

Heart
and **Seoul**

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ERIN KINSELLA



Content Warnings: sexual situations, anxiety, panic attacks, PTSD, mentions of child abuse

Tropes: marriage of convenience, found family, cohabitation

Representation: LGBTQ+ leads (panromantic, demisexual, bisexual), mixed race lead, Korean lead

The glossary is available at the end of the text. The first use of any non-English words, excluding place names, have been italicized to indicate that the term can be found in the glossary.



Chapter 1

Tessa

Tessa Hale woke in the dark, completely disoriented. The espresso she'd consumed after getting off the plane had kicked in hard, dragging her through the day in a caffeine haze. Eventually the crushing weight of her jet lag had pulled her under. Her phone screen blazed with light, and she squinted against the glow.

4:00 a.m.

The apartment around her was heavy with silence and scented with sesame and ginger from dinner. She peeled back the curtain to reveal the glittering sea of lights bisected by the serpentine form of the Han River. The road below was a steady stream of white and red as cars travelled around the colossal city of Seoul.

Her stomach rumbled. She fished out her remaining cookies and peanuts from the flight and ate them while tucked under the curtain like a cat on a windowsill. She remembered

nothing from the last time she'd been to Korea since she'd only been a toddler, but there was still that link, a small piece of her heritage that anchored her here.

Fiddling with her phone, she checked the time back home. Noon. Tessa dialed her mother's number for a video call.

"*Meu amor*, what are you doing awake?" Her mother's mahogany curls were tucked up in a bun, emphasizing the soft heart shape of her face, both traits she shared with Tessa.

"Just jet lag, *Mamãe*."

Her gut swirled with nerves, unsettling the recently consumed cookies. Seeing her mother in the bright sunshine of their kitchen solidified that she really had just crossed the ocean. She was in Seoul, the capital of her paternal grandmother's homeland, and staying with her best friend who'd moved to Korea years ago. In a few days she would get to visit the set where a studio was going to turn her book into a drama.

"How was the flight?" Her mother propped the phone against the wall to free up her hands.

"Boring, but not so soul-crushingly long as when we visited all the fam in Brazil."

Her mother laughed. "That's why I only go back to see my parents every five years."

The sound of pops and sizzles intensified, her mother stirring something in a pan on the stove.

"*Mamãe*, you're getting splatters on the camera. Move me over." Tessa waited while the view changed, the phone shifting away from the stove. "What're you making?"

"Garlic noodles and shrimp."

Tessa's mouth watered. It was her father's favourite dish. "How's *Appa*?"

"It's a bad pain day for him." Her mother wilted. "He was

up most of the night, and he was supposed to cover a class today. He'll be disappointed about having to miss it."

"Cheering him up with food?"

Her mother nodded.

"He'll appreciate it." Guilt twisted in Tessa's chest. "I feel bad for leaving."

"Meu amor, no. This is good for you. It wouldn't change things if you were here, and you deserve a break. I want you to be able to get out and live your own life."

"You're part of my life," Tessa instantly defended.

"That's not the same. Appa's pain isn't going to go away, and you can't while away your entire life helping us."

"I wouldn't mind." She'd written her books while doing just that.

"Meu amor, you're twenty-seven." Her mother's face turned stern and unyielding. "I know how much you love us. You've proven it a thousand times, and I promise that neither of us will think otherwise if you start living your own path. We're still going to be here, no matter how high you reach or how far you go. You've done so much for us, and believe me I don't mean to sound ungrateful at all, but you need to take some time for yourself. Your lovely assistant Amelia is around for any emergencies, and the nurse will be checking in. You don't need to worry. Just enjoy yourself."

"I'll try."

The sound of rustling in the cutlery drawer was followed by the echo of flatware settling on the counter. Her mother piled two plates with the shrimp and noodles.

"Take advantage of this trip. You're there for a few weeks, and there are going to be plenty of beautiful people running around. Kelly would be over the moon assisting with a fling if you wanted to break out of your bubble a little."

"I think we both know I don't do flings."

Her mother laughed. "First time for everything."

"Mamãe, please." Tessa groaned.

"Just try to have fun. For goodness' sake, your book is becoming a drama! You're free as a bird in a foreign country with your best friend. Go soak in every exciting moment of this."

"Consider me a sponge." Tessa grinned. "I swear I'll do my best."

"You'd better." Her mother tucked the phone under her chin, carting it and the two plates up to the room where her father was resting. He was awake when she flicked on the bedside lamp and gave a tired smile, accepting the food and a kiss. The image went wonky while her mother resettled on the bed.

"Hi, Appa!"

"Hi, Peanut." He waved and shoved a bite of food into his mouth.

"So, tell me about the drama," her mother said. "Do you think they'll do your book justice? Goodness, if it were me, I'd be too excited to even notice any flaws. You told me this company has pretty good productions, right?"

"Mhmm, they do. They made that one historical you loved and cried over for a week."

"Ah, yes. They don't often steal my heart like my telenovelas do, but I'm sure yours will make me cry just as much."

"I hope not." Tessa laughed. "A lot less people die in mine."

"Still, I'm glad all those people like your story as much as I did." Her mother beamed.

"I'm so proud of everything you've accomplished."

"I'm proud too, but I have a mouth full of noodles." Her father's cheeks were puffed up like a chipmunk.

"You're both too sweet."

"I'm biased because I'm your mother, but I'm allowed

to praise my favourite author.” She winked, and it warmed Tessa down to her toes. “So, tell me more. When do you go to the studio?”

“I’m not sure yet. I’m still waiting to hear when they want me. I imagine it’ll be sometime this week since they start filming soon, so I should get to see the set and meet some of the actors before that. I was just going to hang out with Kelly and check out Seoul until then.”

“What sort of place doesn’t have that planned in advance?”

She shrugged and propped the phone against the window. “Kelly said it’s pretty common for a lot of things to be last minute. It’s not like I have anywhere else to be when they tell me what’s happening. I gave them my flight details, so I guess they’ll figure it out from there.”

Her mother frowned. “You’ll keep me updated?”

“Of course.”

“Is your lovely assistant excited to have full-time hours while you’re in Seoul?”

“Totally. Amelia’s saving up for a trip, so she was jazzed. I’m trying to let her take care of more so I can focus on my next deadline. You can call her—”

“If we need anything. Yes, I know.” Her mother grinned. “Don’t worry so much, meu amor.”

Tessa blinked rapidly, exhaustion sneaking up on her.

“You should get to sleep.” Her mother smiled softly.

Tessa sighed, pressing her cheek to the window. “I’ll attempt, but I make no guarantees. I love you both.”

“I love you too,” her parents chorused.

They hung up, and Tessa burrowed into the blanket Kelly had covered her with when she’d passed out on the couch hours before.



Beams of sunlight seared her eyeballs. Tessa groaned and buried her face into the pillows.

“Good morning, sunshine.”

Kelly had her hair pulled into a braid, deep violet fading into bubblegum pink at the tips. Her pale face was sans her usual makeup, and she was still in a set of cozy flannels.

Tessa tried to sit up, but let out a whine and slumped back down. “I can’t move. I’ve aged five decades overnight.”

“It’ll only get worse if you keep laying on our awful couch. Go have a shower, and I’ll handle breakfast.” Contrary to her words, Kelly draped herself over Tessa, squeezing her into a hug before releasing a sound only dogs could hear.

“I can’t believe you’re here! I’m going to find you someone perfect to go on a date with so you can fall in love, and then move here so we can be best friends in proper proximity!”

Tessa snorted into her pillow. There was no way she was going to meet anyone in the few weeks she was visiting, but she didn’t want to burst Kelly’s bubble. Her best friend’s delusions of grandeur when it came to Tessa moving to Korea, and her love life for that matter, had always been a little out of hand. She never minded since she’d entertained the thought of moving more than once before but hadn’t quite worked up the courage to leave her family and uproot herself.

Kelly’s husband, Min Joo, emerged freshly showered, dressed, and groomed. He wandered into the living room, adjusting his tie, and looking so much like Tessa’s mental expectation of a professor that she couldn’t help but smile. Shining black hair swept over his brow, brushing the top of his round glasses. The pair of them lived simply in a small apartment in the popular expat and tourist district of Itaewon, making their money through Kelly’s

vlogging channel and Min Joo's job teaching business English at one of the local universities.

"Good morning, Tessa-ssi. Did you sleep well?" His face softened considerably when he lifted his gaze from his tie to the tangled pile of Kelly and Tessa.

"I did! Minus some jet lag, it was pretty good."

"We can start your review of Korean business terminology tonight if you're feeling awake enough for it." Min Joo fixed the buttons holding his tie in place.

"You're the best." Tessa tried to wriggle free of Kelly. "I've been reviewing, but I learn a lot better from people."

"It's no trouble." Min Joo smiled. "I'd have offered to start last night, but you were out like a light."

Tessa blushed. "Sorry about that."

"You only drooled on him a little bit." Kelly snuggled in closer.

"You're fine, Tessa-ssi. You didn't drool."

Tessa's stomach growled obnoxiously.

"Hungry?" Kelly sat up and pulled Tessa with her.

"Starving."

"Go wash up so we can eat." Kelly pushed Tessa off the couch, and towards the bathroom.

Tessa stood under the blistering hot spray until her protesting body limbered up. She emerged from the shower squeaky clean and considerably more awake. Kelly waved her over to assist with breakfast by setting the table, so that they could eat together before Min Joo had to venture off to work.

Tessa inhaled her rice, tofu, and eggs, placating her ravenous stomach.

"You two have a good day. I'll see you tonight for dinner." He kissed his wife, slipped on his shoes, and off he went. Kelly smiled wistfully at the closing door.

"You're too cute, Kel." Tessa poked her friend in the ribs.

“Can you blame me? I love him so much.”

“Oh, trust me. I’m aware.” Tessa laughed. “From the moment you met him you made sure I knew exactly how much you were into him.”

“That was almost ten years ago. I was a young’un.”

“It was sweet then, and it’s still sweet now. I’m glad that you’re so happy with him.”

Kelly’s bluebell eyes glinted with mischief.

“No,” Tessa said.

“No?”

“I know that look. No.”

“I can’t imagine what you mean.” Kelly fluttered her eyelashes innocently.

“Just because I’m single doesn’t mean you can start thinking about fixing me up now that I’m conveniently located.”

Kelly pouted a pink lip. “That’s how things work here though. You meet cool people through your friends and friends of friends. I wouldn’t set you up with anyone bad.”

“Kel, please. I’m demi, and you *know* how stupid people can be about it.”

“Not everyone will be stupid. If they respect you, they’ll roll at your speed. Regardless, I’m not gonna set you up with a fuckboy.” Kelly gazed at Tessa imploringly. “Please consider it? Maybe you’ll make new friends.”

“But I don’t plan on living in Korea. I’m only here for four weeks; that’s not enough to make a proper connection.”

“You can date without intending to marry. Just have some fun. Everyone is going to be vetted, and I will sic Min Joo on anyone who upsets you.”

Tessa snort-laughed at the thought of straight-laced Min Joo starting a brawl for her in his button-down shirt and dress pants.

“Fine, but at least let me get used to the time change before you start throwing people at me.”

Kelly looked so excited she might burst. “So, what’re you feeling, men or women?”

“Whoever you think would be good is fine. I’m open to anyone.”

“Cool.” Kelly squeezed her cheeks, her smile overwhelming her face. “I know a couple people you might like. Let me contemplate. I’ll figure out some double date stuff later in the week.”

Tessa rubbed her fingers over her scalp, trying to loosen the tension. “Don’t make me regret this.”

“Never ever,” Kelly promised.



They were picking at their lunch and deep in planning what to see around the city when Tessa’s phone pinged.

The readout said it was an email from Elite Studios, the production company making the drama. She held her breath and clicked on it, scanning over the orderly *Hangul* characters. The nerves returned, swirling in her gut. She’d missed her chance to review business language with Min Joo, but her conversational fluency would hopefully be enough.

“They want me to come to a meeting this afternoon.”

“Already? Jeez, they work fast.” Kelly snatched the phone. “Hmm, the address isn’t too far from here. I can take you over.”

Tessa was loath to trade her pajamas for actual clothes, but she could hardly show up to a meeting in cat-patterned flannel pants. She decided on black skinny jeans with knee-high leather boots, paired with a red cardigan. It turned into a three-quarter-length sleeve on her, wrists and forearms bare though she’d bought it full length. Her arms were too long to fit most off-the-rack clothing properly. She chose to focus on colour, rather than fit, which meant it was red and gorgeous with her bronze skin

and dark hair, which also meant it was a little confidence boost she desperately needed.

Hours later Kelly drilled her on local custom as they rode the subway. “They’ll most likely have a work dinner after this. It would be super rude of you to refuse to go, and they’ll probably all drink tonight. If someone offers you a drink, you have to take it unless you have some kind of health or religious reason to decline.”

“Why?” She’d never gotten used to drinking, and wasn’t eager to acquire familiarity. So many customs had never come up with her grandmother that she’d have to contend with now that she was in her homeland.

“Tradition?” Kelly shrugged and continued rattling off etiquette to help Tessa avoid embarrassment. “If all else fails, play the dumb foreigner, and they’ll give you a pass.”

“Does that happen to you a lot?”

“Not as much anymore, but let me tell you, it’s saved my ass a few times. You’ll be fine though. I think. You’re obviously not from here so they should be pretty lenient.”

They moved with the crowds off the subway and up to the street where a sleek office building glinted in the sun. A stiff-faced man in uniform opened the door for them when they arrived.

“Hale Tessa-ssi?” A petite woman approached them, heels clacking against the floor. Her hair was cropped to her shoulders, and she was dressed in a smart black blazer and pencil skirt combo.

Tessa nodded.

“My name is Kim Ha Yun. Welcome to Elite Studios.” She introduced herself in rapid Korean. “Oh—” she switched to English, “—I forgot to ask. Will you be needing an interpreter?”

“I don’t think so? I’m mostly fluent, so I should be fine.” She sent up a silent prayer to her grandmother for only speaking Korean to her growing up so she’d learn.

“Excellent. That will make things much smoother.” Ha Yun turned her attention to Kelly. “Will you be joining us?”

“No.” Kelly shook her head. “I just brought Tessa. She’s staying with me while she’s in Seoul.”

Ha Yun nodded briskly.

“I’ll head home. Call if you need anything.” Kelly nudged Tessa forward.

“Stay?” Tessa whispered, already panicking.

“I can’t go to a business meeting with you when I have nothing to do with the drama. That would be like taking your mom to a job interview.” She gave Tessa a tight squeeze. “You’re going to do awesome. Love you, Tess!”

Anguish roared through Tessa as Kelly retreated from the building, leaving her with this stranger. Worry over her ability to hold her own in a professional setting gnawed at her gut, but she was trying to be optimistic.

Her stomach twisted into knots, and she shoved shaking hands into her pockets.

The interior of the building was immaculate and intimidating, shining marble floors, tall windows, and high ceilings. Ha Yun waved her along and led her to the elevators. They rode up to the top level and disembarked into a pristine white hallway. Cast photos of previous dramas lined the walls, and Tessa recognized more than a few faces.

“This way, Tessa-ssi,” Ha Yun urged her onwards.

Tessa followed obediently, emerging into a room where every eye turned towards her. She scanned the attendees, noting the plethora of people in suits, before getting to a few that were more casually dressed. One of them turned towards her and stopped her heart instantly.

Holy. Shit. It’s UpBeat!



Chapter 2

Tessa

He sat there, watching her, with his perfectly swept and styled black hair, flawless pale skin, and full lips that she definitely needed to stop staring at. Right. *Now*. She dragged her gaze up, zeroing in on golden-brown eyes she knew too well. They were framed by thick lashes that made her envious in insecure moments. He'd been her bias, her absolute favourite idol of any K-pop group, for the better part of eight years.

Somehow he was even more beautiful in person.

Her pulse buzzed in her ears, a steady drone that narrowed the world down to him.

"Hale Tessa-ssi." Ha Yun's voice snapped her back to attention.

Tessa's fingers itched to text Kelly immediately, to express some of the silent scream rapidly building in her throat.

Ha Yun went around the circle, introducing the staff, director, producers, and designers before moving on to the actors.

“This is Brooks Lily-ssi who will be playing our female lead, Bridie Murphy.”

Lily smiled at Tessa. Her sandy hair was cropped by her ears, blue eyes bright with excitement.

Tessa’s eyes burned dangerously. Lily exactly matched what she’d imagined for the character. Her name was unfamiliar, but then it wasn’t entirely common for white actresses to get leading roles in Korean dramas.

Tessa turned to the idol, scarcely able to breathe.

“And this is Baek Eun Gi-ssi. He will be playing our male lead, Lee Do Yun,” Ha Yun said, pointing out the man responsible for Tessa’s internal crisis.

She’d seen all the names in the email they’d sent her once casting was confirmed, but she’d never in a million years thought it was *that* Baek Eun Gi. At best she’d assumed it was an up-and-coming actor whose information had been drowned out on her searches by the idol’s popularity.

Baek Eun Gi, or UpBeat, as he was more commonly known to his fans, had the voice of a goddamn angel. She’d discovered his music during a particularly difficult period of her life and had followed his career ever since. She loved all of his group, 24/7, as was only proper, since they were all talented, hardworking, and beautiful. But UpBeat... He was special, and being face to face with him now eroded her ability to be a reasonable human being.

“Hale Tessa-ssi, are you well?” Ha Yun set a gentle hand on Tessa’s shoulder.

Tessa bowed quickly and muttered an apology, accepting a glass of water from one of the assistants. She sipped it carefully, hands shaking.

“Thank you for joining us, Hale Tessa-ssi,” the executive producer said, organizing a stack of papers. “Was your flight pleasant?”

She had grown up speaking Korean with her father and grandmother, but exhaustion and jet lag had her brain working overtime to decipher the words.

“Yes.” Tessa nodded. “It was, thank you.”

“You said you had no concerns with the script when you read it. Is that still your opinion?” the executive producer asked.

“The script is fine,” she replied. “The writers did a wonderful job.”

He nodded, apparently satisfied.

Other voices mixed together, discussing the fine details of what was to come. Tessa wasn’t all that familiar with most of the business vocabulary and missed too much to get a grasp on what they were talking about. She caught *filming* and *Busan*, vaguely recalling that there would be on-site filming in the southern city long after she’d arrived back home. Ha Yun said something about emails and schedules, but the explanatory words eluded her.

Yawn after yawn was stifled. So much ice water had been consumed to keep herself alert that her bladder threatened to burst. She blinked her burning eyes rapidly, trying in vain to be fully present, to overcome the jet lag. It was a losing battle as she tried to listen for her name just in case, but after an hour or so of it not coming up, she became less diligent. Every time her attention drifted she noticed UpBeat all over again, and it sent a spike of adrenaline zipping through her.

They toured the studio with Tessa trailing behind her leads. She’d never been to a film studio before, and stared in wonder at the intricate lighting and camera systems. Several sets had been constructed, including the trade ship interior and the inside of a *hanok*.

Ha Yun kept close to her side, so she didn’t have a chance to pull out her phone and spam Kelly. The overhead lights blazed, seemingly growing brighter the longer she was there.

She rolled her shoulders to release some of the tension there, but it didn't help.

UpBeat paused in front of the costume rack. *Hanbok* and Georgian-style clothing hung in neat rows of bright silks and sturdy, plain cotton. His gaze flickered back to her, and she froze, heart whipping like a pinball. Tessa wanted to talk to him, to smoothly introduce herself, and have a story to take back to Kelly, but every time she worked up a fractional amount of courage, her tongue turned to lead in her mouth and nothing came out.

She was hopeless. The opportunity of a lifetime stood in front of her and she couldn't even form a sentence.

If she had a little less dignity, she might have managed, but she decided that silence was infinitely safer than making a fool out of herself. She wished Kelly were here. Her bestie had no barriers at all to this sort of thing and could have helpfully paved the way to Tessa having an actual conversation.

Tessa imagined it in her head. She would offer a charming smile, warm and sweet. He would be intrigued, asking her about her home and her writing. She'd provide witty commentary, and he'd laugh. She loved his laugh.

A low, pulsing sensation climbed up the base of her skull, interrupting her fantasy.

Her dreams of avoiding a migraine were dashed. She should have expected it with the jet lag and the stress, but somehow she'd hoped it would skip tormenting her, just this once. Nausea and more pain than she could tolerate would come along in a timely manner, as it always did with her migraines. It distracted her from UpBeat's proximity, which was likely for the best.

"Reservations for dinner are in twenty minutes," the executive producer said as they reached the end of their tour. "We can all walk over together." Everyone moved to follow him,

and Tessa focused back in a moment later when Lily rested a hand on her shoulder.

“Not quite over the time change?” she asked, blessedly in English.

Tessa shook her head. She wanted nothing more than to tip over and fall asleep on the couch. “Not quite.”

Lily chattered away in her charming British accent while Tessa half-listened, following along with the group as they headed down the street to a restaurant.

Tessa checked her phone and sent a message to Kelly.

Tessa:

I AM WITHIN TOUCHING DISTANCE OF MY BIAS
AND I'M DYING

Kelly:

WHAT?? WHERE? WHY? HOW? Did you ACTUALLY
touch him? I need details!!!

Tessa:

He's playing the LEAD! I'm going to get to see him
every time I'm on set and I'm so awkward. We're
heading to the work dinner now and I just want to
nap. My head hurts :(

Kelly:

Min Joo looked very concerned over the sound I just
made XD

I NEED TO KNOW EVERYTHING! They'll keep you
out late, but call if you need anything <3 I'm expect-
ing a much better update later so be prepared to spill
every single impression!

The endless supply of rice, pork belly stew, and *banchan* side dishes perked Tessa up a little as she mechanically lifted

her chopsticks to her mouth. Unwilling to appear rude, she accepted a drink of *soju* from Ha Yun who sat to her left, and then another as Lily refilled her glass. She shoved down her natural reaction to shudder as the tang of liquor bathed her tongue, leaving warmth blooming in her chest.

UpBeat passed her another shot, and she smothered a pitiful sound as their fingers brushed one another. She kept stealthily pinching herself under the table to be sure, for the hundredth time, that he was actually right there.

Maybe next time she saw him it wouldn't be so embarrassing.

The evening lasted for three more hours, and several more shots, before people got restless about needing to head home. Most of them packed up quickly, eager to leave. Tessa was considerably more intoxicated than she'd have liked. She picked up her purse and excused herself to use the washroom, using chairs along the way to balance herself. The pulsing sensation in her head had slowly grown to a throbbing ache that squeezed her entire skull. Migraine auras flooded the periphery of her vision, an insistent swirling that blurred the world into static. She stumbled when she reached the doors and slipped inside, bracing her arms on the sink.

Her stomach heaved, and she lurched into one of the stalls, emptying her dinner into one of the toilets. She whimpered. A waste of amazing food. Staggering to the sink, she splashed cool water on her face and dried it off carefully to avoid smearing her makeup. The gloss of pain and fatigue was heavy in her reflected gaze.

Tessa fished through her purse for her painkillers. She cursed, remembering they were useless to her anyway since she couldn't take them after consuming alcohol.

A yawn cracked her jaw, and she swayed on her feet.

Tessa turned back to the door, heading into the restaurant as a wave of nausea and lightheadedness knocked her flat.



Chapter 3

Eun Gi

BAEK EUN GI STEPPED out of the men's bathroom and tripped over an ornamental plant when someone collided with him. He steadied himself on the wall, one arm wrapped around the person's shoulders to keep them from tumbling to the floor.

"What on earth? Hey!" He jostled the writer a little. "Are you okay?"

She didn't answer, instead sinking to her knees, her hand pressed to her mouth. He kneeled next to her. There was sweat on her brow and no response save a quiet groan when he gently shook her.

He hoisted her up bridal style and peeked around the room to find that the rest of their party had vacated the restaurant.

"I was gone two minutes," he grumbled. "How did they all leave so fast?"

He sighed, shifting the writer in his arms. ‘What am I supposed to do with you?’

Eun Gi flagged a waiter and awkwardly maneuvered the writer’s dead weight. “Can you find her a spot to rest for a few minutes? I have a car service on the way already.”

The waiter hustled off to do just that. The restaurant was empty, and the waiter arranged a line of chairs for Eun Gi to lay her down. Eun Gi checked her phone and found it unhelpfully password protected.

He phoned Kyung Mi. Their manager was a terrifyingly efficient woman, but Eun Gi had long since outgrown being intimidated by her. Female managers in the industry were extremely rare, and Kyung Mi took her job *very* seriously.

“Eun Gi, what’s wrong?”

“Why would you think something’s wrong?”

“You don’t call me unless it’s important.”

“I need to find out the writer’s address.”

“Do I want to know?”

Eun Gi flushed when he realized how creepy that must have sounded. “She’s with me right now, but not well. I have no idea where she’s staying.”

“Let me do some digging, and I’ll get back to you. Stay safe.”

“Thank you.” Hanging up, he noticed that the car he’d ordered had pulled up. He shook the writer’s shoulder.

She peeled open one eye.

“Are you okay?” he asked again in English, figuring she might be too out of it for a foreign language. “Do you need to go to the hospital?”

“Migraine, and maybe drunk,” she mumbled. “I’ll be fine, just...need sleep.”

She dropped off again.

He chewed his lip. His home wasn’t far from the restaurant.

If she didn't need a hospital, and Kyung Mi couldn't find out where she was staying, then he could always take her there. The car beeped its horn.

Eun Gi muttered a curse.

He carted the writer into the backseat and wrangled the seat belt into place. Eun Gi stared up at the starless sky in exasperation. Theoretically, it should be safe to take her home until he could get her to where she belonged, but he hated not being sure. She had clearly recognized him, but he was used to that. He'd been expecting her to do something, anything, but she'd mostly avoided eye contact, and hadn't spoken a word to him directly. Surely the studio would have warned him if she were a *sasaeng*.

His phone rang and he melted with relief when he saw Kyung Mi's name.

"Did you find it?" he asked.

"No one I contacted knows the name of the person she's staying with, and she's not booked into any hotels that we can find. Ha Yun said she arrived with a woman, but they never collected her information."

"Great. I guess I'll just take her home for a while then. I can't leave her unattended like this."

"Why do you have to get into trouble when I'm out of town?" Kyung Mi sighed.

"I'm not in trouble. It'll be fine, probably. I'll keep you posted on how things go."

Eun Gi slipped into the backseat and told the driver his address. He kept his gaze firmly out the window, and when they arrived, he sighed quietly before wrestling the writer's uncooperative body out of the vehicle. She curled into his arms, fingers latching onto his shirt. He steadfastly ignored the warmth of her body against his. Ruffled and

cranky, he hoisted her up and carried her inside, nodding to the doorman.

The elevator ride seemed to last forever. He elbowed the doorbell, and his roommate answered.

Hwan's eyes widened as he took in the woman in Eun Gi's arms. "What's going on?"

"Out of the way. She's getting heavy."

Hwan stepped aside and closed the door, following Eun Gi into their apartment. After kicking off his shoes, Eun Gi crossed the white-carpeted living room and set her on the couch, draping a blanket over her before digging out her phone again. There was a single text from someone named Kelly, but he couldn't reply to anything. Eun Gi diverted to the kitchen, opening then closing the fridge after seeing nothing he wanted.

"Well." Hwan crossed his arms, moving to lean next to him. "Are you going to explain?"

Eun Gi did, briskly, agitation growing as he paced. Anxious energy buzzed through his body, and he shook his hands, as if it would shake out the energy too. He turned back to the couch. The writer's dark-brown curls were a riot around her head, and thick lashes fanned over freckled cheeks. Her full lips part softly with each even breath.

Hwan scanned her, hands on his hips, glasses balanced on his nose. His black hair was slicked back and styled to perfection. "I'm sure someone will be searching for her soon enough. If not, she'll wake up eventually, and then you can send her on her way. The studio should have made sure she got home safely."

She stirred, and both men froze, but she only rolled over and settled more deeply under the blanket.

Hwan looped an arm around Eun Gi's shoulders. "I get

that you're not comfortable with her being here, but you were a good person helping out someone in need."

"I guess." Eun Gi glanced at the clock on the microwave. It wasn't too late yet, but he was drained. "Are you guys out tonight?"

"Yeah. I can stay home if you want. We're going to a club. I'd say you should come along, but I don't think either of us want her to wake up here alone."

"It's fine," Eun Gi said. "I can stay. You go have fun with the others."

"You're sure?"

Eun Gi nodded and shooed Hwan away from the couch. "Have you eaten?"

"Sung Soo ordered take-out and I stole some." Hwan grinned, a dimple adorning each cheek. He pulled Eun Gi in, smacking a kiss to his cheek. "I need to figure out what to wear tonight. You have fun babysitting."



The writer's phone rang a while later and Eun Gi realized he'd just been staring blankly at his script.

"Finally." He picked up the phone. "Hello?"

There was silence for a moment and then a woman snapped, "Where's Tessa?"

"She's asleep and safe."

"Bullshit. Tell me where she is and who the hell you are."

"My name is Baek Eun Gi. Tessa-ssi and I work together on the drama. Who are you?"

"B-Baek Eun Gi? *The* Baek Eun Gi from 24/7?"

"Yes."

"Why is she with you?"

“Why don’t you tell me who you are so I’m not providing information to a stranger?”

“Right, sorry. I’m Kelly Walsh, Tessa’s best friend. She’s staying with me while she’s in Seoul.” Another pause. “Now, answer my question.”

Eun Gi explained the situation and the subsequent difficulty in finding any useful information to get Tessa home.

“Why did she collapse? Why didn’t you take her to the hospital?”

“She said she had a migraine, and she also had a fair amount to drink at dinner, but she said she’d be fine and just needed to sleep.”

“I want to see her. I’m going to call back on video and if you don’t answer... so help me God—”

“Okay.”

Kelly hung up, and the video call came through. Eun Gi saw her face shift as she realized he wasn’t lying about his identity, then he rotated the phone to where Tessa was curled up. He lifted the blanket for Kelly to see that her friend was untouched and clutching one of the pillows.

“Tess? Wake up so I know you’re safe.”

Tessa cracked an eye open, but closed it again and turned over. “Sleeping.”

“Shit. The subway is already down for the night. I’ll wake up my husband. We can take a taxi to come and get her.”

Eun Gi turned the screen to face himself. He wasn’t entirely certain he wanted this strange woman to have his address and come into his home. The clock on the microwave told him it was after one in the morning.

“She can stay until morning if it’s too much trouble. The others won’t be back tonight.”

“Who are the others involved here?”

“Hwan is the only one here with me. Sung Soo and Min

Jae have a separate apartment, but either way, they're all out for the night."

Kelly scrutinized his face through the screen. "If anything happens to her, I will find a way to make you pay for it."

"Noted." It wouldn't be difficult for her to do so. The fans could go either way, supporting or destroying him if someone put forward allegations. "You have nothing to worry about. I just want to sleep, but I was waiting for someone to wonder where she was."

Kelly puffed up her cheeks. "Okay, fine. She can stay there, but let me know as soon as she wakes up."

"Of course."

Emotions flickered over Kelly's face before she settled on acceptance. "Thank you."

They parted ways after he provided his phone number to her so they could keep in contact. He could always get a new number if she leaked it. It wouldn't be the first time he'd had to.

Eun Gi slipped into his room and tried his best to ignore the sleeping woman on his couch. He pulled the blankets up to his chin, hoping against hope that his nightmares would give him the night off with a stranger in his home.



"*Hyung*, wake up!"

Eun Gi ignored the familiar voice on the other side of the door. Maybe its owner would leave him in peace for a few more moments of sleep.

The sound of a body thumping against the door had Eun Gi rolling over to stare at the ceiling, but exhaustion kept him pinned.

"I'm awake," he called out.

"Prove it!"

Eun Gi smiled. "Doesn't speaking prove I'm awake?"

The door cracked open. "No! I need to see your face."

A pink-haired bullet launched into the air and landed on the bed, flattening Eun Gi into the mattress. The air whooshed from his lungs. He struggled with the ball of energy that was Jeon Min Jae, the *maknae* of their group. Eun Gi nearly landed face-first as he scrambled off the bed.

Min Jae grinned. "Now you're up."

"I told you to wake him, not crush him." Sung Soo, the eldest of their group, stood by the door with a bowl in hand. He shook his head, an indulgent smile on his face. Strands of blue-tinted hair escaped into his eyes, and he pushed them back with his arm. "You two are ridiculous."

"Don't pretend you don't love us, Hyung!" Min Jae shouted to Sung Soo from the bed.

"I don't even know yooou," Sung Soo sang as he made his way back into the kitchen.

Eun Gi groaned and wandered bleary-eyed into the living room. "What're you all doing here?"

Usually they ate in Sung Soo's suite since he had his own kitchen set up just so, and was the only one of them who actually enjoyed cooking.

"We were curious about your guest." Sung Soo added the egg mixture to a pan.

Eun Gi froze when he saw the writer still nestled on his couch.

"Oh. Right."

Tessa

Tessa woke to a blazing sunbeam piercing through the large window. She grumbled and tried to burrow under her blanket, away from the light. Her head ached like the devil, but at some point she'd have to open her eyes. Voices were nearby, and it took a few moments to process that they were male and speaking Korean.

She pulled the blanket down a little and was met with a sight she didn't recognize at all.

Tessa sat up carefully, her weight sinking into the leather couch. Another equally sumptuous couch sat perpendicular to her, and a huge television was mounted on the wall. Her head swivelled toward the stainless-steel kitchen where the voices and the scent of omelets were coming from. Tessa froze.

Holy shit. It's 24/7! Why are they here? Why am I here?

Hwan noticed she was awake and motioned to UpBeat. He approached, arms crossed over his chest, and Tessa fought the urge to hide under the blanket again.

"How do you feel?" UpBeat sighed when she didn't immediately answer. "English?"

"Yes, please." She was grateful to be able to use her native language while her head was throbbing. "Where am I?"

"Our apartment," UpBeat said before explaining how she'd ended up there.

Tessa's cheeks flamed. "I'm so sorry."

"It's fine. Do you need anything?"

"Painkillers?"

UpBeat made the request in Korean, and Hwan disappeared for a minute, returning with a small pill bottle and a glass of water. Tessa accepted them without a word.

She was in the home of her favourite performers in existence, and had to figure out how to avoid making a fool of herself. Easy, right? Her tongue was a lead block in her mouth. Hwan watched her intently. She needed to say words.

“Thank you.”

Hwan blinked at her before the English words registered. He grinned, his dimples fluttering to life.

Inside, Tessa was screaming, but outside she remained neutral, weighed down by exhaustion.

“Sorry, he doesn’t speak English,” UpBeat said.

“Just Korean and Mandarin.” Tessa’s eyes widened, and she slapped a hand over her mouth. “God, I’m sorry. That’s so creepy. I promise I haven’t memorized your blood types or the names of your childhood pets.”

UpBeat gave her a chagrined look. “That’s a relief.”

Jeon Min Jae, or Jaybird, as Tessa knew him, loped into the living room and jumped onto the couch opposite her. “Good morning!”

Tessa stared at him, agape. She reeled her shock in and pasted a smile onto her face.

“Jae, don’t bother her.” UpBeat shooed him away.

Tessa swallowed down the pills and the water, wishing desperately for a toothbrush. She tried not to think about how her hair and makeup must be faring after fainting and sleeping it off on a stranger’s couch.

“Thank you for keeping me safe last night.”

UpBeat nodded. “You should call Kelly. She was worried.”

Tessa cringed at the litany of missed texts displayed on her phone screen. She sent a quick reply to tell Kelly she was awake and safe and would be heading back at the earliest opportunity.

“Do you want breakfast before you go home?” Sung Soo asked from the kitchen.

Her stomach heaved at the mere suggestion of food.

"I don't want to be a bother." Tessa winced. "More than I already have been, I mean. I'll eat when I get back to Kelly's. It's not far from here, or at least I don't think. What district are we in?"

"Gangnam," UpBeat answered. "I'll call a car for you."

If she'd been feeling well and meeting them under better circumstances, she might not have been so cripplingly awkward, but alas. The only thing she wanted right now was for the floor to open up and swallow her.

She crossed her legs, squirming in a vain attempt to thwart the desperate need to pee.

Hwan sat on the other couch and pointed toward the hall opposite the kitchen. "Toilet."

"Thank you." Tessa nodded, regretting the movement as a fresh wave of throbbing hit her. She slipped away, hiding out in the bathroom, washing up as best she could without any supplies. It wasn't as bad as she feared. The makeup Kelly had put on her had mostly held in place instead of turning her into a raccoon.

Witchcraft.

Water tamed some of the frizz, but overall her hair was a bit of a lost cause. She emerged tentatively after wasting as much time as she could.

UpBeat was fussing in the kitchen, likely eager to have her out of the way. His phone rang before she could sit back down.

"The car is here. I'll take you down."

Tessa thanked them for the hospitality and grabbed her purse, pulling on her shoes at the door. "My coat?"

"You weren't wearing one when you collapsed. I may have left it at the restaurant." He fished one out of the closet and

handed it to her. “We start filming soon. You can bring it back to me then.”

Tessa nodded slowly, dying inside over the concept of wearing her idol’s clothes. She was being ridiculous, because it was *just* a coat... but, it was *his* coat.

She slipped her arms into the blue garment and buttoned it up.

Do not, and I repeat, do not sniff. She could smell his shampoo, or something equally fragrant lingering on the fabric. *Coconut? Oh my God. Stop it. You’re a grown-ass adult.*

The trip down to the front doors was silent and awkward. Tessa wanted so badly to be charming, but she felt like trash. She was in too much pain to be witty, to put on a bright smile and give him some reason to think of her past this moment.

“Have a safe trip back,” he said, pausing at the exit doors of the apartment building.

“Thank you, again.” She forced her lips into an upwards curve, but she wasn’t certain whether it came across as a smile or a grimace. The doorman cast her a speculative look as she slipped past him and settled into the black sedan waiting out front.

The Han River glittered in the morning sun as they crossed it, traveling from Gangnam to Itaewon. Tessa thanked the driver upon arrival and was declined when she tried to pay. UpBeat had already covered it.

Kelly was at the doors when Tessa got out. “You’re here! How are you feeling?”

“Like a pile of ass. I’m sorry I worried you. I should have come home before dinner, but I wasn’t sure how to excuse myself when it was the first time meeting everyone.”

“It’s okay. Let’s get you upstairs. I know your migraines knock you on your ass, so you can have some food and then you’re going back to bed.”

“Okay.”

“Be prepared to love me because I made you *canjica*. I ordered in the maize so I’d have it when you were here. I figured it would be easy on your stomach and at least get some food into you.”

“You’re a goddess.”

Inside, Tessa changed into pajamas while Kelly ladled out a bowl of the sweet maize porridge. With a satisfied stomach, Tessa climbed into Kelly and Min Joo’s bed with the curtains drawn.

“I’ll check on you later,” Kelly said. “I’m going to film some videos while you rest. Just some vlogs so you don’t have to listen to me clanging around for a cooking one. Sweet dreams, Tess.”

Tessa nodded, waiting to succumb to sleep. Maybe when she woke she’d find all this humiliation had been a dream.