said. "We really appreciate it."

"Is good for me," New Clip said. "For practice English."

"It's good for us, too, for sure," Leo said. "We'll buy you lunch."

"Thank you, Leo," New Clip said.

Three seats opened up at a little outdoor stand just as we were passing. "Hey," Leo said. "Sushi rolls! Want to stop?"

We snatched the seats before anyone could dig their fingernails into us. Stacked on a plate at one end of the counter were rolls of seaweed and rice. "In Korea, no sushi," New Clip said. "We say, *gimbop*. *Bop* is rice, and *gim* is, uh, green part."

"Ah!" I said. "The seaweed. *Gim bop*, seaweed rice. I got it. Thank you, New Clip."

"Got it?"

"It means I understand." I held my hands up like I was holding a football. "It's like, you have the information, whatever you're telling me—" I mimed throwing the ball and then catching it. "And then I tell you that now I have that information. *I got it*. Do you understand?"

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“I got it,” New Clip said.

“Ha! Yes. Just like that.”

I showed Leo the shirts I’d gotten to send to friends back in Iowa. Cheap outdoor markets in Asia tended to sell unbranded merchandise with garbled English, and this place was no exception. I was sending two of the shirts to my friend Danny. One had a cartoon fish on it and read, “I am happy! Pants!” Another had small letters on the left breast that said “INTERCOURSE.”

A grubby man came up and poked me on the shoulder. New Clip said something to him in Korean but he ignored it and poked me again. He held out his palm. The woman behind the counter shouted at him. He made a circle with his thumb and forefinger, a coin, and placed it in his other palm.

The woman from behind the counter picked up the stool next to Leo and came around behind me, still shouting. The man made another gesture at me. The woman jabbed him hard under the jaw with the stabilizing bar between the stool legs. He made a choking sound and fell to one knee. She ran at him and he scabbled backward, disappearing into the crowd.

This *gimbop* was not raw fish. It had some cooked carrot, processed fish cake, and a yellow pickled radish.

The three of us finished eating and made our way toward the gates. On one table in front of a tent I saw six-inch-long dried centipedes, tied with twine into bundles that would’ve been too big to put my fingers around. “Are they for medicine?” I asked New Clip. “Yes,” he said.

On our way out of the market area, we passed a table with various cuts of meat, including the skinless head of a dog about the size of a golden retriever, obvious because of its long canine teeth.

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“I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore, Toto,” I said. Leo laughed. New Clip didn’t understand.

“Do you know “The Wizard of Oz?” I asked him. His Easter Island face bobbed up and down but his expression did not change.

“Remember how in the movie, Dorothy had a little dog named Toto? When she got to Oz, things looked quite different, and she told him she didn’t think they were in Kansas anymore.”

He stared back at me, expressionless, as before.

“So, I said I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore ...” I gestured at the dog head. “... Because look at Toto! Do you get it, New Clip?”

“Ah, get it,” he said. “It means understand. Yes. I get it. You talk to dead dog. Very funny.”

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