



# From Paris to Seoul

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** If you love K-dramas but wish they turned up the heat —this novel is for you!

Seo-yeon has always followed the script: perfect daughter, rising actress, the picture of success. But after a painful breakup from a long-term relationship and mounting pressure from all sides, she flees to Paris, desperate for a moment to breathe.

Baekhyun has never had the luxury of chasing dreams. A minor model with a family to support after his father vanished, he's spent years hustling, not hoping. When he meets Seo-yeon in the City of Lights, love isn't part of the plan—just a few unforgettable nights. No strings, no promises, no complications.

But not everything that happens in Paris stays there.

Back in Seoul, reality is impossible to ignore. Careers are shifting, expectations are closing in, and starting over in their thirties feels more daunting than ever.

Was it just the magic of Paris? Or is this the start of something neither of them saw coming?

**Total Pages (Source):** 69

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Seo-yeon

The camera flashed for what felt like the hundredth time. I shifted poses, tilting my chin just so, plastering on a smile that barely reached my eyes. The designer dress was gorgeous—sure—but it clung a little too tightly, like plastic wrap stretched over a supermarket rotisserie chicken.

“Perfect, Seo-yeon! Just like that,” the photographer gushed, practically buzzing with excitement.

I resisted the urge to raise an eyebrow. You sure?

I knew the routine by heart: tilt, smile, hold. Repeat. And yet, all I could think about was how exhausting it was to play pretend. Working in this industry—model, actress—was supposed to be all glitz and glamour, right? So why did I feel more like a mannequin than a person?

My phone buzzed from the makeup table, snapping me out of my thoughts. During a brief pause, I grabbed it, blinking against the lingering glare of camera flashes. A message from my sister.

“Don’t forget about tonight. 7 PM sharp.”

Oh, right. The charity gala. Another night of smiling, waving, playing my part.

I exhaled and typed a quick message to my boyfriend, Cho Min-seok. “Oppa, are you going to pick me up after my shoot?” Not that I expected a fast reply—he was probably in a meeting, as always. Still, I waited a second longer than necessary before setting my phone down.

“Seo-yeon,” the photographer called. “You’re thinking too much. You’re crinkling your forehead—very dangerous habit. Might cause wrinkles,” he added with a wink.

I forced a polite laugh. “Got it.”

Another hour. More poses. More flashes. By the time we wrapped, my smile felt permanently stuck to my face. I muttered thanks to the crew and checked my phone.

No reply.

I sighed. Why do I even bother hoping?

“Ji-a,” I called, showing her the address. “Could you give me a ride to the hotel?”

She barely glanced at the screen before smirking. “Suuure.” The knowing tone in her voice said it all.

Ji-a’s been my assistant-slash-caretaker-slash-best-friend for the past couple of years. Honestly, she does everything for me. I even call her “Mommy” sometimes because she takes better care of me than my own mom—despite being two years younger.

A few minutes later, I heard a quickbeep-beep from outside. That had to be Ji-a. I changed out of my dress as fast as I could, said goodbye to the photographer and his crew, and hurried out the door.

Just as we hit the road, my phone buzzed again. Min-seok's name popped up on the screen with his usual lukewarm response: "Sorry, I had a meeting all day. Meet you at the gala?"

I let out a deeper sigh, bordering on dramatic. It was always like this—his texts felt more like they were coming from my accountant than my boyfriend. Six years together and a future ahead of us, but lately, it felt like I was the only one invested in it.

As we neared the hotel, I grabbed my vanity case and checked my makeup in the tiny mirror. A quick spritz of settingspray—more for my sanity than anything else—and I braced for what was to come.

I could already picture the next few hours: me, smiling and nodding, playing the role of the perfect daughter, paraded around the room by my parents and clinging to my boyfriend's arm like a trophy, while pretending to enjoy endless small talk with a crowd of old geezers.

Okay, maybe calling them old geezers was a bit much, but honestly, I'd rather be at home watching some trashy TV show, reading a book, or playing the piano. Even a trip to the dentist sounded more appealing than this.

But, ever the good daughter, I accepted my fate.

With the venue now in sight, I absentmindedly checked my makeup in the mirror, smoothing my lipstick and adjusting my necklace. A few deep breaths, and I was ready—or at least pretending to be.

"Ya, Seo-yeon-ah! Hurry up! There are cars waiting behind us!" Ji-a's voice snapped me out of my little beauty ritual. I glanced out the window and realized we'd already reached the hotel lobby.

I quickly jumped out of the car, careful not to trip over my heels. I waved at Ji-a, who gave me a thumbs up before driving off to park.

A concierge greeted me at the entrance and took my coat, guiding me toward my parents.

## Page 2

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They were impeccably dressed, as always. My dad—the host of the annual MarineTech Association charity gala—looked sharp in a deep navy suit, while my mom stood beside him, every bit the perfect gala wife in a flowing beige gown that draped her figure gracefully. They gave me a brief nod to acknowledge my arrival before returning to their conversation with the guests in front of them.

“Mr. Kang, this is our youngest daughter, Seo-yeon,” my mom said, gently pulling me to her side as she introduced me to the white-haired man they’d been chatting with. I bowed and smiled politely, just as I’d imagined the night would go.

The man went on and on about his daughter who’s living in the U.S. and how he’ll be visiting her and his grandson next month. I nodded, pretending to look enthusiastic while my gaze drifted to the waiter in the background, carrying a tray of champagne glasses and what looked like shrimp cocktails.

I automatically did the math in my head: each shrimp has about six or seven calories, so I can indulge in a few. But the calories aren’t the issue—it’s the salt. Too much, and my cheeks might get puffy, and I can’t afford that because I have something planned for tonight.

My mom shot me a warning glance, so I nodded even harder at whatever Mr. Kang was saying. After hundreds of these parties, I’d become an expert at pretending to be engaged while my mind wandered elsewhere. Besides, I had a feeling Mr. Kang loved talking about himself and didn’t particularly care if anyone was actually listening.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a familiar couple surrounded by guests.

The petite woman, despite her high heels, looked tiny next to the tall man beside her, who seemed gigantic in comparison. Many guests seemed intrigued by them, chattering and giggling with excitement before the woman swiftly slipped away to grab a mini hamburger from a passing tray.

Ah, if it wasn't theitcouple, Ryu Ji-yong and Han Yumi.

Ji-yong and I went to drama school together, and currently he's undoubtedly one of the country's most famous actors.

The petite woman by his side is his girlfriend, Han Yumi, an actress in her own right, though she's had more success on theater stage than on TV screen. The three of us co-starred in thehistorical drama TV seriesPrincess of Cosmosa few years back, so seeing them here was a nice surprise.

I noticed Yumi's face light up the moment she took a bite of the mini hamburger. God, I envied her. Most people in the industry started strict diets at a young age, but there were exceptions like Yumi, who could eat whatever she wanted and still look petite.

Her figure and her appetite were a complete mystery. Once, to my horror, I saw her wolfing down not one but two bowls of tteokbokki from our lunch bus on set—a calorie load that would last me the whole week! I could only hope she didn't have a stomach worm.

I caught Ji-yong's loving gaze as he watched Yumi, amusement dancing in his eyes as she wiped a smudge of ketchup from her cheek with a cheeky shrug.

Watching them made my stomach knot lightly. Was it envy? Or was it just the sweetness of the moment—like that warm feeling you get watching a litter of puppies? I couldn't quite tell, but they seemed almosttooperfect together.

Well, Ji-yong had always been Mr. Perfect, even back in our university days, which was exactly why I never had a crush on him. He seemed unreal—like a Ken in a Barbie world.

A gentle tap on my shoulder startled me, as if my ‘bird-watching’ activity had been interrupted. I turned to see Min-seok, my boyfriend, looking a bit worn out. The soft lines at the corners of his eyes had deepened slightly, enhancing his charm.

Being seven years older, he carried that aura of a successful, attractive, middle-aged lawyer: polished, classy and rich.

I smiled back as he smiled at me, slipping my hand onto his arm, doing my best impression of the perfect gala girlfriend.

Onstage, my dad stood at the podium, thanking everyone for their generosity and explaining how their donations would support MarineTech’s mission to preserve marine biodiversity.

I snorted in disbelief. The hypocrisy was off the charts—his company is one of South Korea’s largest producers of industrial seaweed, a business that directly contributed to the loss of marine biodiversity.

The night wore on as we mingled with VIPs, chatted with Ji-yong and Yumi, and exchanged sarcastic jokes in hushed tones with my sister, Yae-rin. I did my best not to yawn too openly.

Finally, a little before midnight, once the ‘mandatory attendance’ time had passed, Min-seok and I said our goodbyes, citing early morning plan. My parents and sister stayed at the party, which meant I could finally have some alone time with Min-seok for a while.



“Should we go to your place?” I suggested as we hopped into his car. Min-seok nodded, though not very enthusiastically, and replied, “Sure, why not.” We drove mostly in silence until we finally arrived at his place—a sleek apartment in a downtown high-rise.

As soon as we stepped inside, he loosened his cravat, grabbed a cold beer from the fridge, offered me one, and then sank into the sofa, closing his eyes for a moment and pressing his fingers against his temples.

I had to admit, my plan for the night wasn’t off to a great start.

“Did something happen at work today?” I asked.

He sighed. “Same old, same old. My client wasn’t too happy with how things were progressing,” he replied with a shrug. “How about you?”

I shrugged back, smirking as I moved closer to him. My hand traced his chest in a suggestive manner as I unbuttoned the top of his shirt.

At the beginning of our relationship, he always said it turned him on when a woman made the first move. But this time, I wasn’t sure if he was genuinely interested or just felt obliged to play along.

Still, he returned the gesture, his hand trailing over the top of my dress as he undid the buttons one by one.

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He paused, noticing the new red lingerie I'd put on. He grinned and gave an appreciative nod.

I felt a small jolt of triumph. With our busy schedules, it had been over a month since we'd last had sex. And while I hadn't exactly been craving it, I was starting to worry about our relationship.

So, I made plans to spend more time together and spent hours last weekend shopping for sexy lingerie, hoping tonight would be the night to rekindle things (and maybe even score a marriage proposal?).

I just want to feel seen and desired again... and I'm ready to take the next step in our relationship.

We aren't exactly young anymore—I'm in my mid-thirties, and he's in his early forties. It feels like the right time to move forward, to reignite whatever spark we still have.

So when he kissed me, I kissed him back. When his hands roamed over my body, I told myself this was what I wanted.

We quickly moved to his bedroom, and he positioned himself on top of me. After a bit of fumbling, he managed to remove my new red lingerie, leaving us both naked. He began grinding against me, and I let out a small sound, adding a touch of enthusiasm.

I would have loved to have a bit more of 'appetizer' before the 'main dish', but as

usual, he didn't think it was necessary and plunged straight into action.

But I knew I just had to endure this a little bit more. I 'participated' for a bit until I heard him grunt and then went limp on top of me, his breath heavy and uneven.

Well, at least we did it, I tried to reassure myself, even though I felt... a bit like a letdown.

After six years together and a long day at work, it's hard to keep things feeling hot and steamy anyway, I reminded myself.

We lay in bed for a while. "That was nice," he said once his breathing returned to normal.

Nice? The word echoed in my mind, loud and insistent. Nice like the weather? Or like a decent plate of kimchi fried rice?

Then he got up, started getting dressed, and headed to the bathroom to clean up. "I'll take you home," he called out as he disappeared into the hallway.

Huh, I thought. Very transactional... No exchanged smiles, no giggles, no cuddles, no... nothing.

How was this any different from being a prostitute?

Lying there, doubt began to seep into my mind. Is this how I'll spend the next 50 or 60 years of my life?

I felt the weight of my choices pressing down on me. On one hand, we'd been together forever, and he checked all the boxes for an ideal husband—at least by my parents' standards. On the other hand, I couldn't shake the feeling of being unwanted

and... unsexy.

But the thought of starting over—dating someone new again, in my thirties, after six years in a comfortable relationship—was terrifying.

I sighed, trying to push those thoughts away, then picked up my lingerie from the floor (which now felt pretty ridiculous) along with the rest of my dress.

I guess you just have to take one small victory at a time and learn to be content with it.

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Baekhyun

“Mm... Samgyetang Express chicken soup!”

“Practical,” I replied with my brightest smile, looking at the camera while holding up a spoonful of the questionable chicken broth.

“Easy,” Tae-hyun, who was playing as my child, looked back at me with an equally big grin.

“And yummy!” we both exclaimed simultaneously, taking a spoonful to our mouths and savoring the salty broth.

“Alright, cut!” The director reviewed the scene on his camera screen and gave us a thumbs-up along with a nod of approval.

I exhaled in relief, eager to wrap up this day. This was already the sixth take of a supposedly simple act of pretending to enjoy some awful instant soup.

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I swear, I'd never touch Samgyetang Express—even if we were on the brink of a zombie apocalypse with no other food options.

I raised my hands for a high-five with Tae-hyun and took my excuse to step outside for a quick smoke.

“You did it, bro!” My manager, Byung-ho, chimed in, joining me for the smoke in the smoking area outside.

I shrugged. “It’s just a soup commercial,” I replied, taking a puff. “Could you stop hooking me up with these kinds of commercials and find me a deal for an AAA film?” I said, only half-joking.

“You want the money or not?” Byung-ho shot back, puffing on his cigarette.

I laughed and nodded. “You’re right, the money is good.” At the same time, I absentmindedly checked my bank account on my phone, silently calculating in my head.

It had slowly become a habit to check my bank account—like staring into an empty fridge when you’re hungry, hoping it will magically be stocked with food.

As a hustler in the industry—modeling, taking small roles in dramas, commercials, music videos, or variety shows... pretty much anything that pays—I wouldn’t call myself poor.

But with an absent father, a mother who earned just enough for covering day-to-day

expenses and a little sister who just started university, life's becoming a bit more expensive.

And in this line of work, it's only a matter of time before my expiration date hits and I'm replaced by someone younger with fewer wrinkles. I've got to make as much as I can, while I still can.

A notification flashed across my screen, covering up the balance in my bank account.

"Oppa, are you done with shooting?" the text read, complete with a cute bunny sticker.

"There's a new restaurant in town I'm dying to try. Let's meet there tonight at 8," she added, with the address attached.

Ah, right. And having a so-called girlfriend definitely doesn't do my wallet any favors.

When was the last time I saw Sun-hee? I tried to remember—probably almost a week ago. There was no question mark in her text, so it wasn't a suggestion; it was an order. And if I tried to cancel on her tonight, she'd definitely be pissed.

I finished my cigarette and turned to Byung-ho. "Hyung, I gotta go. Let me know as soon as you book me a new gig?"

"Sure, sure, go run to your girlfriend," he teased. "I'll handle the paperwork here and update you on payment soon."

"Perfect," I called over my shoulder before heading back inside the studio for quick goodbyes, then making my way to this "must-try" restaurant.

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I arrived at the Italian restaurant downtown a solid five minutes before 8, managing to beat the traffic and feeling a bit proud of myself.

Sun-hee was already outside, waiting in line to get in. She wore a stylish long coat over a mini-skirt with stockings and sneakers, despite the chilly February air.

“Oppa!” she called out cheerfully. “Come, come, say hi to my followers,” she said, holding up her phone for a live shot.

Besides some modeling gigs, Sun-hee is also a social media influencer. I was a little hesitant about that before we ended up together—having a camera in my face during my downtime isn’t exactly my idea of relaxing. But I tried to remind myself that it’s just part of who she is.

After a long sigh, I mustered a smile and waved at her phone camera, trying not to feel too silly.

Dating someone younger definitely has its challenges.

Sometimes, I feel like she gets caught up in things that wouldn’t even cross my mind... or maybe it’s just me forgetting what it’s like to be her age.

“So, now that my boyfriend’s here, we’re heading inside!” Sun-hee chirped into her phone, addressing her followers with the ease of a pro. “I made a reservation, so we’re all set!” she whispered to the camera as we entered the restaurant.

“What should I order...?” she mused aloud during her stream, scrolling through and reading comments from her followers. “Hmm, I’m torn between the vegetable lasagna and the mushroom risotto. I heard those are their specialties!”



She kept chatting to her phone, sharing her thoughts on the restaurant's decor, the menu, and just about everything else—basically ignoring me until the food arrived.

Then came the photo session: at least ten shots of her plate, and a few of mine for good measure.

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Finally, she took a bite. “Mmm, so yummy! I totally recommend this place!” she said with a bit of an exaggerated smile. “Alright, now we’re going to enjoy our meal, so catch you on the next food vlog, Sunny-side Up Lovers!” She ended the live-session with the name of her followers, which is a playful wordplay on her own name.

She glanced at me after finishing her vlog and, without even taking a breath, launched into her monologue. “Oh right, oppa! It’s hard to believe, but I’ve been invited to Paris Fashion Week! How cool is that?”

She kept going, “It’s next week, and my agency is covering the hotel while I’m there. Can you come with me? Please, please? You just need to buy the plane tickets!”

I blinked, caught off guard. “Uh, hello? How are you? How was your day?” was all I could manage.

She giggled, “Good, good! So what do you think about Paris? It’s going to be amazing—tons of celebrities, famous people... and it’s Paris! Can you imagine? I’ve never been, but I just know it’ll be glamorous and romantic.”

“I... well...” The wheels in my head started turning. I’d just paid my sister’s semester tuition, and I think I’ve still got some spare cash in my account. Instinctively, I checked my bank balance again and quickly looked up the price of a round-trip ticket from Seoul to Paris. Oh, 1 million won. Not bad, especially with the hotel covered.

“Can I think about it first? When do you need a final answer?”

She pouted, and I knew her well enough to tell that “no” wasn’t an option. “I’m flying out next Monday, so I need to know pretty soon.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll check with Byung-ho, see if I’ve got any shoots lined up.” I smiled, keeping things light. “How’s your food? Not planning to finish it?”

She gave me a look like I’d just said something completely ridiculous. “Finish all these carbs? No way.”

I shrugged, taking a big bite of my pizza to make a point (and maybe annoy her a little). But she’d already lost interest in me and was back to scrolling Instagram, eyeing branded fashion.

I tell myself I’m being dramatic, but every now and then, I get this nagging feeling that I’m more of a placeholder than a priority.

That thought’s a little too depressing, though, so I focus on my pizza, wolfing it down while I mull over the idea of going to Paris.

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“I’m home,” I called out as I stepped into my mom’s Chinese-Korean restaurant, which was already closed for the day.

She’s been running this place for over 20 years, ever since she opened it just months before my dad disappeared without a word. The second and third floors have always been our home, so I’m used to the ever-present scent of cooking oil, soy sauce, and grease that clings to the walls.

Growing up here meant countless hours spent as an unpaid waiter, dishwasher, or whatever else needed doing. It wasn’t glamorous, but it was our life—and it kept us

afloat.

“Oh, Baekhyun, have you eaten yet?” As always, it was her first question, no matter the hour.

“Yeah, I had dinner.” I walked toward the kitchen to find her. “What about you?”

“I did, I did. Just the leftover jjajangmyeon, as usual.” She smiled while scrubbing the last of the dishes.

“Mom, you shouldn’t be eating jjajangmyeon so often. It’s not healthy,” I frowned.

“Yes, yes, I know. But I made too much again, and we didn’t sell it all. I’d rather eat it myself than throw it out or serve it unfresh,” she replied with a small shrug, her familiar practicality showing.

“Well, tomorrow, I’m bringing takeout, so don’t you dare eat the leftovers,” I said as I rolled up my sleeves and started helping with the dishes. Watching her like this tugged at my heart a little. She deserved better.

She nodded, waving me off. “Yeah, yeah. Go on, take a shower and get some rest.”

I quickly rinsed the last plate, offered a small, closed-lip smile, and headed upstairs.

On the second floor, loud metal music blared behind a ‘No Entry’ sign. I shook my head, amused—my sister Ye-bin, ten years younger than me, was deep into her metal phase, just like I’d been at her age.

Maybe that’s why I understood her a little too well. And maybe that’s also why I couldn’t help but feel sorry for her—she never even knew our dad. He walked out on us when she was just a few months old.

What kind of man does that, honestly? Abandoning his own family like we meant nothing. Sometimes I wonder if Ye-bin ever thinks about him, but she never says a word. Maybe it's easier that way, not knowing.

Deciding to skip teasing her today, I climbed the last flight of stairs to the top floor, slipped into my room, and quickly changed into my home clothes.

I grabbed a book from my desk, right next to my electric bass, then flopped onto the bed.

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“Aimer, ce n’est pas se regarder l’un l’autre, c’est regarder ensemble dans la même direction,” I muttered while reading *Le Petit Prince* in its original French. Then, with a small smile, I added, “Le premier amour est plus aimé, le reste est mieux aimé.”

Saying it out loud made me feel a bit silly, and I was pretty sure my pronunciation was borderline catastrophic—but I couldn’t help myself.

I must’ve rehearsed those lines a thousand times, gearing up for an audition where I only had to deliver three sentences in French.

I stressed over every word, every syllable, obsessing about my accent... and in the end, I didn’t even get the part.

But ever since, I’ve been practicing my French pronunciation little by little, enchanted by the poetic works of French writers like Antoine de Saint-Exupéry.

Going to Paris seems like the perfect opportunity to practice French. But will anyone there actually understand me if I try?

A guy like me, going to Paris... really?

Out of habit, I checked my bank account again. Well, at least a guy could dream, right?

With a sigh, I picked up my electric bass and let my fingers move across the strings, playing whatever tune came to mind. Anything to blow off some steam.

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Seo-yeon

The aggressive honk of a car jolted me from my wandering thoughts. We'd been stuck in traffic for over 40 minutes, and I was already 5 minutes late for a small role in a TV drama shoot.

I hate being late, but some things are just out of our control—like highway closures from road accidents for example.

Ji-a tapped the steering wheel impatiently, clicking her tongue and huffing in frustration.

I love Ji-a. I really do. If I ever turned lesbian, she'd be my top pick for marriage. But put her behind the wheel, and she transforms into a full-on ogre.

"Ji-a...?" I ventured, cautiously. "Want me to drive instead?"

She shot me a look, one eyebrow raised and practically steaming. "And just how do you think we're going to swap seats here? We're gridlocked!" With a sigh, she rummaged through her bag, pulled out two big chocolate bars, and handed one to me. She unwrapped the other and took a big, satisfying bite.

"Okay, I feel a bit better," she admitted, her irritation softening as the sugar kicked in.

"See, you're so lucky you can eat whatever you want," I muttered, carefully picking an almond from the candy bar and separating the chocolate from it piece by piece.

As I munched on the almonds, stuck in the endless traffic jam, I spoke absentmindedly. “Can I tell you something?” I began. “I think Min-seok is acting kind of weird.”

Ji-a shot me a look and raised an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

I hummed, pausing for a moment before continuing. “He’s been a little... ‘absent’ lately, I thought it was just because he’s busy with work. But last night, at another work party, I swear I caught the scent of a woman’s perfume on his shirt.”

I was met with a moment of silence, then Ji-a spoke up. “Min-seok? Really...? I mean, no offense, but it’s hard to imagine he’d do something like that.” She kept her eyes on the road. “He’s kind of... predictable.”

“I thought so too. And I’ve been with him for so long, I thought I know every little thing about him,” I said, agreeing. “But... I don’t know. He just feels a little... off.”

Ji-a shrugged. “I think you should trust your gut. But... I don’t know, try to get some more evidence before you go jumping to conclusions. Should we trail him tonight?”

Suddenly, I imagined Ji-a and me going undercover—sunglasses and headscarves, straight out of a spy movie. I chuckled to myself; it felt absurdly childish, especially for tailing a man in his early forties.

“Nah... It must’ve just been my imagination,” I muttered, pushing the thought out of my mind for the moment. The traffic crawled along, and I sighed as I saw the red lines everywhere on the GPS.

When we finally arrived at the shooting location, I was greeted by the Producer-Director (PD) and the film crew, none of whom seemed too thrilled. I apologized profusely and we got on with the shoot.



It had been a long, exhausting day—even though I was only playing a minor role, nowhere near the lead. I spent more time waiting around and getting my makeup retouched than actually being on camera. By the time we wrapped up, it was already 9 p.m.

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I stepped outside to clear my spinning head, braving the brisk, chilly wind for a breath of fresh air. I walked a bit away from the studio, and before long, I heard some familiar voices.

“I’m so glad we’re done with that scene,” one of them said, followed by a deep breath—like they were about to light up a cigarette.

“Yeah, I’m glad too. But that Seo-yeon, though... she needs to pay for our overtime,” the other voice added with a chuckle.

I realized it was the voice of the PD and the casting director. They must’ve been on a cigarette break.

They were inside the smoking booth, so they couldn’t see me. But if I walked back toward the building, my footsteps would definitely give me away.

I felt a little awkward eavesdropping, but at the same time, I couldn’t help wondering what else they were saying about me.

“Yeah, I don’t know what else to do with her... I mean, isn’t she already in her mid-thirties? But she’s always playing minor roles—second lead, at best. I think that’s about as far as her career’s going to go.”

“You think it’s time for her to go under the knife?”

“Nah,” the casting director said. “She’s not bad-looking. She’s got that natural beauty. But... I don’t know. She’s missing something. Like... she’s just plain and

boring.”

The PD chuckled. “Well, then it’s gonna be tough. Not even plastic surgery’s gonna fix that.”

I had to bite my lip to keep from screaming.

Great. Just what I needed to end this awful day.

I’d worked with them for years, even if only in minor roles. I thought they at least respected me as a colleague.

But how could they be so... mean? Being called ‘boring’ had to be the ultimate insult.

The prickling sensation in my eyes threatened tears.

I overheard them gossiping about others, commenting on the acting and appearances of the actors in the drama.

After a while, they finally left, and I had to fight to keep my legs from giving out after crouching behind the bush for so long.

As they walked back into the studio, I considered slipping away without saying goodbye. But I stayed—because that’s what was expected of me, right? The perfect daughter, the perfect girlfriend, the perfect minor actress... even if, in the end, I was just plain and boring.

I straightened up, forced a smile, held my tears at bay, and said my goodbyes to the crew before heading to my car—left by Ji-a this morning—and driving straight to Min-seok’s place.

He's my boyfriend, and if I can't find comfort in him, then who else would I turn to?

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The ride to his place went smoothly, with no traffic jams, in contrast to this morning. I arrived at his parking lot and took a moment to collect myself, taking a few deep breaths. What should I even say to Min-seok?

Maybe I don't need to say anything at all. Maybe all I need is for him to hold me in his arms and tell me everything will be okay.

I wasn't even sure if he was home yet. I hesitated for a moment, debating whether I should give him a call, but I remembered he'd given me his spare key card for emergencies.

I'd never come to his place unannounced like this, but whatever—this feels like an emergency to me.

I swiped the card to open the apartment door from the parking lot, then used it again on his front door before typing in the security code.

As I opened the door, I expected him to be surprised (but happy) to see me. At worst, I figured I'd find an empty apartment where I could chill, steal a beer, and cry on his couch.

But instead, I found him on that very couch, straddled by a woman wearing a sheer leopard-patterned cape over provocative lingerie.

He looked surprised, alright.

"Seo-yeon? What... what are you doing here?" Min-seok stammered, pushing the

woman off his lap and walking toward the foyer half-naked.

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There was no other way to interpret what I just saw. My mind went blank, like my soul had just left my body and was watching this event unfold from the outside, laughing hysterically.

“You stupid girl,” I heard my ‘soul’ mocking me, cackling like crazy.

Even though the whole thing lasted no more than two minutes, it felt like it happened in slow motion in my head. And with nothing left to say, I just... left.

I slammed the door behind me and ran to my car. That jerk didn’t even try to chase after me.

Suddenly, everything clicked—the scent of a woman’s perfume on his shirt, the lack of intimacy, and his absence over the past few months...

My vision blurred by tears as I drove home, reflecting on all the years we had spent together, now feeling like nothing but wasted time.

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“There you are! I’ve been freaking out, looking for you everywhere! Your sister said you left this morning without a word, and I had to track you down using find location on my phone!” Ji-a said, rushing to sit across from me in the hospital cafeteria.

“I nearly had a heart attack when I saw your location pop up at a hospital! Are you okay? You didn’t get into an accident, did you?!”

“Sssh,” was all I managed to say as I slurped the last of my iced coffee latte. “I’m okay... more or less,” I replied, sinking behind my oversized sunglasses.

Not that I really needed them—I’m hardly a famous actress; no one’s lining up for my autograph or anything. But everything that had happened over the past few days felt so... traumatic and, frankly, embarrassing. I wore my sunglasses like armor, as if hiding behind the dark lenses could make me invisible, letting me escape the weight of it all. “What happened to you?” Ji-a demanded.

Instead of answering her question, I realized something. “Wait, you can track my location on your phone? What the hell?” I raised my voice, still processing how she’d managed to find me.

“Well, yeah, we agreed to share our locations in case of emergencies, remember? So... this is an emergency,” she declared.

I guess she had a point. I hadn’t shown up at the shoot yesterday and had practically disappeared for the past two days—just holed up in my room, crying and eating ice cream. Super classic drama material, right?

I guess I am boring after all.

“That jerk, Min-seok...” I muttered, starting my explanation. My voice was barely above a whisper, just in case anyone was listening.

“That son of a bitch—an eternally semi-limp guy—cheated on me,” I finally told Ji-a, my anger bubbling up. All the heartache had faded, replaced by pure fury.

And the sadness I felt over the past two days? Yeah, it wasn’t because I lost someone I loved—it was because I wasted so much time on him!

Six years, the prime of my life, gone.

I've technically only ever been with one guy my entire life, and honestly, he wasn't even worth it.

Since the incident, he's been blowing up my phone with calls and texts—even showing up at my place once. Thankfully, my parents weren't home; I suspect they would've taken his side.

But I think, after a few days of silence from me, he's finally gotten the message: we're over.

“He... what?” Ji-a's eyes widened as she suddenly leapt out of her seat, almost like a character straight out of a cartoon. “Thatssibal saekki!” she burst out. “Let's go to his place and beat him up!”

I chuckled—so typical of Ji-a.

“And what, get arrested for trespassing and assault?” I raised an eyebrow. “Just let it go. He's not worth it.”

Ji-a plopped back down, still fuming. “Okay, fair point. But I'm so pissed. I mean, who does he think he is?! How did you even find out? And why are you at the hospital?” Her questions kept firing off like a machine gun.

“I went to his place two days ago and found him with a woman... who looked like an escort,” I shrugged. “So I came here to check if I'd caught something from him or—god forbid—if I'm pregnant.”

Ji-a looked shocked. “And? What did the results say?”



“Yeah, I’m clean,” I said with a sigh. “And not pregnant.”

I leaned back, feeling the weight of everything. “I swear, Ji-a, I’m just so done with everything. I need to get away. Somewhere far.”

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And suddenly, a wild idea popped into my head. I grabbed my phone, opened the map, and said, “Alright, let’s see where my finger lands. Random choice... here we go.”

I closed my eyes, held my breath, and randomly tapped a spot on the map.

I looked down, smiling. “Oh look, my finger’s got good taste. It says... Europe.”

I felt a spark of excitement. “Of course. Paris. It’s been way too long since I’ve been there!”

“But wait...”

And even before Ji-a finished her sentence, I already booked a return ticket to Paris for next week.

For a moment, as the adrenaline coursed through my system, I felt a rush of satisfaction.

So who’s boring now? I muttered to myself, a grin tugging at my lips.

4

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Baekhyun

Paris is everything I imagined... and so much more. After 15 hours on the plane and battling exhaustion (since, naturally, I couldn't sleep on the flight), we finally arrived at a beautiful boutique hotel downtown, along with a bunch of other models, all courtesy of Sun-hee's agency.

The next day, despite the jet lag, we dove into exploring the city. My first impression of Paris is pure amazement at its breathtaking architecture—the centuries-old buildings, majestic cathedrals, iconic museums... even the bridges are a sight to behold.

I could lose myself for hours at the Pont Alexandre III, watching the sunlight dance on the Seine below and waiting for the streetlights to flicker on.

I'm starting to think this might be the most beautiful city in the world. Though, to be fair, I can't really compare it to anywhere else, since this is the first time I've ever left Korea.

But the city also has its surprises: smelly metro stations, food that's a world away from what we're used to in Korea, and... that complicated, seemingly impossible language.

I was so excited when I first spoke very broken French at the airport, and people actually understood me! And I understood them too! But as I continued, some French people scrunched up their noses. I didn't take it personally, though; I know my French is far from perfect.

Sun-hee praised me, pleasantly surprised that I could speak a little French. For a moment, it almost felt like I was living in my own Western TV series.

But, as with everything, there's a downside. Traveling with influencers and models means every second of the day turns into content creation. Sun-hee had been busy the

entire trip, spending nearly all her time vlogging and taking pictures for her followers.

And when I say everything is content, I mean everything. Airplane food? Gotta find the right angle! Our hotel room in Paris? That's at least ten minutes of footage right there. First croissant? Get ready for twenty minutes of reactions, angles, filters—and oh, now she's going into full “review mode.” I can already imagine the title of a video on her channel: ‘I tried the 10 best croissants in Paris’ or something like that.

The rare times she actually speaks to me are usually to ask me to take countless photos of her or to grumble that the angle makes her look fat. How a 45 kg grown woman could possibly look “fat” in a picture is beyond me.

And then there's the shopping situation.

I get that Paris is basically a sacred site for luxury-brand lovers, but they're genuinely more excited about queuing for hours in the freezing weather outside designer stores than they are about exploring the city itself.

I could probably point out Notre Dame right next to us, but they wouldn't care unless a luxury bag store was in their line of sight.

So on the third day, I actually felt a bit relieved to explore the city on my own while Sun-hee attended Fashion Week.

“Oppa, let's meet tonight after Fashion Week at a restaurant near Opéra Garnier?” she suggested.

“Sure, just send me the address and let me know when you're almost done,” I replied as we left the hotel. She nodded and headed off with her loud influencer-slash-model friends, all busy commenting on each other's shoes.

I watched them leave for a moment. I really don't get that obsession with fashion and designer brands.

I can appreciate a neat or cool outfit, of course. But for me, fashion is just... fashion. There's no deeper meaning behind it.

I continued walking in the opposite direction, considering the metro, but the weather was too perfect to be stuck underground.

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So I kept strolling and eventually arrived at the iconic Eiffel Tower, doing an internal ‘ooh’ and ‘aaah’ as I took it in with my own eyes, before making my way down the Avenue des Champs-Élysées.

I even climbed to the top of the Arc de Triomphe, where I could see twelve avenues branching out in flawless symmetry. The view of the city was breathtaking, but at the same time, I felt a twinge of melancholy.

I should’ve wanted to experience all of this with my girlfriend, right? But honestly, I didn’t feel that way at all. In fact, I felt a bit relieved she wasn’t here—she’d be too busy recording and taking pictures instead of simply enjoying the incredible surroundings.

Am I in the right relationship...?

Then again, if it weren’t for Sun-hee, I wouldn’t even be in Paris.

Pushing those thoughts aside, I decided to video call my little sister.

“OPPPAAAA!!!” she screamed on the second ring. “ARE YOU REALLY IN PARIS?? Show me! Show me!”

I chuckled at her enthusiasm and waved hi when I saw my mom join beside her.

“Yeah, so I’m at the Arc de Triomphe now,” I said into my phone, hoping my pronunciation wasn’t too far off and carefully angling the camera to get the perfect shot. “Not sure if you can see behind me, but the background here is pretty stunning.”

I slowly turned, giving them a full view of the majestic panorama.

“Oooh, so beautiful! You’re so lucky!” Ye-bin squealed. “I wish I could go there one day!”

I nodded, glancing at the city stretching endlessly below. “Yeah, we should come here one day.”

My mom, who had been quietly listening, smiled warmly. “Of course, you’ll take us all on a trip around the world one day. But you’re already doing so much—just make sure to take care of yourself first.”

There was a brief pause, and the familiar weight of being the family’s main provider settled onto my shoulders—just as it always had since Dad left when I was young.

Had she really meant it when she said I’d take them on a trip around the world one day? Or was it just something she said in the moment, caught up in the view, in the idea of us sharing something beautiful together? Somehow, though, those words had turned into an expectation—one I wasn’t sure how to feel about.

Guilt tugged at me. I was here, wasn’t I? Taking time for myself, spending money on something that had nothing to do with them. Shouldn’t I be saving for them instead?

But at the same time... why was that my responsibility?

The thoughts pressed in, uncomfortable and unwelcome, but I pushed them aside.

“Don’t worry, Mom. I’m doing fine,” I said finally, forcing a reassuring smile.

I continued to chat some more with them before heading to Opéra Garnier, feeling proud of myself for navigating on the metro like the locals.

Sun-hee hadn't texted me yet, so I decided to take a little tour inside the stunning Opéra Garnier, a place that felt like something straight out of a dream.

The lavish architecture, the grand staircases, the dazzling chandeliers—it all felt surreal. On one of the walls, the year of its construction was etched: 1861. It was mind-boggling to think that this building, with all its majestic grandeur, had stood the test of time for nearly two centuries.

As I wandered through the halls, taking in the beauty of the place and snapping a few photos for my personal documentary, my eyes suddenly caught a familiar face.

At first, I thought I was imagining things, but no—it was really her. She saw me too, momentarily stunned, as if she couldn't believe it either.

Then, slowly, her lips curled into a smile as she made her way toward me.

“Yang Baekhyun? What are you doing here?” she asked, her surprise quickly turning into a smile. “What are the chances of running into you here?”

“Seo-yeon,” I said her name, half in greeting, half in disbelief at the unexpected reunion. A small smile tugged at the corners of my lips. “I'm here for Fashion Week... well, my girlfriend is, actually. What about you?”

Seo-yeon and I had played second-lead lovers in a historical drama called *Princess of Cosmosa* a few years ago. Seeing her again brought back a rush of memories—shooting in the cold winter while wearing heavy royal costumes, the awkwardness of trying to look regal with frozen fingers, and the nights we'd all unwind with karaoke and barbecues after long shoots.

Those had been good times.



“Oh, I’m just here for... vacation,” she said, her gaze drifting away with a hint of secrecy.

There she goes again, with that unmistakable princess-like demeanor.

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When I first met her on set, I honestly thought she might be from a royal family. Her tall, slender frame—like a delicate flower—her polished, classy demeanor, and her impeccably neat appearance (not a single strand of hair out of place, even after countless bottles of soju) all exuded an air of quiet elegance. And then there was her smile—warm, yet faintly melancholic.

It was as if she was born to play the role of a royal queen in *Princess of Cosmos*. As for me... well, I was cast as the sickly king, doomed to die halfway through the series.

The sound of shattering glass in my mind broke through the moment, abruptly pulling me back to reality.

Right then, my phone buzzed in my pocket, snapping me further back to reality. I quickly glanced at the text from Sun-hee, sharing the location of the restaurant just across from the Opéra Garnier.

“Well, are you staying in Paris for a few more days? Maybe we can catch up later,” I suggested to Seo-yeon. “Or, if you’re free tonight, you’re welcome to join us for dinner. My girlfriend and her friends will be there too.”

Seo-yeon paused to consider my offer. “Oh, thanks. Yeah, we could catch up later, no worries. Just text me if you guys have time. I wouldn’t want to interrupt a romantic dinner,” she said with a wink, teasing me.

The playful gesture caught me off guard. Despite spending months filming together, I’d rarely seen her joke or tease anyone. It was like watching a mannequin come to

life—unexpected, yet oddly charming.

“Sure. Text you later on KakaoTalk?” I said, naming the messenger app we used.

She nodded with a small smile.

“Okay, see you later then!”

With small waves exchanged, Seo-yeon and I bid each other a temporary goodbye. I made my way downstairs, weaving through the grand central staircase of the Opéra Garnier and a throng of tourists, finally stepping out into the crisp Parisian air.

The restaurant Sun-hee mentioned was right across the street, its warm glow spilling onto the sidewalk and illuminating the terrace outside. Inside, I spotted her and three of her friends gathered around a round table, laughing over something. A couple of large shopping bags rested beside their chairs, a clear testament to their Parisian shopping adventures.

“Oppa, annyeong! Did you have a good time in the city? Too bad I couldn’t get you into Paris Fashion Week—today was the best day ever!” Sun-hee greeted me enthusiastically as I approached.

“Oh wait, before you sit, can you take a picture of us?” she asked, handing me her phone without even bothering to wait for my response. I pressed my lips together, took her phone, and snapped a few photos of her and her friends at the table.

When I handed the phone back, she immediately checked the pictures and frowned slightly. “Oh, it’s not centered... never mind, we can take more later.”

I sighed, slid into the seat next to her and nodded to her friends. “I had a nice day by the way. I spent the day doing touristy stuff. You should check out the Opéra

Garnier across the street—it's incredible.”

“Hmm... maybe, if there's time,” she replied, already flipping through the menu. Her excitement shifted gears in an instant. “I'mstarving!”

The ambiance of the restaurant oozed sophistication, with chandeliers sparkling above and quiet murmurs of French accents filling the room.

I noticed the waiters wearing name tags adorned with a collection of little flags, signaling their multilingual skills.

Glancing at the polished menu in front of me, I could already tell this place was going to burn a hole in my wallet.

I started by flipping to the last pages, looking for drinks. A glass of wine—15 Euros. Soda—8 Euros. A bottle of branded water—6 Euros. I gasped in silence. Back in Korea, I could get ten cans of soda for the same price.

I hesitated before checking the prices for meals. Should I just get an appetizer and skip the main course?

Noticing my reaction, Sun-hee subtly tugged at my pants under the table and shot me a death stare.

“Oh, come on. Don't be so cheap,” she whispered, barely audible.

I stared back at her. Sure, we're allowed to enjoy ourselves once in a while, and I do like to treat her occasionally. But did she ever consult me before picking this restaurant? Or... any restaurant, for that matter?

Why did she even want me on this trip if she was just going to spend all her time with

her friends? A bitter thought popped into my mind.

And on the rare moments when she's actually present—not glued to her phone making content—she's throwing sharp comments my way in front of them.

I noticed some of her friends shift uncomfortably in their seats, clearly overhearing what Sun-hee had just said.

One by one, they placed their orders, and finally, it was my turn. When the food and drinks arrived, we ate mostly in silence. The taste was just... okay. It felt like we'd stumbled into a typical tourist trap.

I sighed and tried to make small talk with her friends to diffuse the tense atmosphere. After dessert (which, by the way, cost you at least one kidney), they decided they were too exhausted to walk or take the metro, so they called a ride-sharing service to take us back to the hotel.

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During the ride, I could feel Sun-hee's sharp stare piercing through me, and by the time we arrived, I knew exactly what was coming. I stepped up and paid for the entire ride, just like she expected me to.

We made our way to the room, and by then, it was clear she was giving me the silent treatment.

"You're mad at me, aren't you?" I finally said, tired of playing these mind games. I was too old for this.

"Oppa, how could you embarrass me in front of my friends like that? I don't know how to face them tomorrow, I'm so embarrassed!" she burst out.

"Sorry..." I gave her a genuinely confused look. "How did I embarrass you?"

"Well, other girls' boyfriends just automatically pay for dinner, buy them flowers and gifts. And you? You can't even order a steak without thinking twice!"

I gave her a long, cold stare. In that moment, I knew—we had no future together. She understood my family situation, knew I couldn't afford to spend money carelessly, and, most importantly, knew how much I despised pretending to be someone I wasn't just to impress others.

And yet, here we were.

That's when I finally snapped.

I grabbed my jacket off the coat hanger, my toiletry bag from the bathroom, and some clothes off the rack, shoving them carelessly into my bag.

“You and me? We’re done,” I said, maybe a bit more dramatically than I intended, but... whatever. I was so tired of this nonsense. “Maybe you’re looking for an ATM or just another devoted fan—not a boyfriend.”

“Oppa, are you crazy?” she croaked after a few seconds, finally processing what had just happened.

“I’m leaving,” I declared, shutting the door to her room with a bit more force than I intended.

I managed to walk to the lobby with my small suitcase, emotions still running high.

Okay. And now what?

I pulled out my phone to search for a place to stay for the night—and immediately gulped at the prices. I still had a week left here before heading back to Korea. It would cost a fortune, but at this point, anything was better than staying with my ex.

Why were we even together in the first place? A wave of regret crept in. Sure, she was cute, but beyond that... did we ever really connect? And the whole influencer thing—even thinking about it makes my head feel like it’s about to explode.

After booking a small room through an app, I dragged my sorry ass out of the hotel lobby. The place I found was a tiny room on the seventh floor of a building with no elevator.

As I trudged toward the nearest metro station, I swore to myself: no more relationships.

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Seo-yeon

“I’m here in Parissss!” I texted Ji-a, attaching a selfie with a classic peace sign in front of a Paris airport sign.

Oh, wait—it’s probably past midnight in Korea. Ji-a is probably fast asleep.

I forwarded the same photo to my older sister, Yae-rin, who keeps an odd schedule at the company. She’s probably still awake, burning the midnight oil.

She’s the pride and joy of our parents—the smart, successful one. A few years ago, she started working at their company, clearly being groomed to take over one day.

Their only complaint about her is her complete disinterest in dating. And for a while, that was the one thing I had going for me in their eyes.

But not anymore.

So, what’s a recently single, possibly soon-to-be-jobless, boring disappointment supposed to do first in Paris? I sighed, wondering sarcastically.

After retrieving my suitcase from the carousel, I hailed a taxi and headed to my hotel. It was a four-star spot downtown, close to the Louvre—a place that brought back memories. I’d stayed here once with my family during a rare holiday a long time ago.



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My phone buzzed with a text from my sister, reminding me to stay cautious since Paris isn't always the safest city for a solofemale traveler. She also mentioned that she'd informed our parents about my whereabouts. Apparently, they were baffled by my decision to take off on an unannounced vacation like this.

Truthfully, this was my first time traveling alone. I'd never done anything so out of character before, but after everything that had happened recently, I needed a change—to do something spontaneous, to do something I wasn't "supposed" to do.

First things first, I decided to take a bath—something I hadn't done in a while. No rushed showers, no deadlines looming over me, just pure relaxation. And there's nothing quite like washing off a long flight—the warmth of the lavender-scented water was pure bliss as it soaked into my tired feet.

The hotel room itself was divine, with a spacious bathroom and a bed so big and soft it practically begged me to sink into it.

Half an hour later, dressed in my pajamas, I gave in. I dove into the plush, fluffy bed with a sigh. Ah... small pleasures like this made everything feel worth it.

It didn't take long before I drifted into a deep 12-hour sleep, nearly missing breakfast. As usual, I hadn't slept well on the plane, and combined with jet lag, I could easily have slept the day away without realizing it.

After finishing breakfast, I set out to begin my solo adventure in Paris. My first stop was the Louvre Museum, but I decided to skip it for now when I saw the massive queue outside. I made a mental note to book a ticket and come back later.

Instead, I continued strolling along the Seine, soaking up the sun, stopping by charming coffee shops and quaint local stores, and passing through the famous Tuileries Garden. It reminded me of our family trip here ten years ago. I was 24 then—still fresh-faced and optimistic, thrilled about my budding career in modeling and acting, and excited about landing small roles in TV dramas.

Back then, everything felt like an exciting, open opportunity. Maybe I'd land a bigger role? Or perhaps I could pivot to becoming a news anchor?

Now, as I caught my reflection in a shop window, I saw someone who looked... tired and deflated.

That jerk Min-seok, I thought bitterly, watching a flock of ducks race across the large fountain in the middle of the Tuileries Garden. The image of him straddled by a woman in a tacky leopard-print outfit flashed in my mind, making me shudder in disgust.

Why her over me? Was it like the casting director had said—was I just too plain, too boring?

As if the disaster of my relationship wasn't enough, now I had to worry about my career too. After the harsh criticism from the PD and casting director, I wasn't even sure if I wanted to stay in this industry anymore.

They were the ones who claimed this was as far as my career would ever go. The thought stung, and a frown tugged at my lips as I sank into a reclining green bench by the fountain, surrounded by a mix of locals and tourists.

Facing a career and relationship crisis and starting over at 34 feels a lot scarier—and far less romantic—than it would have if I were ten years younger.

I sighed again as I pulled out a small novel from my tote bag: *Little Women*. I must have read this book dozens of times; the pages were yellowing, and some corners were cracked. It's my go-to comfort read, a familiar story about family and sisterhood that never failed to soothe me.

As I flipped through the well-worn pages, my phone buzzed in my bag.

"Enjoying Paris?" Ji-a's message popped up.

"Yes! The weather's amazing today. I love it! How about you? What are you up to?" I typed back.

"Dealing with the agency's fury over your sudden leave and coming up with excuses for the PD about why you didn't show up at the studio. Oh, and they said you might have to pay a fine," Ji-a replied, adding a flood of angry emoji.

I gulped, guilt creeping in. "Sorry, Ji-a!" I texted back quickly. "I owe you big time. And of course, I'll cover the fine." Regret settled in. I had needed this escape, but knowing I'd left someone else to clean up the mess didn't sit well with me.

Ji-a didn't reply right away, and I reminded myself to call her later. She didn't deserve to handle the fallout on her own.

After finishing a few chapters of *Little Women*, I continued my stroll and eventually found myself near Opéra Garnier. My stomach growled as I passed an ice cream shop, reminding me that I'd skipped lunch—jetlag really had thrown my whole schedule off.

I glanced at the brightly colored swirls of ice cream on display. I can do whatever I want on this trip, right? Including having ice cream for a very late lunch. With that thought, I stepped inside, ordered a cone, and settled at a small table by the window.

The ice cream was insanely good—rich, creamy, and just sweet enough. But what made it even better was that, for once, I wasn't mentally calculating calories like I usually did.

Still, as I ate, I had a groundbreaking realization: traveling alone wasn't as amazing as I'd hyped it up to be.

The best part of traveling is sharing experiences—pointing out weird little details, reacting to new flavors, laughing over random things. But here I was, sitting alone with my ice cream, nodding at myself like some lunatic. Wow, this is delicious, Seoyeon. Oh my gosh, really? Tell me more!

Yeah. Not exactly the dramatic solo adventure I'd imagined.

The café buzzed with groups of friends and couples, conversations blending into a warm, familiar hum. Meanwhile, I sat alone, licking my cone like I was in an indie film montage—just without the artsy filter or emotional depth.

I exhaled, letting it go, and focused on finishing my ice cream before heading out to explore the Opéra Garnier. It had always been one of my favorite places in Paris. I had attended an opera performance there with my parents once—the singers had been absolutely breathtaking. But what lingered in my memory the most was the pianist.

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The way he played was unforgettable—so elegant and smooth, his fingers gliding over the keys as if they were weightless. The melodies echoed through the high ceilings of the Opéra, making the moment even more mesmerizing.

As my thoughts drifted back to the past, I suddenly spotted a familiar figure strolling around the Opéra Garnier. Another Korean! But not just any Korean... someone I actually knew!

I couldn't believe my eyes—what were the odds of running into a fellow co-star in Paris?

It was Yang Baekhyun, a few years my junior, who had played the second-lead role alongside me in the TV series *Princess of Cosmos*. The same series where Ji-yong and Yumi were the main leads.

In contrast to Ji-yong, Baekhyun doesn't have that flashy, universally appealing face or the magnetic, charming energy that draws everyone in. Sure, he is tall, with broad shoulders, but he is the reserved, mysterious type—he wouldn't say much unless it was absolutely necessary.

At first, I barely paid him any attention—he was distant, a bit aloof. But after seeing him a few more times and working alongside him, I began to notice his unique charm.

Not that it should've been surprising—he started as a model, after all, and models are expected to have a certain presence. Yet, there was something about him that went beyond just good looks.

His almond-shaped eyes always held a sharp intensity, his neat, clean-cut hairstyle added to his chiseled look, and his deep voice, paired with a strong jawline, gave him an air of quiet confidence. There was something about him—thrilling, intriguing... almost enigmatic.

We quickly exchanged greetings, and he mentioned something about his girlfriend. Ah, of course. What kind of lunatics would go to the city of love without their lover?

He even kindly invited me to join him for dinner... with his girlfriend. I laughed it off with a small joke as I politely declined, and we quickly said our goodbyes. Then, I practically bolted in the opposite direction, hoping he wouldn't catch on to my solo-trip fiasco.

Let's just hope Paris is big enough. And let's hope we never run into each other again.

6

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Baekhyun

I woke up in a tiny room, barely bigger than a closet. I blinked a few times, trying to process my surroundings.

Right. I broke up with Sun-hee—the realization hit me like a bucket of cold water.

I checked my phone: a few missed calls from her and over twenty messages, ranging from disbelief—Are you joking?—to pure rage—What am I supposed to tell my friends and followers if we break up?!

I let out a dry chuckle. So, that was her main concern? Well, that's her problem, not mine. She could say whatever she wanted to her friends or followers—I don't give the tiniest shit.

I yawned and stretched luxuriously in bed. With no plans for the day and still reeling from the emotional rollercoaster of the past few days, I felt restless. Well, first things first, I thought—I needed coffee to clear my head before continuing my now-solo Parisian adventure.

But after breakfast, another stroll along the Seine (again), and exploring Montmartre and Sacré-Cœur—where I even spotted a pickpocket in action—I realized I might be running out of places to visit.

Should I hit a nightclub tonight? Party until I drop, just like the good old days? I'm single and in Paris—this is the perfect chance, right? The thought flashed through my mind.

Or maybe I could do something totally different and visit a nearby city like Versailles...?

Then, Seo-yeon crossed my mind.

Maybe she'd like to join me? She seemed to be traveling alone the other day. Surely, exploring a foreign place with someone familiar is better than doing it solo, right?

“Are you free today? Want to meet up?” I typed and sent the message.

I kept strolling, letting the idea settle, when I felt the buzz from my phone on my pocket and saw the reply from Seo-yeon. “Sure, where should we meet?”

A small smile formed on my face as I typed my reply, a bit surprised she had

accepted my invitation. I thought she'd hesitate.

“Versailles?” I texted, testing my luck.

She responded with a shocked-face emoji, but followed by, “Oh, okay! Meet you in front of the castle around 2 p.m.?”

I sent a thumbs-up emoji as reply, feeling a little bit upbeat and pleasantly surprised that Seo-yeon had agreed so easily.



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After an hour-long train ride, I finally arrived in front of the palace. Like everything else in Paris and its surroundings, it looked majestic, with its gold-coated gates and rooftops.

Even though the area was packed with tourists, I easily spotted Seo-yeon near the entrance. She looked a bit cold, rubbing her hands together and blowing warm air into them.

Her reddish cheeks, nose, and ears stood out against her pale skin.

I quickly made my way over and greeted her, “Hey! Sorry, did I make you wait long?”

“Oh no, no, don’t worry, I just got here,” she said with a warm smile. “We might’ve been on the same train, actually!”

“Ah, that’s possible,” I replied curtly, suddenly feeling a bit awkward.

It’s true that we had spent about three intense months together filming a historical drama, but we weren’t close by any means. Back then, we were rarely alone, and we hadn’t kept in touch after the drama ended.

Did I make a mistake asking her to join me? What if we ran out of things to talk about and things got awkward? After all, it doesn’t seem like we have much in common.

She’s clearly from a rich family, oozing a princess-like aura. What if she just wants to

eat at a fancy restaurant and talk about pretentious things, like the difference between Manet and Monet's art styles or... whatever their names are?

"You okay? Should we go in?" Seo-yeon interrupted my thoughts.

Whatever. It's too late to back out now, I told myself.

I nodded, and we started walking toward the ticket booth.

"Are you here by yourself? Where's your girlfriend?" Seo-yeon asked, looking a bit confused.

I cringed slightly before replying, telling her I'd broken up with my girlfriend due to... mismatched personalities, without going into detail.

Seo-yeon doesn't seem like someone who would gossip. And even if she did, I'm not big enough in the industry for my dating history to cause a scandal.

"Oh!" Seo-yeon exclaimed, her expression shifted to concern. "I'm really sorry to hear that. Are you... feeling okay?"

"I mean, of course, you're not, but... ah, I never know what to say to someone who just broke up," she continued, rambling a little, looking awkward.

I blinked, then let out a small laugh. I'd never seen this side of her before.

"It's funny, isn't it..." she went on as we paid for our tickets and headed into the castle. "I just broke up with my boyfriend, too. You'd think ending a six-year relationship would be hard, but honestly? It's not. It's actually... quite liberating." She flashed me a bright smile.

“Oh, I’m talking too much about myself,” she said, looking a bit embarrassed.

“No, no, go on. Actually, we don’t really know much about each other,” I said. “Back on set, you seemed... reserved. Like you only wanted to hang out with familiar people or, you know, the big names like Ji-yong. You kind of had that princess vibe—just like the one you played in the drama.” I smirked. It felt nice to be direct—no expectations whatsoever. Just casual banter between old acquaintances.

Her eyes widened in surprise. “No way! To me, you were the one who seemed a bit cold. Honestly, I never knew what to say around you because every time I tried to start a conversation, you’d just give me a one-word reply,” she pouted and playfully landed a light punch on my arm.

“Was I...? Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to,” I said with an apologetic smile. “And by the way, I feel fine. I mean, the breakup was just yesterday, so it’s still fresh, but it was a relationship doomed to fail anyway,” I muttered quietly.

She hummed, clearly intrigued. “Did you just realize that recently, or was it, like... you always knew, but you were in denial?”

Then, as if catching herself going too deep too fast, she quickly added with a smirk, “Ah, should we open a psychology practice together?” She chuckled, trying to keep the mood light.

Funny how easy it felt to talk with Seo-yeon—and funny how I was only realizing it now, in Paris, even though we had spent a few months together on a film set back in Korea.

“Or maybe a love doctor consultation,” I added, playing along with her ironic joke before my tone grew more serious.

“I think I always knew, but I kept convincing myself to give the relationship a chance,” I admitted as we walked through the castle’s grand foyer.

She hummed thoughtfully. “Interesting... I think it’s kind of similar to my situation.”

We let the conversation fade as we continued exploring the castle. Our discussion turned lighter, joking about the bathing habits of French royalty. One display explained how, in the Middle Ages, doctors advised people not to bathe because water was considered unsanitary.

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“Oh, so that’s why there are so many perfume brands here,” I joked. Seo-yeon chuckled quietly.

Maybe we had more in common than I thought.

The castle was stunning, and through its grand windows, we could see the enchanting garden, complete with an enormous fountain that only flowed in spring and summer.

Before we knew it, the afternoon had slipped away, and we were ushered outside the castle.

“I’m starving,” I said, rubbing my stomach as we stepped into the courtyard.

“Let’s have dinner in Paris! I know a few places,” Seo-yeon exclaimed enthusiastically.

This is it—the moment of truth. Is she about to take me to some ultra-luxurious, five-course restaurant? One of those places where the wine and champagne list costs more than my monthly salary?

“Ah, but what do you feel like eating tonight? Something light? Or something hearty?”

Her question threw me off for a second. It was nice that she was asking. A simple gesture, something any decent person would do—but after being dragged around by Sun-hee without a say, it felt oddly refreshing.

“Tteokbokki,” I joked.

“I already miss tteokbokki too!” she said with a dreamy sigh, like she was imagining the spicy, chewy goodness right then and there. Another surprising statement from Princess Seo-yeon.

I let out a hearty laugh. “Jokes aside, I’m good with anything—I’m not picky. But just a heads-up, I’m starving, so I’d prefer a big portion. The other day, we had dinner near the Opéra, and the portions were tiny while the prices were outrageous,” I recounted the unfortunate soirée as we boarded the train back to Paris.

She nodded knowingly. “Of course. If you eat in a touristy area like that, it’s bound to be overpriced, and the food is usually just okay. Same everywhere!”

“That said, I think I know a place in Paris that serves huge portions of local specialties at a reasonable price. Want to go there?” she added.

A big portion of local food at a fair price—did I need any more convincing? Of course not. It was like she had read my mind. I nodded enthusiastically, more than happy with her suggestion.

About an hour later, we arrived at a quaint brasserie downtown—a cozy spot serving French specialties in a relaxed setting. Since it was still early for dinner, we managed to get a table, though a designated queuing area hinted at the usual peak-hour rush.

Scanning the menu, I spotted some intriguing options: Tête de veau... calf’s head. Rognon de bœuf... beef kidney.

“Hmm, yummy, yummy,” I mused, catching Seo-yeon’s expression of equal fascination from the corner of my eye.

“Are you feeling brave tonight?” she whispered.

“I am,” I whispered back conspiratorially. “It’s not that different from sundae or pork tripe, right?”

She shrugged. “I think I’ll go with something classic, like steak or rotisserie chicken.”

“Bo-ring...” I teased in a sing-song tone.

For a split second, something shifted in her expression—her eyes flickered, and she glanced down, a small frown forming.

I hesitated. Had I pushed too far? Maybe we weren’t that close yet.

“Ah, but if you’re in the mood for steak, that’s totally fine too,” I added quickly, clearing my throat in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Seo-yeon gave a small, sheepish smile and cleared her throat as well. “Or... maybe I could go for beef tartare,” she murmured, opting for something a little less conventional.

Oh no. Did I ruin everything? We’d had such a good time today—no endless photo-taking, no live-streaming. Just two people, fully present, enjoying Paris together.

The waiter arrived to take our order, and soon after, we sipped our wine in quiet contemplation.

“Actually... the casting director on my last project said I’m plain and boring,” Seo-yeon finally admitted after a long pause. “And after that comment, plus my breakup with my long-term boyfriend, I ran away to Paris...”

I stared at her, stunned. “You? Plain and boring?” My voice almost rose in disbelief. “Seo-yeon, you’re incredibly talented. You memorize lines effortlessly, you have this natural grace, and your eyes—there’s so much warmth in them. How could anyone look at you and think that?”



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She gave a small, sheepish smile. “Well... he didn’t say it to my face. I overheard it.” Her fingers traced the rim of her glass. “But it made me question everything. My career, whether I’m really meant to be an actress... And, you know, starting over in your thirties isn’t as romantic as in your twenties. It’s terrifying.”

She exhaled softly, then glanced at me. “And you don’t have to say all those nice things just to cheer me up.”

“I don’t say those things just to cheer you up—it’s the truth,” I said firmly. “I played a role next to you for months. I know you’re a damn good actress. There were times I felt jealous of how effortless and natural you were, like the role was written just for you.” I explained, feeling a twinge of frustration that she didn’t seem to believe me.

Couldn’t she look in the mirror and see just how talented—and how beautiful—she is?

The waiter arrived with our food, and I muttered a quick “Merci.” This conversation had almost made me forget how starving I was.

Seo-yeon poked at her beef tartare absentmindedly, then shot me a knowing look, her lips curling into a smirk. “But wait... ‘warm eyes’?” she echoed, dragging out the words playfully. “You’ve got to explain that one.”

I hesitated, caught off guard. This time, I was the one looking sheepish. “Well...” I started slowly, focusing on cutting into my andouillette—a type of sausage made from pig’s intestine—buying myself a few seconds.

“I don’t know how to explain it, but while you might seem a little reserved—like a princess—you have warm, kind eyes. The kind that makes people feel at ease around you.”

“What’s with you and this princess thing?” she asked, huffing in playful annoyance.

“Of everything I said, that’s the part you’re stuck on?” I shook my head, half-amused, half-exasperated.

She laughed, taking another sip of wine, and just like that, the conversation drifted into lighter topics as we carried on with our evening.

7

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Seo-yeon

Despite the unexpected turn of events in Paris and somehow ending up touring Versailles with my quiet, mysterious co-star, spending a day with Baekhyun was... surprisingly chill.

I thought it might be awkward, considering how reserved he was on set, but being around him felt easy—like I could finally breathe again.

That tight knot in my stomach, the one that had been there for days (or maybe even longer), was starting to loosen.

Conversation flowed naturally, like we were old friends catching up after years apart. I even felt comfortable sharing more personal details with him, which wasn’t something I did often.

After a daring culinary experience at a classic French brasserie (I suggested we each pay our share—after all, this wasn't a date), we continued our stroll along the Seine, eventually deciding to take a boat tour. I'd done this exact thing 10 years ago, but Paris at night never lost its magic.

“Mademoiselle, may I?” Baekhyun offered me his arm with a small smirk as we boarded the boat.

The night had taken on an easy, lighthearted rhythm, filled with playful banter.

“The correct term is Madame, actually. I'm in my mid-thirties—the perfect time for a mid-life crisis,” I quipped, mirroring his smirk but still slipping my hand through his arm.

“As long as you're still single, you're a Mademoiselle.”

“Ouch. That one went straight to the heart.”

On board the boat, we headed straight to the bar, where Baekhyun ordered two glasses of champagne in almost-perfect French.

“Je vais prendre deux champagnes, s'il vous plaît.”

“Oh! You can speak French!” I said, surprised by this hidden talent.

“Well, ‘speaking French’ is a bit of an overstatement. Like, awayoverstatement,” he admitted with a small laugh. “I just picked up a few words when I auditioned for a role that required French. But in the end, I didn't get it—I was too stressed during the audition.”

“Oh,” I murmured. A short silence followed before I asked, as casually as I could,

“Baekhyun-sshi... do you like being an actor?” I couldn’t help but wonder if others in the industry struggled with the same doubts I did.

Baekhyun hesitated for a moment before replying. “I never really thought much about it, actually.” He let out a small sigh. “After high school, I had no clue what I wanted to do with my life. And... my family situation made university pretty much impossible. So, while I was working part-time at an internet café, someone scouted me for a coffee ad photoshoot. That’s how I ended up in this industry.”

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He shrugged, then added, “I don’t have the luxury of hating it—I just have to keep earning money for my mom and little sister.”

His answer hit me like a jolt of lightning. I suddenly realized how out of touch my question sounded.

Not knowing what else to say, I muttered, “Oh... I’m sorry...”

“What are you sorry for?” He smiled and raised his glass, proposing a toast to lighten the mood.

“And what about you?” he asked as the boat set off, gliding past the shimmering Eiffel Tower. “You said you’re doubting your career... so, what’s next?”

I blinked, caught off guard. “That’s... the big question, isn’t it? Like, who are we outside of being actors, actresses, models? Sometimes, you just don’t know what else to do, so you stay and keep working—because that’s what a responsible adult is supposed to do, right?”

Baekhyun took a slow sip of his wine before responding, “Yeah, but what do you want to do—if you weren’t busy being a ‘responsible adult’ doing what you’re supposed to do?” His laugh was light, but there was a slight trace of sarcasm in his tone.

“I don’t know your financial situation, but it’s probably a lot better than mine,” he continued with a wry smile. “If I were you, I’d take a chance—travel the world, maybe become a musician... or even a farmer. Or why not a musician farmer?” He smirked. “And if I failed? I’d just start over. Or maybe I’d simply live my life, invest

in stocks, and never work another day. You should see how lucky you are—so many choices, so many opportunities...”

Somehow, our lighthearted banter had taken a more serious turn.

“It’s not that easy, you know...” I murmured, my voice carrying a tinge of defeat.

He shrugged again, seeming ready to change the subject. Stretching his arms, he looked more cheerful as he admired the sight of Musée d’Orsay in the distance.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed him glance at me. When he saw me fidgeting with my hands, he casually slipped off his jacket and draped it over my shoulders.

“Not trying to flirt with you or anything, but I just can’t ignore someone being cold,” he said with a grin.

I mumbled a quiet thanks.

Why did he even need to clarify that? It’s not like I would’ve thought about him that way anyway. He’s like four years younger than me and definitely not the kind of guy my parents would approve of. He doesn’t even have a university degree.

“If only we were allowed to smoke here, it’d be perfect,” he muttered, slipping a hand into his pocket as if itching to reach for a cigarette.

“I can’t understand how anyone finds pleasure in clogging their lungs with smoke.” I said, my tone disapproving—maybe even a little judgmental.

“You just enjoy it and don’t think too much about it,” he replied with a shrug.

Think too much... Plain... Boring... The words suddenly flashed through my mind.

“Right, I’ve been overthinking everything, and that’s how I became a boring person,” I concluded after a brief pause. “From now on, I’m just going to say yes to whatever comes my way!”

Even with his muffler covering part of his face, I could hear his amused snort. “Oh? Are you serious?” He turned to me with a raised eyebrow, as if challenging me—giving me one last chance to take it back.

I didn’t answer. Instead, I locked eyes with him, my gaze steady and determined.

He chuckled again, low and knowing. “This is going to be fun,” he murmured, his voice laced with something that sent an unexpected thrill down my spine.

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I spent the next couple of days still exploring Paris and its surroundings with Baekhyun. We visited the Basilica of St. Denis, admiring its stunning stained-glass windows, spent an entire day wandering through the Louvre, and explored the Panthéon.

It felt like we were completely swept up in the magic of Paris, indulging in endless wine and cheese, momentarily forgetting about our lives—and our problems—back in Korea.

But as our departure date crept closer, an anxious knot formed in my stomach. I couldn’t stop worrying about what I would say to my agent (if I wasn’t fired already) and how I would face my family.

I had brief phone calls with my sister and Ji-a, but every time my mom called, I let it go to voicemail. I simply didn’t have the mental energy to deal with her wrath just yet.

Ji-a told me yesterday that she did her best to convince the agency I had to leave for an urgent 'medical visit' abroad—without giving them any real details.

The thought of facing them when I got back had kept me awake all night.



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“You okay? You look a bit tired.”

Baekhyun’s voice pulled me from my thoughts as he placed our drinks on the open-terrace table—a latte for me, a glass of wine for himself. We were taking a break after wandering through the Palais-Royal.

I gave him a small, appreciative smile and tried to suppress a yawn. “Yeah, yeah, I’m fine. Just didn’t sleep much last night,” I admitted drowsily.

“Why? Worried about what’s waiting for you in Korea?”

A direct hit. It was almost unsettling how easily he could read my mind.

“Kind of, yeah. I mean, I ran away here—so it’s not like I’m excited to go back.”

Baekhyun nodded, taking a slow sip of his wine. “I might have an idea to help you forget about all that for a while.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Why do I feel like this is going to be something I’ll regret?” I groaned, though a small laugh escaped me.

“Let’s hit a nightclub tonight.”

“What? No way! I’m too old for that!”

He smirked. “Weren’t you the one who said you’d start saying yes to everything?”

Damn. Why did I have to say that? And why did he have to remember?

Still, despite my protest, a nervous flutter took hold within me. Before I knew it, night had fallen, and Baekhyun was half-dragging me through the streets of Paris.

I dressed as best as I could on short notice, but I still felt slightly out of place—unprepared, a little ridiculous, and more eager than I cared to admit.

“Which nightclub are we going to?” I called from behind, trying to keep up with Baekhyun’s long strides.

“Just follow me and you’ll find out soon enough!” he replied, extending a hand toward me. After a brief hesitation, I took it.

We wound our way through a narrow alley in the heart of Paris. At first glance, it looked like any other passage, lined with small shops, restaurants and dimly lit signs. But in the middle of that passage, there was a huge wooden door that felt out of place.

Baekhyun suddenly stopped in front of it and pulled it open. Beyond the door, a short corridor stretched ahead, and faintly, the thumping bass of electronic music pulsed through the air.

I swallowed hard, unsure where this night would lead. Had I ever been to a nightclub before? Maybe during my teenage years? I couldn’t remember. All my so-called wild memories seemed to come from TV dramas I’d watched or roles I’d played—scenes of friends and strangers partying in Itaewon.

My idea of a night out was more along the lines of dinner with a familiar group or, at most, a private karaoke session.

I watched as Baekhyun exchanged a few words with the bouncer. With a simple nod,

the man stepped aside and let us in.

Not wanting to stand out, I fought the urge to cover my ears—but the pounding bass was already threatening to overwhelm me. Red, yellow, and green lights flashed wildly across the dance floor, casting chaotic shadows over the moving crowd.

I felt completely out of place, like a grandma who had accidentally wandered into a nightclub.

Baekhyun glanced back at me, grinning at my obvious discomfort, before gently taking my hand and leading me further inside.

Then, my jaw nearly dropped at the sight in front of me—a packed bar with people eagerly shouting their drink orders, and above them, an array of what looked like... sex toys? Hanging upside down like some bizarre chandelier.

“What is this place?!” I yelled into Baekhyun’s ear, struggling to be heard over the pounding music.

Baekhyun just grinned. “A nightclub! I guess...?”

He led me to the bar and ordered two drinks. The moment they arrived, I took a big gulp, feeling like I needed the alcohol to process whatever this place was.

Still smirking like he was enjoying my discomfort way too much, Baekhyun started moving toward the dance floor. I shook my head, panic bubbling in my chest. Dancing was definitely not my strong suit.

“Yes to everything!” he mouthed at me, his eyes glinting with amusement as he teased me from the dance floor, throwing a playful fist into the air in time with the music.

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Who would've thought that my aloof, reserved co-star could be this silly when he wanted to be?

I pointed out my drink, "Let me finish this first!"

Baekhyun nodded, then jerked his thumb toward the door with a wink, signaling that he'd be stepping outside for a bit.

Left alone in the middle of the pulsing crowd, I sipped my cocktail, feeling more and more like I didn't belong. Some people were genuinely having fun, lost in the music, while others just looked outright wasted. The air carried a musty scent, a mix of sweat and alcohol, as bodies moved feverishly, their damp shirts clinging to their skin.

I realized that as the only Asian woman in the crowd, I stuck out like a sore thumb. A creeping panic rose in me as I noticed a few guys glancing in my direction, their eyes lingering a little too long.

Where the heck is Baekhyun?!

A few minutes later, I scanned the dance floor and finally spotted Baekhyun making his way back inside. I felt instant relief.

He mouthed a quick "sorry" and casually draped an arm around my shoulders, steering me toward the bar after noticing my empty glass.

On the way there, I couldn't help but notice how many people were openly kissing

and touching each other. I knew PDA was more common in Western culture, but it still took me a moment to push past the secondhand embarrassment.

Baekhyun handed me another glass of Long Island and led me to a quieter corner.

“Where were you?!” I demanded.

“Oh, sorry, sorry. Just stepped out for a smoke,” he said with that infuriatingly charming grin that made it impossible to stay mad at him.

“Come on, let’s dance.” He grabbed my free hand and started moving it up and down like a puppet master.

“No, I don’t... I don’t think I can,” I muttered through gritted teeth, feeling irritation creep in. I took another sip of my cocktail—too fast, maybe—but I had a feeling I’d need a little liquid courage to get through this.

He waited patiently for me to finish my drink, then placed my empty glass back on the bar before leading me back to the middle of the dance floor. Gently, he lifted my hands and placed them behind his neck, forming a loose circle.

I realized then, as I had to tilt my head slightly to meet his gaze, that even with my heels on, he is still a few centimeters taller than me.

Maybe it was the flashing lights, or maybe the alcohol finally settling in, but when our eyes locked, I could’ve sworn my heart skipped a beat.

His smile was playful, almost mischievous—like a little kid who knew exactly what he was up to. “Better now?” he whispered in my ear, making my skin tingle. It must have just been the ticklish sensation, nothing more.

I responded with a light punch to his arm but found myself swaying to the rhythm with him, falling into step.

He was right—this is actually kind of fun.

We swayed more than danced, my hands still resting behind his neck, the music pulsing around us. It felt almost like slow dancing—close, easy, yet I felt my heartbeat pounding a little too fast in my chest.

He must have noticed the tension in my grip or the way I swallowed hard. Leaning in slightly, he whispered in my ear, “Want to step outside?”

As much as the thrill of doing something so out of character still buzzed through me, I decided this was enough for one night. I nodded, and we quickly made our way outside, stepping into the quiet alleyways and empty streets of Paris. The sudden silence was a stark contrast to the pounding music inside the nightclub.

We walked a few steps in silence before I heard the familiar flick of a lighter—Baekhyun was lighting a cigarette beside me.

He took a few puffs nonchalantly, as if he didn’t have a care in the world. As if we weren’t in Paris. As if we hadn’t just walked out of a bizarre nightclub decorated with sex paraphernalia, where we slow-danced like we had all the time in the world.

Right on cue, my stomach let out a loud protest. “Ah, I’m starting to get hungry.”

Baekhyun held up his cigarette in response.

I rolled my eyes. “No, thanks. How exactly is that supposed to fill my stomach?”

“Well, how do you know if you’ve never tried, princess?”

Ugh, again with the princess bit! Just as I turned to him, ready to land a playful punch, my foot slipped. Before I could react, I felt myself tipping backward—but Baekhyun was quicker. His arm shot out, catching me just in time before my head could meet the cold, hard concrete of Paris.

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But with one hand holding a cigarette and the other trying to steady me, Baekhyun lost his balance too. With no choice, we stumbled backward until my back hit the rough brick wall of a store in the alley.

Cornered between the wall and him, I felt his warm breath—laced with the scent of smoke—skim across my cheek, sending a strange, delicious tremble through me.

“Want to try?” he asked, grinning as he twirled the cigarette between his fingers, holding it up just inches from my face.

Maybe it was the lingering buzz of alcohol, the late-night haze, or some unspoken magic between us—but against all logic, against the answer I had given just moments ago, I nodded.

And I could never have predicted what he’d do next.

Baekhyun took a slow, deliberate drag of his cigarette. Then, lowering his head, he leaned in—so close that I could feel the warmth of his skin, the faintest brush of his breath. Just millimeters separated us.

My heart slammed against my ribs. I gasped. My mind raced with a thousand thoughts.

Is he going to kiss me?

Do I want this to happen?



I'm even sure anymore.

Don't think too much.

I shut my eyes, bracing for the feel of his lips against mine.

But instead, a slow wisp of smoke curled between us, slipping past my parted lips as he exhaled—straight into my mouth.

A sudden wave of wooziness hit me, and as the smoke reached my throat, I broke into a fit of wild coughing.

Baekhyun scoffed at first but stopped after a few seconds. A flicker of guilt crossed his eyes. "You okay, princess?"

"Stop calling me princess!" I snapped between coughs, landing a not-so-playful punch on his arm.

Now that we were back at a normal distance, I felt... strange. My chest pounded, my breath still uneven as I gulped in the night air.

I had never smoked a cigarette in my life—until now (if this even counted). But I was a hundred percent sure that a regular cigarette didn't smell so... earthy and herbal, like the one he held between his fingers.

I narrowed my eyes. "Are you sure that's just a normal cigarette?"

He glanced at it, then at me, before lowering it with a nonchalant shrug. A grin tugged at his lips, his expression unreadable—almost conspiratorial. And then, to my frustration, he simply turned and started walking away.

“Hey!” I called after him, my irritation flaring as I hurried to catch up.

I had thought he was a decent guy. We had spent these past few days in Paris enjoying each other’s company. I thought maybe...

I didn’t even know what I was supposed to think anymore. My head felt light, my stomach uneasy.

“I’d kill for some instant ramen,” I groaned, trailing behind him.

He stopped so suddenly that I nearly bumped into his back. It took me a second to realize he was just checking his phone for directions.

Then, as if it were the most casual thing in the world, he said, “I have some at my place.”

My heart kicked up a notch, but I quickly shook off whatever ridiculous thoughts were creeping in. It was just noodles—nothing more. Not an invitation for anything else, not a secret signal. Just a late-night snack.

And yet, a tiny voice in my head whispered, Are you sure? What if this meant something more? What if I was reading too much into it? What if I wasn’t?

But it was late, I was hungry, and overthinking wasn’t going to help.

So I nodded.

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After a ten or fifteen-minute walk, we arrived at “his place,” which turned out to be a tiny rented studio apartment on the seventh floor—with no elevator.

Already feeling dizzy and slightly nauseous, I was out of breath by the time we finally stepped inside.

It took me a few seconds to process just how small the space was. Everything felt miniature: a two-seater sofa that doubled as a bed, a tiny table in front of it, and a shower squeezed next to the equally tiny ‘kitchen,’ which consisted of a double electric stove. The walls felt like they were pressing in from all directions.

“Wow,” I blurted, unable to hide my surprise.

“Yeah, wow. Welcome to my crib,” he said dryly, a hint of irony in his tone.

Wasting no time, he fished out two packs of instant noodles from his suitcase and set a pot of water on the stove.

“Should I throw everything in?” he asked, holding up the sauce packets and seasoning.

If I were being honest, I rarely ate instant noodles. With a private chef at home, I never needed to—except during my so-called rebellious phase, sneaking off to convenience stores just to eat it like everyone else.

But once again, against my better judgment, I nodded.

The noodles were ready in no time, and the first bite tasted like heaven. I wolfed them down, forgetting just how good instant noodles could be—especially when you're tipsy and lightheaded.

“Ahh, SO good. Why does it tastethisamazing?” I groaned in appreciation, savoring the last drop of the soup.

Baekhyun watched me with amusement, and let out a small chuckle. “Is this your first time eating instant noodles?”

I rolled my eyes—though, honestly, it wasn't far from the truth. But I wasn't about to give him another reason to call meprincess. “Of course not.”

He smirked and went back to finishing his bowl while I got up and wandered around the tiny space. If there was one great thing about this cramped studio, it was the view. The city lights of Paris stretching endlessly beyond the window.

I sighed, pressing my fingertips against the glass. “Maybe I should move here. Lose my passport and just stay. What do you think?” I turned back to him, half-joking.

Our eyes met, and for a moment, neither of us spoke.

“What are you so desperate to escape from?” he asked quietly.

My lips parted before I even realized I was speaking.

“Myself.”

The word hung in the air, and suddenly, I wasn't sure if I should laugh it off or let the sadness sink in.

Before he could reply, my stomach churned violently, followed by the most grotesque sound imaginable. Oh no. Was it the noodles? Did I eat too fast? Or was it the alcohol? The smoke?

A wave of nausea crashed over me. I gagged, slapped a hand over my mouth, and bolted for the toilet—thankfully, this tiny studio at least had a private one.

Baekhyun followed, his expression shifting to concern. I shook my head desperately, mortified beyond belief, but he didn't back off. Instead, he hovered beside me, his strong hands steadying my hips just as the inevitable happened—I doubled over and emptied my stomach.

The world tilted slightly as I gasped for air, slumping onto the cold tile like a deflated balloon. My entire body felt drained. Still, Baekhyun stayed beside me, his fingers gently pulling my hair back, keeping it away from the mess.

“Hey, are you okay?” His voice was thick with concern. When I didn't answer, he tried again, gentler this time. “Do you feel better now?”

I barely managed a nod.

“Here, let me get you some water.” He stepped away to fill a cup from the tap.

I groaned, pressing the flush button. My face burned with embarrassment. “It's... it's fine,” I muttered, wishing the floor would open up and swallow me whole.

It rarely happened; I think the last time I threw up was when I was a kid, after catching a stomach bug along with half my class.

Why did it have to happen now—of all times, in front of Baekhyun?!

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Well, at least he wouldn't call me princess anymore, I thought dryly.

"I should go," I mumbled hastily, pushing myself up. I just needed to grab my things and get the hell out of here. But as I turned, I felt a gentle tug—his hand stopping me.

I kept my gaze fixed anywhere but on him.

"Hey," he said, his voice calm and steady. "It's fine. These things happen. Do you still feel sick?"

I shook my head quickly, my cheeks burning with embarrassment.

He rummaged through his vanity case, then held something out to me. "Here. I have a spare toothbrush—you can use it."

I hesitated, but he pressed it into my hand with a small smile. "Come on," he added. "You'll feel better after."

I slowly turned my head to peek at his face. His expression was gentle, a soft smile on his lips, but his eyes were filled with concern.

"I'll do it too," he said, holding up his own toothbrush like he was demonstrating to a kid before starting to brush his teeth.

Reluctantly, I followed suit.

Once I was done, I rinsed my mouth and exhaled. "All good now," I said, feeling

slightly more human again. “I should head back to my hotel.”

Baekhyun didn’t respond right away. After a moment, he said, “I think you should stay here for the night. Paris isn’t exactly safe at this hour. And you might still be feeling a little sick.”

He glanced around the tiny room before adding, “I know it’s small, but don’t worry—we’ll make it work.”

Embarrassment quickly turned into hesitation. My mind raced, weighing the pros and cons.

After a long silence, I finally croaked, “How, though?”

Even though it felt a little awkward—maybe even risky—I had to admit, deep down, I was relieved. The thought of heading back alone past midnight in Paris unsettled me, and I still felt slightly nauseous.

The last thing I wanted was to throw up inside a taxi and get into a dispute with the driver in a language I barely understood.

Baekhyun started unfolding the double-seater sofa, turning it into a makeshift bed. Then, he grabbed a duvet and spread it across the narrow space left between the couch and the table.

“You take the bed, I’ll sleep on the floor,” he said matter-of-factly.

“What? No way! That doesn’t look comfortable at all,” I protested. “I already trashed your toilet—I can’t take your bed too.”

“Well, it’s either this,” he said, stretching his arms behind his head, “or I take a taxi

with you back to your hotel and come back here after.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You’d actually do that?”

He shrugged, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “Of course. But then, by the time I drop you off and make it back here, it’ll be what—3:30, maybe 4 AM?”

I glanced at my phone. It’s 2:15 AM. He wasn’t wrong.

“It’s still way better than when I was stationed in Nonsan during military training.” Baekhyun nudged the floor setup with his foot and nodded. “And believe me, I can sleep anywhere.”

He dug through his vanity case, then unzipped his suitcase and handed me what looked like stomach medicine and a fresh T-shirt. “Here, take this—and this. If you want to change into something more comfortable,” he added casually, flashing that innocent grin again.

A few months ago—hell, even just a month ago—I would’ve flat-out refused. Sharing a tiny room with a male co-star I barely knew, after getting wasted at a nightclub and ‘smoking’ a questionable cigarette? Absolutely not.

But ‘yes to everything’ was my new mantra. And even though, so far, nothing particularly good had come out of it, I couldn’t deny that I felt more real. These experiences—good, bad, ridiculous—felt like they were mine and mine alone.

Not something expected of me by my parents, my company, or society. Just me, making my own choices.

“Fine. I’ll go back tomorrow morning,” I relented, accepting the medicine and T-shirt with a small, grateful nod before heading to the toilet to change.



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When I stepped back into the studio, Baekhyun had already changed into his pajamas, looking surprisingly comfortable on the floor with just a duvet.

“See? It’s just like sleeping on a traditional futon,” he said with a smile. “And it’s actually good for your back.”

I scoffed, settling into the sofa-bed. “Young people like you don’t know anything about back pain yet.”

He let out a laugh before standing up briefly to turn off the light. The only illumination left came from a small gap between the window and the curtain—the soft glow of the Parisian night spilling into the tiny room.

A moment of silence passed before he spoke again. “Hey, Seo-yeon?” His voice was quieter now. “I’m sorry about earlier... for giving you that cigarette. I think that’s what made you sick. I have to admit, I was a bit high. That was a shitty thing to do.”

High?

Oh.

So it wasn’t a normal cigarette after all.

“It’s fine,” I replied after a pause. “I said yes, so it’s not entirely on you.”

And besides, for the first time in a long while, I had felt truly alive—caught up in sensations I never imagined possible.

But was it really the cigarette?

Or was it Baekhyun—his lips, his breath, the way he had ‘transferred’ the smoke to me?

The realization hit me like a punch to the gut. It wasn’t just the cigarette I had wanted.

I had wanted his lips on mine.

Desperate to distract myself, I blurted out, “Do you get high like that often?” Even as I asked, I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the answer.

“No, it was my first time,” he admitted from beneath the sofa bed. “I bought the cigarette from some guy outside the nightclub. I shouldn’t have—who knows what he put in it?”

I sighed, relieved that he wasn’t some kind of addict. Thinking back to the past few days in Paris with him, I realized, “I haven’t actually seen you smoke that much.”

“Yeah, I only do it occasionally—kind of like drinking. A social smoker, I guess,” he replied. “It’s silly, really. You burn your money and your health... I should probably quit while I can.” He let out a small sigh.

“My dad was a heavy smoker,” I said. “Then one day, he had a health scare—almost like a mini heart attack. The doctor told him he had to quit, or he wouldn’t make it. He also had to give up red meat, which was probably the hardest thing he’s ever done,” I added with a scoff.

“That’s lucky for him... and lucky for you too,” Baekhyun murmured sleepily. A pause. Then, softer, “I just wish I could see my dad again. Even just once...”

His breathing slowed, turning steady. He must have been exhausted.

I peeked down and found him already asleep. He really could sleep anywhere, couldn't he? "Good night..." I whispered, closing my eyes and hoping sleep would find me too.

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I woke up suddenly to the sound of muffled voices and faint music from next door. For a few seconds, I couldn't understand why I was hearing other people's conversations in my room. But then it hit me—I wasn't in my room. I wasn't even at my hotel. I was in Baekhyun's tiny studio. In Paris.

As the realization sank in, I glanced down and found Baekhyun curled up on the duvet in what had to be the most uncomfortable position possible. His limbs were too long for the cramped space on the floor, forcing him to tuck his legs in a tight fetal position.

Despite that, he was fast asleep, his breathing deep and even.

Judging by the soft pinkish glow outside, I had only slept for a few hours. And now that the sun was rising, maybe it was time to head back to my hotel—and let Baekhyun have his bed back.

The thought made sense—especially considering I had a perfectly comfortable, empty hotel room already paid for.

I moved slowly, careful not to step on him, and reached for my bag on the table. As quietly as possible, I slipped into my coat.

A drowsy murmur broke the silence. "Seo-yeon?" His voice was soft and groggy, one

eye still closed.

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“Oh—no, no, go back to sleep. You can move back to your bed if you want,” I whispered, not wanting to disturb him more.

But instead of lying back down, he stood up and followed me to the door. Still half-asleep, he miscalculated the space, bumping his knee against the corner of the table with a quiet curse.

As he reached out to open the door, his arm brushed against my back. The narrow hallway between the room and the entrance felt even smaller now.

Our eyes met, and in that moment, I was back in the alleyway of Paris where we got high. My gaze drifted to his lips, wondering how they would taste.

As if he could read my mind, a flicker of desire flashed in his eyes before he leaned in, his lips brushing against mine in a chaste kiss, sending a spark racing through my veins.

It started as the softest pressure, so light it felt like the whisper of a feather. Then, he deepened the kiss, claiming my lips with growing intensity.

The world around us faded, leaving only the warmth of his body, the taste of him, the way our tongues moved together—curious, searching, desperate. My heart pounded as he pressed closer, his touch awakening something raw and unspoken between us.

His hands roamed over my body, seeking more, and instinctively, mine mirrored his. The winter chill melted away, replaced by the fire building deep within me. The contrast of his cold fingers against my skin sent a shiver of pleasure through me,

intensifying every sensation.

Our breaths came in sharp, uneven gasps as he trailed his lips down my neck, his tongue teasing against sensitive skin. A quiet moan slipped from my lips as he lifted my shirt, his fingers expertly unclasping my bra, melting me with every touch.

One of his hands traced over my breast, his fingers expertly teasing—twisting, circling—sending a rush of heat flooding through me.

Then, just as suddenly as it began, he stopped. His touch disappeared, leaving my body aching for more. He lifted his gaze to mine, his dark eyes searching, his chest rising and falling with uneven breaths.

“Seo-yeon...” he murmured between breaths, his voice low and uneven. “If you want me to stop, you need to say it now.”

A breath hitched in my throat. My body screamed for his touch, for the fire he had ignited within me.

“I want this...” The words slipped out, barely more than a whisper, but I meant them with every fiber of my being.

That was all the approval he needed.

His breath grew harsher, thick with desire, as his other hand slipped beneath my underwear, finding my core. His fingers explored, teasing, drawing tight circles, seeking entrance.

Clothes scattered to the floor as we tumbled onto the sofa bed—an unexpected perk of being in such a tiny room. His lips trailed down my body, and when he took my nipple into his mouth, alternating between his lips, tongue, and teeth, a cry tore from

my throat. I swore I almost came right then and there.

The sound that slipped from my lips must have roused him, as he lifted his head to meet mine, a wicked smile playing at his mouth.

“I bet you taste sweet... like a peach, maybe,” he whispered in my ear, sending a tingling sensation all over my body. “But I won’t taste you yet. I need to be inside you. Now.”

His hand caressed the soft heat of my core, stroking gently, finding exactly where it felt best. And I knew—I needed him deep inside me too. Now.

He tore open a pack of condoms, rolled one on, and pushed in slowly, filling me completely before pulling back. Then, he thrust forward again—hard and fast.

I gasped at the sensation, at the fullness stretching deep within me, and whimpered. My body arched against his, my hands roaming over his back, desperate for more.

He growled in response, one hand pinning mine above my head, holding me still. With no choice but to surrender, I let him take control, his free hand resuming its teasing, torturous caresses.

“Good girl,” he murmured wickedly as our hips pressed together repeatedly, our skin melding, while his hands continued to tease the tender mound of my core as he entered me.

Our lips clashed, tongues tangling as we chased the edge together. I wanted all of him—the faint taste of cigarettes on his lips, the subtle hint of woody perfume, the masculine scent of his skin, and the way my body molded perfectly against his toned frame.

It felt raw. Primal. Like a force had taken over my body and mind, leaving me incapable of thought—only able to feel the delicious, overwhelming sensations coursing through me.

I had never wanted anything so badly, never felt so untamed, so sexy, so deeply desired.

“Baekhyun...” I exclaimed, teetering on the edge of climax. Watching him move, seeing the length of him entering me, felt perversely intoxicating... like something forbidden—only heightening the pleasure surging through me.

And as his movements grew faster and deeper, my nails dug into his shoulders, my muscles tightening around his length. A scream tore from my lips as I reached my release.

The sensation of my body tightening around him must have triggered his own climax. He moaned, surrendering to the pleasure, his body shuddering before finally going still. A few seconds passed, and I felt his weight relax as he lay on top of me.



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After a few moments, he lifted his head, meeting my eyes. “What kind of spell did you cast on me?” he asked, his breath still heavy, wonder lacing his voice.

A soft chuckle escaped my lips. “I don’t know,” I admitted. “Maybe it’s the alcohol, maybe the cigarette or maybe... it’s magic after all.”

Baekhyun studied me for a moment. “Magic, huh?” he murmured, brushing a stray strand of hair from my face. His fingers lingered, as if caught in a thought he wasn’t ready to share.

Neither of us moved right away—because leaving meant stepping back into the real world, where magic didn’t last past sunrise.

8

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Baekhyun

Well, this time, you’ve really outdone yourself. I thought dryly, scolding myself as I lay on the bed with Seo-yeon fast asleep beside me, her breath steady and serene.

Growing up, I was never the obedient type. I’d been through my fair share of trouble—from fistfights with school bullies to underground motorcycle races.

I liked to think I’d mellowed out over the years, but here I was—fresh off a breakup just days ago, in Paris of all places, and now in bed with another woman after we’d

just fucked each other senseless.

The worst part? She wasn't just some random hookup. She wasn't just another woman. She was Seo-yeon. The kind of woman you commit to—kind, caring, and ridiculously beautiful.

And it wasn't just that. It was the way she looked at me—like she actually saw me, past the aloofness, past the recklessness, straight into something I wasn't even sure I understood about myself. The way she listened, not just to my words but to everything left unspoken. That quiet, effortless warmth—someone you don't just walk away from.

And my god, the way her body moved—uninhibited, completely lost in the moment—like I was seeing a side of her no one else had.

The way she gasped my name, the little cries she made as she came beneath me... it unraveled me completely, shattering every last thread of control I thought I had.

So how the hell was I supposed to walk away now?

In two days, she'd be flying back to Seoul. I had three. There was no way this could continue once we were back—our worlds were too different, financially and otherwise. I suspected she came from a wealthy family, maybe even a conglomerate family or chaebol, bound by strict rules and the expectation of a strategic marriage.

I glanced at her, watching as her brows knitted together in sleep, a quiet whisper slipped from her lips. Maybe she was already worrying about the same thing.

Then, she stirred, blinking awake. "Sorry, did I sleep for long?" she asked, stretching with a small yawn. "I think I slept better here than in my hotel room," she added with a soft chuckle.

But as her gaze settled on me, I watched as the realization of what had just happened between us settled in her eyes.

“Hey, Baekhyun?” she finally said after a brief pause, her voice light yet unreadable. “I’ve always seen this in dramas and wanted to try it myself.”

She toyed with the edge of the sheet, as if weighing her next words. “What if we just enjoy the time we have left in Paris? And when we’re back in Seoul... we go back to being almost strangers. What happens in Paris, stays in Paris. Deal?”

I nearly laughed. Jackpot. She was offering a solution for whatever this was between us. Of course, I should accept it. It was a no-brainer, right?

No fuss, no awkwardness, no strings attached.

And besides, I’d sworn off relationships. I should stick to my word.

I nodded. “Deal.”

She gave me a small, almost melancholic smile before pulling the bedsheet around her and shifting to sit up.

“Could you... um, turn around? I need to get dressed,” she said sheepishly.

I scoffed, eyeing her. “Seo-yeon, there isn’t a single part of you I haven’t seen. What are you suddenly shy about?”

Her face turned red. “I know, but still... being sober, in broad daylight, it’s... it’s embarrassing.”

I sighed dramatically just to tease her, then shut my eyes. “Fine. But just so you

know, I can picture you naked anytime I want. In fact, I might be doing it right now.”

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A light punch landed on my arm.

“Don’t do that. And when we’re back in Seoul, I officially revoke your right to imagine my body, naked or not. You know, privacy policy, image copyright, all that.”

I scoffed again, a hundred percent sure I wouldn’t be able to forget her body even if I tried. And closing my eyes like this, listening to the soft rustle of fabric as she dressed—buttoning up one by one—was damn near torture.

How I’d love to undo all those buttons again... to touch her bare skin...

But it could wait. I’m not an animal.

“All done,” she announced, moving toward the kitchen sink to freshen up.

I glanced at the clock, and an idea popped into my head. “How about brunch? And do you still have places in Paris you want to see?”

Please don’t say shopping, I silently prayed.

Her eyes lit up, and she nodded eagerly. “Brunch? Of course!” she lit up, practically buzzing with excitement. “And then... maybe another museum? There’s the Rodin Museum for sculptures... Pompidou for modern art... Invalides for warhistory... or the Picasso Museum. I haven’t been to any of those, so...”

Her excitement was infectious, making me smile as I pulled out my phone to search for a good brunch spot. I showed her a few options, and after some playful debate, we

finally settled on one.

Before long, we were back on the streets, strolling toward the café by the canal, our hands entwined like any other couple hopelessly in love.

Except we're not.

After a fifteen-minute walk, we arrived at a brunch spot that offered an all-you-can-eat menu. We wasted no time stuffing our empty stomachs with as many croissants as possible, even turning it into a competition—keeping score and betting on who could eat more croissants and pain au chocolat.

“Ah, it’s so good to eat without thinking about calories and all that nonsense,” she sighed dramatically, taking a hearty bite of her pancakes. “It’s unfair, isn’t it? Especially for women in the entertainment industry—we’re robbed of one of life’s simplest pleasures.”

I could relate. As a man in the industry, I faced less scrutiny, but there was no denying that physical appearance was nearly everything—especially in Korea, where people judged every inch of your body with ruthless precision.

I am lucky—my metabolism keeps me from gaining weight too easily, which is a relief because I love eating. But even then, staying toned means keeping up with regular workouts. And beyond that, we have to be extra cautious about skincare, following strict routines to keep our faces camera-ready at all times.

“So... about what you said a few days ago—about what I want to do outside of acting and modeling...” Seo-yeon started, uncertainty laced in her voice. “I honestly have no idea.” She let out a dry scoff, somewhere between amusement and exasperation. “Do you think it’s ridiculous to take a career and personality assessment at my age? My mother would kill me. Or worse—she’d force me to work for the family

company.”

I raised one eyebrow. “Let’s start simple—what do you enjoy doing the most?”

She poked at her pancakes, lost in thought. “Hmm... I love playing the piano. But... I don’t think I could make a career out of it. Especially not if I’m starting this late.”

Oh. So we had even more in common than I’d initially thought.

I’d always loved music and even performed live once a week at a local jazz café. Originally, I bought my sister a keyboard for her 17th birthday, but I ended up playing it more than she did. It wasn’t exactly a piano, but close enough.

“Interesting. Well, you could start from there.” I took a sip of my orange juice, resisting the urge to throw out generic clichés or to mention my own love for music. This was about her and what she wanted.

When I didn’t say anything more, she continued. “I once thought about applying to music school. But when I did, I got rejected from the top program in Seoul. I got into the second-best school, but that wasn’t good enough for my family. My mother said that if I wasn’t accepted into the best university, I should enroll in business school instead—to prepare for the family business.” She let out a dry laugh. “But... even if I don’t know exactly what I want, I know what I don’t want. And that’s working for my family. So, I chose drama school instead—thankfully, I got into one of the best—and became an actress.”

Wow. Her mother really didn’t make things easy for her.

Seo-yeon tilted her head, studying me. “And what about you?” she asked. “If you weren’t busy being a responsible adult, what would you want to do?”

I exhaled, running a hand through my hair. “Something with music too, I think,” I admitted after a pause. The words felt foreign—like a secret I hadn’t even let myself fully acknowledge before. “I perform every Saturday at a jazz café in Gangnam. You know, the one with all the blue décor? It was pretty popular on social media a few years ago.”

Her eyes lit up. “Oh! I know that place!”

I hesitated before adding, “But that’s not really an option. It’s too risky for my family.”

Seo-yeon rested her chin on her hand, considering my words. “Isn’t that kind of similar to my situation? You’re putting aside what you want because of expectations.”

I shook my head. “It’s different. My mom and my sister depend on me. I can’t just drop everything and risk my sister’s college tuition or my mom’s restaurant rent.”



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She hesitated before saying carefully, “But... do you really have to carry that alone? You’re their son, their brother—not the head of the family.”

The words hit deeper than I expected, rubbing against something raw inside me. I wanted to argue, to tell her she didn’t understand—to push back. But the truth was, she wasn’t entirely wrong.

Didn’t she know those were the exact words I wanted to say to my father? If only I could find that bastard.

I cleared my throat, eager to change the subject. “Anyway... want to check outMoulin Rougetonight? Cabaret in Paris is supposed to be quite the spectacle, right?”

Seo-yeon gave me a long look, her expression a mix of quiet disappointment and something else—was it understanding?

“Sure,” she finally said, not wanting to push further. “We can check outMoulin Rougetoo.”

The mood lifted after brunch as we headed to the Rodin Museum. We cracked jokes about the statues’ poses, laughing atour own silliness, but even through the humor, I had to admit—they really were stunning.

Later, we took a break at yet another charming open-terrace café. Despite the cold, Parisians sat outside, unfazed, sipping their coffee and people-watching like it was a full-time job.

On our way to the Moulin Rouge, we passed through Pigalle—a district that felt... different. Sex shops lined the streets, their neon signs flashing shamelessly. Even though prostitution was technically illegal in Paris, the area definitely had a red-light district kind of vibe.

As we passed a five-story building crammed with every kind of adult novelty imaginable, I glanced at Seo-yeon. She looked... intrigued. She tried to play it cool, slipping into her usual princess mode, but the faint flush on her cheeks gave her away.

Being the gentleman I am, I took her hand lightly. “Let’s check it out.”

Her face went up in flames. “What? No way!” She instinctively tugged her hand in the opposite direction.

But by now, I was starting to understand her. So, without a word, I strolled straight into the building. Sure enough, she followed—half-grumbling, half-amused, her face still bright red.

So cute.

Leaning in close, I whispered into her ear, a smirk tugging at my lips. “Hey, Seo-yeon... how about we buy each other a gift here? Something we could use tonight.”

Risky? Definitely. This could backfire spectacularly.

But after everything that happened last night, something had shifted. Whatever this is—whatever we are—it’s not going back to how it was before.

Her mouth fell open, one arm already raised, ready to launch one of those adorable little attacks I’d grown familiar with. Deciding I deserved it, I let the hit land on my

arm with a grin before casually wandering deeper into the store.

She called my name in a low voice, but there was an unmistakable hint of panic in it.

I took my time browsing, ignoring the fact that she was probably burning holes into my back with her stare. After about ten minutes, I finally picked something I was pretty sure she'd enjoy using tonight and headed to check out.

She was already waiting near the exit, arms crossed, all frowns. But her eyes—those gave her away. Beneath the pretense of disapproval, I knew she was actually enjoying this.

“Did you find something interesting for me?” I grinned, but she just huffed and didn't respond.

I took her hand again as we crossed the street toward Moulin Rouge, grinning like an idiot, letting the neon lights and buzzing energy of Paris sweep us away.

At Moulin Rouge, the cabaret show was spectacular, all flashing lights, extravagant costumes, and hypnotic performances. A flute of champagne in my hand, I let myself sink into the moment, almost—almost—forgetting whatever number was left in my bank account.

I realize that in the past few days, I haven't been checking my balance as obsessively as I usually do. Maybe I don't want the reminder. Maybe, just for a little while, I want to pretend I don't have the weight of an entire household on my shoulders.

And then, Seo-yeon's words from brunch resurfaced in my mind. But... do you really have to carry that alone?

It was such a simple thing to say. Obvious, even. And yet, I couldn't remember the

last time I had let myself consider that possibility. Because that's not how it works—not in my family.

Not in most Asian families, really. Money wasn't something you talked about—it was just understood. The eldest son steps up. The one who can provide, does. No questions, no complaints.

Except... maybe I do have complaints.

I had sacrificed my own education so my sister could go to university. I had taken job after job, poured everything into keeping things afloat—while my mom just let me take on the role of the provider.

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And my dad? That bastard didn't even have to think about us. He got to leave. To disappear.

While I was the one left behind to carry the weight he abandoned.

I exhaled slowly, forcing myself to focus on the stage, on the glittering performance in front of me. I didn't want to go down this road tonight. Not now.

So I took another sip of champagne, and let the music wash over me—allowing myself to believe that none of it mattered.

I glanced at Seo-yeon, but instead of watching the scene, I caught her staring at me—intently, as if asking, What's wrong?

I shook my head with a small smile. No words were needed.

We turned back to the stage, but my mind was already elsewhere. And as the show came to an end, so did the moment we had both anticipated—and maybe even dreaded.

What now? Going back to my place together seemed logical. Or maybe her hotel?

But... wouldn't that feel a little too couple-y?

Then again, hadn't we already agreed to enjoy whatever time we had left in Paris?

Suddenly, an idea struck me—the perfect, ladylike excuse, tailor-made for Princess

Seo-yeon. So demure. So poised.

I leaned in with a grin, my lips brushing against her ear as I murmured, “Want to get some instant noodles at my place?”

Even in the dim light, I caught the flush creeping up her ears. But it worked. After a brief pause, she fidgeted with her hands before mumbling, “Fine. I’m hungry anyway.”

I chuckled. We both knew what this was, but neither of us was willing to say it out loud.

On our way back to my place, we made a detour, stopping at a small artisanal sandwich shop to grab something more substantial. The instant noodle excuse was already long forgotten.

Back at my tiny unit, we ate in front of the TV, watching a local channel on its small screen.

“I have no idea what they’re saying,” Seo-yeon furrowed her brows mid-bite. “I took French lessons for a couple of months, but I think I was a terrible student because none of the words stuck.”

She isn’t wrong—French is tough if you’re not used to it. Even after reading French books and spending hours on YouTube to train my ear, I can still only catch a phrase or two from the broadcast.

I rummaged through my suitcase and pulled out a well-worn copy of *Le Petit Prince*.

“This is one of my favorite books,” I said, flipping through the pages. “I wrote Korean translations under each word.”

I smiled, remembering the hours I had spent going through every line, scribbling notes in the margins, working through the language on my own for that audition. Unlike top stars, I didn't have the luxury of a native tutor correcting my pronunciation—I had to figure it out myself.

Seo-yeon glanced at the pages, then back at me. "You really put in the effort," she murmured.

I hesitated for half a second—then, before I could think twice, I placed the book back in her hands. "You can have it."

Maybe it was just a book, but at least when we went back to being almost strangers, she'd have something to remember our time in Paris.

Her fingers traced the worn cover, uncertainty flickering across her face. "Are you sure? It seems important to you. I can't just take it."

"It's okay," I reassured her. "I can always buy another one—and redoing the translations will be good practice for me anyway."

She tilted her head, intrigued. "Why French, though?"

I shrugged. "At first, it was for the audition. But I also like the idea of understanding more of the world. Isn't it crazy that by learning a new language, you can suddenly connect with millions of people you'd never have been able to talk to otherwise?"

Her lips curled into a small smile as she nodded. "Yeah. I've always dreamed of leaving Korea one day. Not just because of everything going on lately, but... you know, for a fresh start. A new beginning."

The words lingered between us, unspoken thoughts filling the quiet. Then Seo-yeon

cleared her throat with a soft cough, breaking the moment.



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“Um... I know I already stole your spare toothbrush, but do you happen to have a towel too? I’d love to take a shower and freshen up.”

“I do, actually.” I dug through my suitcase again, like it was some kind of magic bag filled with everything we needed. After a moment, I pulled out a fresh towel—and another clean T-shirt that could double as her pajamas for the night.

She accepted them with a grateful smile and disappeared into the shower—which, oddly enough, was right in the kitchen area. No walls, no separation. Just a shower booth. “Interesting layout,” she muttered, crinkling her nose before closing the door.

While waiting for my turn, I tidied up the tiny desk where we’d eaten and unfolded the sofa into a bed. The place wasn’t much, but it had its charms.

After we both showered, I found Seo-yeon standing by the window, gazing out at the shimmering Paris skyline—being on the seventh floor meant we had a perfect glimpse of the city’s lights.

I stepped behind her, wrapping my arms around her waist, and pressed a light kiss to her neck. Her skin was cool, carrying the fresh, clean scent of soap.

“So,” I murmured, lips close to her ear. “Want to check out the gifts we picked for each other?”

I felt the warmth rise in her body as she tensed slightly in my arms. Then she let out a small huff. “I panicked and had no idea if you were serious or just messing with me,” she admitted, sounding a little annoyed. “So I just grabbed this.”

With a sigh, she pulled a bright-red eye mask, trimmed with delicate lace, from her bag and waved it in front of me.

I burst out laughing, easily picturing her flustered expression as she hurried to check out with the lacy red mask at the adult shop earlier tonight.

“Well, thank you,” I teased, smirking. “At least it’ll be useful on the plane.”

Before she could say anything, I tilted her chin up and captured her lips in an open-mouthed kiss—because, honestly, I couldn’t wait any longer.

I shivered with delight when she matched my movements, her lips parting with the same hunger, devouring me as eagerly as I did her. But before we lost ourselves completely, I reached for the light switch, letting shadows spill across the room.

A small protest escaped her lips, followed by a quiet gasp as I eased her onto the bed. Even in the dim light, we found each other effortlessly, our clothes slipping away, discarded onto the floor in a hushed urgency. The sound of her breath—shallow, expectant—sent warmth pulsing through me.

I captured her lips again, then traced a slow path down her body, my mouth finding the sensitive curve of her neck, the swell of her breasts, the hardened peaks that begged for attention.

Lower still, my fingers brushed against the heat pooling between her thighs, feeling the slickness that told me she was ready for me.

But not yet.

I wanted her to feel everything—to explore every sensation her body had to offer.

I moved lower, pressing a slow, deliberate kiss between her thighs.

“What are you... No...” she started, her voice unsteady. But as I continued teasing and licking, her words dissolved into a breathless moan. “Oh. Baekhyun...”

That was all the encouragement I needed.

I grew bolder, my tongue caressing, exploring, while my fingers slipped inside her effortlessly, seeking out the spot that would make her shudder with pleasure. Her body arched, back lifting off the bed, a silent cry caught in her throat as waves of sensation washed over her. Her thighs trembled around me, and I knew—

That’s one.

“Baekhyun, what are you—”

I caught her lips before she could finish, kissing her deeply, letting her taste the remnants of her own desire.

“I was right,” I murmured against her mouth, grinning. “You do taste like a peach.”

I could feel her glare even in the faint lighting. But that was fine—because soon enough, she wouldn’t be thinking about it at all.

Putting my own needs aside for now, I reached for the ‘gift’ on the nightstand and switched it on. A steady, low buzzing filled the room.

“What is that sound?” Seo-yeon’s breath was still uneven, a note of curiosity in her tone.

I didn’t answer. Instead, I pressed it gently against the sensitive mound of her core.

Her reaction was immediate—a sharp inhale, then a long, trembling moan as her fingers gripped the bedsheets, as if they were her only anchor in the storm of pleasure.

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In the soft glow from the window, I traced the rise and fall of her chest, the way her skin shimmered with heat, the way her body reacted to every slow, deliberate movement of the toy. I kept going, teasing her, pulling her closer and closer to the edge.

“Baekhyun... please... what... ah—”

Her voice broke as her body tensed, then trembled, and finally shattered again. I felt the quiver in her thighs, the way her breath came in ragged, uneven gasps.

At this point, I’m pretty sure at least one of the neighbors has an idea of what we’re doing. I never imagined Seo-yeon could be this loud—and the thought fills me with satisfaction, knowing I’m likely the one to bring out this side of her.

Smirking, I leaned down, brushing my lips against her ear. “That’s two,” I murmured, voice thick with amusement. “Think you can handle another?”

“Oh, you sound cocky now, don’t you?” she teased, stretching up and pinning me down despite her still-ragged breath.

She reached for the condom on the nightstand and rolled it onto my hardened length. The sensation of her touch alone sent a surge of pleasure through me, drawing a string of incoherent murmurs from my lips.

I saw her grin—like she knew exactly which buttons to press.

“Seo-yeon...” My voice was half a whisper, half a plea as I tried to sit up and pull her

into my arms. But she shook her head, pressing a hand against my chest, holding me down—keeping me beneath her.

Slowly, deliberately, she sank down onto me, taking me in inch by inch. I felt her warmth, her tightness and my hands instinctively gripped her hips, but she placed her palms over mine, lacing our fingers together as she set the pace.

“Guess I’m in your hands now,” I managed to say, my voice rough.

She smirked. Then she moved—rolling her hips in a way that made me curse under my breath. It took everything in me not to lose control too soon, but she felt too damn good.

Then she quickened her pace, her back arching beautifully. The gentle rise of her breasts moved with her, her long hair cascading forward, partially hiding her face.

I reached up, brushing her hair back so I could see her fully—see the way her lips parted, the pleasure written across her features. My hands slid down to her hips, guiding her as she rode me harder, pushing me closer and closer to the edge.

I groaned, my fingers digging into her skin, the pressure building to an unbearable peak. So close now.

But I wasn’t done with her yet. Seizing the moment, I let my hand wander, tracing the soft contours of her core as she moved, determined to push her over the edge one more time.

And it worked—her body tensed, trembling uncontrollably as another wave of pleasure washed over her. The sight of her unraveling, mesmerizing even in the dim glow, pushed me past my limit. I felt the tight grip of her muscles around me, and with a final thrust, I found my own release.

She collapsed onto my chest, completely spent, like a rag doll.

“So, that’s three,” I murmured smugly, wrapping my arms around her, feeling the damp warmth of her skin against mine. She struggled to catch her breath, speechless—like an athlete who had just finished an intense race.

Suddenly, a couple of thuds echoed against the wall, followed by what sounded like a curse in French.

I bit back a laugh, and when I glanced at Seo-yeon, her face was once again turning bright red.

“I was too loud!” she whispered, horrified. I pulled her closer, pressing a kiss to her temple. “Maybe just a little,” I teased.

She groaned and buried her face in my chest. “This is so embarrassing.”

I chuckled, running my fingers through her hair. “Don’t worry. They’ll survive.”

She let out a dramatic sigh but relaxed against me, her breath warm against my skin. The room settled into a comfortable silence, the faint hum of the city beyond the window lulling us into stillness.

Eventually, exhaustion caught up to us, and with the warmth of her body against mine, I drifted off to sleep.

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The soft light of early morning filtered through the window, casting a golden hue over the room. Seo-yeon was already awake, sitting at the edge of the bed, her back to me as she stared out at the view of Paris.

“You’re really leaving today,” I said, my voice still rough from sleep.

She turned to me with a small smile. “Yeah... still got some time before my flight. What do you want to do today?”



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I shrugged, trying not to dwell on the fact that she was leaving—that after this, we’d go back to being almost strangers. “Let’s head to your hotel so you can pack first. Then we’ll figure it out from there.”

“Sure,” she said softly, throwing me a wistful smile. I knew she didn’t want to go back to Seoul—to face whatever was waiting for her there.

A part of me wanted to ask her to stay, even just for a little longer.

But that wasn’t part of the deal, was it?

When we arrived at her hotel, it only confirmed what I had already suspected—she was loaded. The place was on a whole different level, luxury dripping from every corner, from the grand lobby to the smallest details in her suite.

I let out a low whistle. “Damn, Seo-yeon, why didn’t you say anything? You stayed in my tiny studio when you had all this?”

She shrugged, a faint smile tugging at her lips. “I don’t know... I slept well at your tiny studio.”

“Sure, you ‘slept’ well,” I teased, exaggerating air quotes around the word.

She giggled, landing another one of her playful punches on my arm.

I watched as she packed her suitcase with effortless precision, neatly folding each item before methodically checking the bathroom and peeking under the sheets one

last time. “There, all done,” she said, zipping up the suitcase with a sense of finality.

She rolled it through the door and left it with the hotel’s conciergerie service to be shipped directly to the airport later—one of those effortless luxuries that people with money didn’t have to think twice about. It was such a stark contrast to my own reality that I couldn’t help but be reminded, again, that we lived in different worlds.

We grabbed a quick lunch at a café near the Seine before deciding, without really saying it, to retrace our steps back to Pont Alexandre III.

Just days ago, we had passed under it by boat, watching the intricate details from below. Now, standing on the bridge itself, the perspective felt completely different—grander, more vivid, yet somehow heavier with the weight of everything that had happened in between.

Seo-yeon leaned against the railing, gazing down at the river, lost in thought. The wind caught strands of her hair, making them dance in the late afternoon light.

She exhaled softly. “It’s strange, isn’t it? How a place can feel different depending on who you are when you see it again.”

I looked away, unsure of how to put my feelings into words. “A few days ago, I was here alone, and it felt like the most beautiful place on earth. When the streetlights flickered on, one by one, it was like something straight out of a film.”

“Then, I was here again—under this bridge, at night—with you. It still felt surreal, almost like a dream.”

“And now, this afternoon, standing here again with you... it feels like a movie.”

Seo-yeon chuckled. “Romantic comedy or horror?”

I rolled my eyes but didn't take the bait. Instead, I finally voiced the thought that had been lingering in my mind since the moment I met her.

"You're beautiful, Seo-yeon."

Our eyes met, and then I kissed her. Her lips were warm, carrying the faint taste of butter and sugar from the pastries we'd shared earlier. It felt easy, inevitable—like the most natural thing in the world.

I've never been a hopeless romantic. I've been in a few relationships before—none ever felt quite right, but I went along with them anyway.

With Seo-yeon, though, it was different. Everything seemed to fall into place effortlessly. There was no pretense, no games.

Is it Paris casting its spell on me? The golden light of the late-afternoon sun shimmering on the Seine, catching in her hair? Or is it just... being with her?

But all good things come to an end, don't they? Soon, we'd be back in Seoul, back to our separate realities. Seo-yeon—probably an heiress to some powerful conglomerate. Me—just a struggling actor taking any gig I could to put my sister through university.

This isn't the kind of story that had a happy ending.

Checking my phone, I realize it's time to go. We take the metro to the train station, even though Seo-yeon insists I don't need to follow her all the way to the airport.

"It's really fine," she argued. "If you come with me, you'll have to go back into the city, only to return to the airport again tomorrow morning for your flight. It's silly."

“Still, I’d rather—”

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She gave me a look—the kind that made it clear she wasn't going to budge. I sighed but let it go.

As we stepped into the bustling train station, her eyes lit up. In the middle of the foyer stood a piano, waiting for anyone bold enough to play.

“Want to play a song?” she asked, though she was already settling onto the bench, her fingers hovering over the keys.

Without hesitation, she began to play—a delicate, flowing melody that filled the station. Within seconds, I recognized the piece: Hisaishi's Merry-Go-Round of Life.

She played beautifully, her touch both confident and expressive.

I couldn't resist. Smirking, I slid onto the bench beside her and joined in, adding deeper, richer chords to her melody. Soon, we were playing a duet, instinctively matching each other's rhythm.

A small crowd had gathered—some clapping along, others pulling out their phones to record. But we barely noticed. For those few minutes, it was just the two of us, lost in the music, as if the world outside had faded away.

As the last notes faded, we turned to each other and high-fived.

“You play really well!” she said, a mix of surprise and something else flickering in her eyes.

“So do you,” I replied, stepping away from the piano, suddenly aware of the lingering eyes of strangers. I wasn’t one for too much attention.

Seo-yeon cleared her throat, shifting her gaze toward the line of taxis outside the station. “I think I’ll just take a taxi from here.”

I hesitated. “Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you?”

She shook her head. “No, no. I don’t have any luggage anyway, so I’ll be fine.”

She looked at me for a long moment, as if memorizing my face, committing every detail to memory. Then, without a word, she reached for my hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

“I want to say, ‘See you in Seoul,’ but... maybe we won’t.” Her voice was quiet, the sadness in her eyes reflecting my own thoughts.

It was a shame, though. We were really good together.

I forced a small smile. “Then... I guess I’ll see you when I see you?”

She nodded. “Yeah. See you when I see you.”

We stepped into a final embrace, and I whispered into her ear, “Everything is going to be okay,” while gently tapping her back.

She pulled back slightly, her eyes searching my face for a moment before she leaned in, pressing a soft kiss to my cheek. Then, with a small wave, she lifted *Le Petit Prince*—the book I had given her.

“Thanks for the book!” she called over her shoulder.

I watched as she slipped into the taxi, the door clicking shut behind her.

And just like that, she was gone.

A strange, almost foreign feeling settled in my chest—heavy, lingering, and just a little too real.

9

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Seo-yeon

The journey back to Seoul from Paris was only 12 hours, but it felt like an eternity. I spent the first few crying, and even though flying first class meant I had no one crammed beside me, a flight attendant still stopped by to check on me.

What was I supposed to say to her?

That my career was in ruins and I'd probably already been fired? That I had no idea what to do with my life?

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That my relationship was over? That the man I had spent six years with—the one I thought I'd spend forever with—had been cheating on me?

That my parents, especially my mom, would lose their minds when they found out I was jobless, single, and had run away to Paris?

And worst of all... that I had left behind the best, the craziest, the most thoughtful, intelligent, and undeniably hottest man I'd ever met—along with a piece of my heart in Paris—because I thought it was the right thing to do?

Instead of saying all that, I just nodded and asked for more wine.

This was the choice I made, wasn't it? I was the one who said Paris was all we could have. No messy what-ifs, no impossible dreams of a future together. Just a beautiful, fleeting moment frozen in time.

Because deep down, I knew we could never be together. How on earth would I convince my parents to accept him—a son of a single mother, an obscure actor and model, the main breadwinner of his family? Someone who doesn't even have a university degree?

It sounds shallow. It sounds awful. But I know exactly how my family works. The first question my mother would ask if I introduced a new man: How much does he have in the bank? Followed by: What do his parents do? And finally, Which university did he graduate from?

And none of the answers—none of his answers—would ever satisfy them.



But Baekhyun is so much more than that. There's something about the way he moves through life—unforced, instinctive—and he carries this thirst for life, this relentless curiosity, that I've never seen in anyone before.

And to be honest? None of that even matters to me. What matters is that he understands. He listens. He comforts me. He challenges me. Those six days in Paris with him made me feel more alive than six years with Min-seok ever did.

He wasn't just a distraction or some rebound to help me forget Min-seok. He was the first person in a long time who truly saw me. Who made me feel like I wasn't just an accessory to someone else's life, but the main character of my own story.

And oh my god... the sex.

With Min-seok, everything was about him. Pleasing him. Making sure he was satisfied. My own pleasure was an afterthought—like a footnote in a book, something barely worth mentioning.

But with Baekhyun... he made me feel. Things I never thought I could. Things I never even knew I wanted to feel.

Will I ever meet someone like him again?

Probably not in this lifetime.

I sighed, rubbing my temples. What was the point of dwelling on it now? I was heading back to Seoul, back to the real world. The world where I had to answer to my parents, my agency, the media.

The world where I was Seo-yeon, the obedient daughter—not the girl who had spent six reckless, unforgettable days falling for a man she could never keep.

I flipped through the book he had given me, *Le Petit Prince*. Even his handwriting was charming.

Had I really been reduced to this? Clinging to the handwriting of a man I told myself I could never have?

I sighed again and took another sip of wine, finishing my second glass. My eyes flicked to the screen in front of me—ten more hours until we landed in Seoul.

Ten more hours until reality.

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The first day back in Seoul wasn't so bad. Jet lag hit me hard, and after sleeping for nearly ten hours straight, everyone just left me alone.

The second day, though, reality caught up with me. First thing in the morning, I met Ji-a at a café.

“Sorry, Seo-yeon, but they’re letting you go...” she sighed, looking both apologetic and exhausted.

“I tried to explain that you left because it was urgent, but they said disappearing without notice in the middle of an ongoing project was unacceptable. I think you’ll be getting a formal dismissal letter soon. And... there’s also a fine to pay.”

Well... it wasn't exactly a surprise.

I reached across the table, taking Ji-a's hand. “It's fine. I kind of expected this anyway. And thank you, Ji-a. For everything. And... I'm sorry, too. For leaving so suddenly and dumping the mess on you.”

I gave her a sheepish look. “Oh god, I really hope you get to keep your job. And... we’re still friends, right?”

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Ji-a nodded, but to my surprise, a faint blush colored her cheeks. Very unlike her.

“Yeah, I was actually reassigned as an assistant for a rising star—Sungmin,” she squealed, practically bouncing in her seat. “Aah,otokke, he’s so handsome! And it’s my first time being an assistant for a male celebrity—I can’t even look him in the eyes.”

I blinked, then burst into laughter. “So things actually worked out even better for you.”

Ji-a looked a little embarrassed. “Sorry, Seo-yeon, I didn’t mean to— I mean, of course, you’re still my best actress and my best friend in the whole world.”

I hummed, pretending to consider her apology—though, honestly, she had nothing to apologize for.

“So... what’s next? And how was Paris, by the way?” Ji-a seemed desperate to change the topic.

Right—Paris. And Baekhyun. My mind went to him immediately.

He hadn’t contacted me yet, which made sense since he was probably still on a plane. And even if he had landed in Seoul already, we had agreed not to reach out to each other.

“Good,” I said, the only word I could come up with.

Ji-a frowned. “Good? That’s it? You ran away to Paris, had this whole dramatic escape, and all you have to say is... good?”

I cleared my throat. “Yeah, well, it was beautiful. The museums, the architecture, all that...” I waved my hand vaguely. “And as for what’s next... honestly? No idea. I don’t have the energy or motivation to start contacting new agencies. I think I’ll just enjoy my time as an unemployed person for now. At least until my mom kills me so I won’t have to worry about my future anymore.” I added dryly.

Ji-a huffed. “Well... your family is rich anyway. Can’t you just take over the family business or work there instead?”

“That’s exactly what I don’t want,” I said, exhaling sharply. “I went to drama school, thinking I could forge my own path... but who knew that path would be full of shit?” I let out a quiet, bitter laugh.

She toyed with her straw before sighing. “This industry is brutal. Haven’t you heard? Another actress took her own life a few days ago.”

“Yeah, I saw it on the news,” I replied. “Poor thing... she was so young.”

Ji-a nodded. “You never really know what someone’s going through. She seemed to have everything. But one blackmail scandal, and just like that—she was gone.”

We both got lost in our thoughts for a few minutes before Ji-a finally checked the time and sighed. She had to get to work.

We hugged, promising to meet again soon. Then she headed to her car, and I went to mine. We drove off in opposite directions.

For a brief moment, I considered just driving. Driving and driving until I reached

Busan, to my grandparents' house.

But I couldn't keep running away forever, could I?

By the time I reached home, a tight, heavy knot had already formed in my stomach. My mind raced with worst-case scenarios.

What if my mom had already opened my dismissal letter? What if they knew about Baekhyun? And what the hell was I supposed to say about Min-seok?

The only advantage of living in a house this big was that I wouldn't have to see anyone right away. My room was on the west wing, while my parents' bedroom was on the second floor of the east side.

I parked the car and slipped inside as quietly as possible—moving almost like a thief in my own home.

Luckily, I didn't run into anyone from my family, except for the butler. I asked him about my mom's schedule, and he mentioned she had a board meeting this morning.

Seizing the opportunity, I slipped into the west wing of the house and entered the piano studio next to my room. It was the one place where I felt most at peace. The studio was soundproof, allowing me to play for hours without interruption—just me and the keys, shutting out the world and my problems.

After playing for a while, my throat felt dry, so I stepped out to grab some water. As I passed my sister's room, I noticed her door was slightly open.

That was odd. She was usually at the office by now.

"Yae-rin?" I called out, pushing her door open.

I froze. Blinked. Then blinked again.

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Her laptop sat open on the desk, playing an explicit video—two women tangled up in, well... veryunholyactivities.

And my sister is still in her pajamas, one handdown there, clearly about to have some... private time.

“Oh no. Oh no,” I panicked, stumbling backward, squeezing my eyes shut in a desperate attempt to erase the image from my brain.

I heard a flurry of movement—the sharp snap of her laptop closing, the rustling of sheets—then suddenly, she grabbed my wrist and yanked me back into the room.

Eyes still tightly shut, I had no idea what to expect. But suddenly, it all made sense.

So that’s why she was never interested in dating... or at least, not in dating men.

Not my business anyway, I reminded myself. As long as she’s happy, that’s all that matters.

I heard her exasperated sigh. “I thought you’d still be passed out in your room,” she muttered, sitting back on her bed and yanking me down to sit beside her.

Cautiously, I cracked one eye open—half-expecting to see something I really didn’t want to. “Err... nope. I’m here,” I said dryly, unsure of what else to add.

Yae-rin ran a hand through her short hair. “Well, I felt a bit sick today, so I’m skipping the office,” she announced casually, as if I hadn’t just walked in onthat.



Then, as if deciding to steer the conversation far, far away from what just happened, she added, “Anyway... how was Paris? Just so you know, Mom is absolutely livid. And Min-seok called a few times. Mom was even angrier when she found out you left without telling him.”

“Oh... that jerk,” I muttered, letting out a long sigh before flopping onto my sister’s bed.

“He cheated on me, and we broke up. That’s why I ran away to Paris. And now, I just found out I’ve been fired,” I blurted out. Short and quick, like ripping off a bandage.

Surprisingly, it felt good to finally say it out loud.

“You... what? He did what to you?!” Yae-rin leaned in closer, her head hovering over mine, eyes burning with intensity.

I let out another long breath and simply nodded.

“Oh, that gae-saekki,” she cursed, punching the bed in frustration. “I never liked him anyway. With his stupid glasses and that annoying way he always adjusts them—like he’s the smartest person in the room.”

She huffed. “And the worst part? He’s acting like nothing happened! He called Mom the other day, all ‘Oh, how has Seo-yeon been? I haven’t heard from her in a while, I’m so worried’—ugh. Unbelievable.”

Yae-rin hovered above me again, her eyes looking big and funny from this angle. “How do you feel now? Are you okay?”

Then, noticing the opportunity, she added, “And about your job... I know you really don’t want to, but I’d gladly welcome you into the company. I know you’d be great

there.”

I laughed. “That’s really nice of you—to say that a 34-year-old ex-model and actress with zero corporate experience would do great at the job...”

I let out a sigh, deciding to be honest with her. “But no, I don’t feel fine. Well... not because of the breakup. That was actually the easy part. But... I don’t know what to do with my life.”

I hesitated before adding, “And, sis... what do you do when you meet a... stray cat that makes you really happy, but you know you can’t keep it?”

Yae-rin squinted at me, completely baffled by my sudden mention of a stray cat.

“Could it be... you met a very handsome French guy during your trip?”

I groaned, throwing my arms over my eyes. There was a reason my parents had entrusted the company to my sister—she was sharp, quick to catch on. And since I’d already opened up this much, I might as well tell her everything.

“Close enough,” I muttered. “A very handsome Korean guy in Paris.”

I heard her gasp. “Omo. Who is this guy? Do we know him? Is he famous?”

“Yeah, maybe you’ve seen him a few times on TV or in magazines,” I admitted. “But that’s not the important part. The important part is... I know he’s not the kind of guy our family would welcome with open arms.”

Yae-rin’s brows furrowed, and I could practically see the gears turning in her head. “You mean... he doesn’t have a good background?”

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I let out a dry laugh. “If by ‘good background,’ you mean rich parents and a degree from a top university, then yeah... he doesn’t.”

Yae-rin sighed exasperatedly before throwing a punch at my arm. “Aigo. You might as well have hooked up with a handsome French man—that would’ve caused fewer problems. At least they wouldn’t be familiar with our system and expectations.”

I peeked at her from under my arms. “You think there’s no way that I could... that we could...?” I trailed off, unable to even finish the thought.

We could have... what?

Those six days in Paris really were just a movie, like he said. A dream. A fantasy. Not real life.

And even if—and that’s a big if—we somehow managed to be together against all odds, would it even work? Would we end up driving each other crazy?

Relationships aren’t just about burning passion and fluttering hearts, are they?

Yae-rin exhaled heavily, rubbing her temples. “You know why our family is like this, right? Remember Uncle...”

“...Suk-jin?” we finished together.

Uncle Suk-jin—my dad’s youngest brother—had become something of an urban legend in our family, the you-know-who, a name unspoken at family dinners or any

formal gatherings.

At first, he was the golden child. He joined the family company and quickly secured a high-ranking role. But then, he met a woman—one who, let's just say, didn't come from the same world as our family. He fell hard.

A few years into their marriage, she conned him. Drained their joint account, somehow managed to sell off properties they had bought together and disappeared without a trace.

What followed was a long, exhausting legal battle that left scars on the entire family. As for Uncle Suk-jin, he chose to leave everything behind and start over in Thailand. No one has heard from him since. Thankfully, they never had children together.

Yae-rin leaned back against the headboard, arms crossed. “So, yeah. That's why Mom and Dad are the way they are. It's not just about money or prestige—it's about control. They think they're protecting us from making the same ‘mistakes.’” She sighed, shaking her head. “And I think they're just scared.”

I exhaled slowly, staring at the ceiling. “Scared of what?”

“Losing us. Losing face. Losing their version of what life is supposed to look like.” She shrugged. “To them, love isn't a gamble worth taking unless the odds are completely in their favor.”

I chewed on her words, my mind drifting back to Baekhyun—the way he laughed, the way he listened, the way he teased me. The way he made me feel like more than just someone's daughter, someone's fiancée, someone's carefully planned-out future. With him, I didn't have to be perfect all the time—I could just be myself.

“They'd never accept him,” I murmured.

Yae-rin was quiet for a moment before nudging my leg with her foot. “But do you?”

I turned my head to look at her.

She met my gaze evenly. “Forget Mom and Dad for a second. Forget their expectations. If none of that mattered, would you want to be with him?”

Would I?

The answer came to me so clearly, so overwhelmingly, that it almost scared me.

“Yes,” I whispered.

Yae-rin smirked. “Then I guess the real question is... what are you going to do about it?”

I didn’t have an answer.

Instead, I lingered in Yae-rin’s room a little longer, wrapped in the kind of comfortable silence only siblings could share. But my thoughts kept looping back to our conversation, her question repeating in my mind over and over.

Eventually, she shooed me away, mumbling something about needing rest.

Back in my room, I flopped onto my bed—one of the few perks of being newly unemployed: nowhere to be in the middle of the day. I stared at the ceiling, my thoughts restless.

Mostly, they were about him.

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Baekhyun.

Even with my eyes closed, I could still picture him, still hear his voice—like we were still walking beside the Seine.

I exhaled slowly and rested my hands behind my head. Is this just how things were going to be? Living my life with someone handpicked by my parents, all while secretly longing for the one who got away?

A soft knock at my door snapped me out of my thoughts.

And just like that, I knew.

My time had come.

It had to be my mother.

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My mother isn't the type to yell. She never has been. But I've feared her in a way that has nothing to do with volume. It's the way she carries herself—cold, poised, and always in control.

“Seo-yeon,” she greeted me, her voice quiet but firm as she stepped into my room. She took her time, walking over to my desk and running a finger along its surface, as if inspecting for dust. A small, calculated gesture—but one that made it clear who held the power in this conversation.

“Did you have a good time in Paris?”

How was I supposed to answer that?

Running out of ideas, I simply nodded and braced myself for whatever was coming next. I realized I’d been holding my breath since she walked in.

She turned to face me, her expression stoic, unimpressed. “I assume you knew we didn’t appreciate your little trip. The one you took so suddenly, without warning—leaving behind your social obligations, your job, and your boyfriend.”

She stepped further into my room, arms crossed. “Tell me, what made you do that? Was there something... someone... in Paris you just had to see? Or were you simply bored with your life here? Why did you feel the need to run away like that?”

I gulped. This was escalating faster than I expected.

“Well...” I started, forcing a casual tone. “You were right. I was a little bored, so that’s why I flew to Paris.”

Her lips pressed into a thin line. “Don’t you know we were all worried about you? I called you every day while you were there, but you never answered. Is sending a simple text too much to ask?”

She took a slow breath, as if reining in her frustration, then continued. “I reached out to everyone—Min-seok, Ji-a, your agency, even some of your friends I met at events—asking where you were. Do you realize how that made me look? A mother who doesn’t even know where her own daughter is?”

Ah. Of course. It wasn’t about me. It was about her reputation.

I exhaled quietly, keeping my expression as neutral as possible. “I didn’t mean to cause any trouble,” I said carefully. “I just needed some time to think.”

“To think?” She arched an eyebrow, unimpressed. “And what exactly was so important that it required you to disappear to another country without a word?”

I hesitated.

If I told her the truth—that I left because I found out Min-seok cheated on me—she’d probably dismiss it, say it was impossible because he was such a nice and respectable man.

If I told her I left because I wanted to quit acting and modeling, she’d chalk it up to some kind of mid-30s crisis and push me straight into the family business.

Either way, I’d lose.

I swallowed hard, choosing my words carefully. “I just... needed to get away for a bit. Away from work, from expectations, from everything.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Everything? Including Min-seok?”

There it was. The real test.

“Yeah. Including him.”



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“And why is that?” Her sharp gaze bore into me, demanding an answer.

“Because maybe... he’s not good for me.”

“Explain.”

“Because I’m not happy with him!” The words burst out before I could stop them, my voice shaking as I fought to keep my emotions in check.

For a moment, I was tempted to tell her the truth—that Min-seok cheated on me. Surely, she wouldn’t let her daughter stay with a man who slept with an escort. No matter how impeccable his family background was or how successful his career as an international lawyer.

But the words wouldn’t come out.

Somehow, I was embarrassed. Embarrassed by the failure of my relationship.

I heard a persistent, tiny voice in my head: What if the cheating was because of me? Because I was plain? Boring? Not enough?

My mother sighed, her expression softening as she stepped closer. Instinctively, I took a step back.

“No relationship is perfect, Seo-yeon. Even the strongest ones have rough patches,” she said, her voice lowering as if imparting some great wisdom.

“But while you were in Paris, I spoke to him. We talked about everything. He told me how things really went and...” She paused, watching me carefully.

“He even said he’s been thinking about marriage.”

I blinked. “He... what?”

“Yes, he told me he’s been looking at engagement rings. He even showed me one! It’s beautiful, Seo-yeon. I don’t want to spoil the surprise, so you should go talk to him. I’m sure you two can work things out.”

Oh, I’m sure that WON’T be the case.

Judging by how my mom was practically glowing at the thought of a wedding, it was obvious Min-seok had conveniently left out the part about his raunchy night with leopard-print-cape girl.

The audacity of this man!

I clenched my jaw, forcing myself to stay quiet. If I said anything now, it would only turn into another argument—one I had no energy for.

Instead, I sat on my bed, arms crossed, fuming as I waited for her to leave.

“Are you done now, Mom? I’m still exhausted from the trip, so if you could give me some space, that’d be great,” I said, keeping my tone as neutral as possible.

My mom opened her mouth, then closed it again. She looked like she still wanted to interrogate me about work but decided she’d done enough for today.

“Okay, fine. But promise me you’ll speak to him and fix things,” she said as she

walked toward the door.

I just stared at her coldly as she left my room.

Once she left, I paced back and forth in my room, unknowingly biting my nails. Should I go to his place, confront him, and tell him to stop all this nonsense because we were over?

Or maybe he didn't even deserve my presence.

This could be done over the phone, I decided.

I dialed his number, and on the first ring, he picked up, sounding both surprised and excited.

"Seo-yeon! How... how are you? Are you back in Seoul?"

I let him blabber like an idiot for a few moments before settling in.

"Listen," I said, my voice calm but cold. "Maybe it's not clear enough for you, but we're over. I don't want to be with you anymore. I'll be telling my family soon, so don't talk to anyone in my family again or spread any more nonsense."

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I heard a small sound on the other end of the line, as if he was scrambling for the right words.

“Seo-yeon... listen, I can explain—”

“There’s nothing to explain,” I cut him off. “Are you suffering from amnesia or something? I saw it with my own eyes. You cheated on me with that girl. And I will never accept that.”

With that, I hung up, feeling satisfied at having the last word.

The first part was done.

The second part—telling my family—would be much tougher.

10

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Baekhyun

“With Hanseong Bank, anything is possible!” I said cheerfully into the camera, holding up the bank’s debit card.

It had been a week since I returned from Paris. Now, back to business as usual, I was in the middle of filming a bank commercial.

“No, no, it’s any-thing, not just a flat ‘anything.’ Put more emphasis on ‘any,’ got it?”  
The PD checked the monitor and gave me instructions to redo the take.

I nodded, though I rolled my eyes internally. As if stressing ‘any’ would magically convince people to sign up—especially with the bank’s abysmal customer satisfaction ratings.

“Ready?” The PD checked his camera again. “Action!”

“With Hanseong Bank, any-thing is possible!” I repeated the line exactly as instructed, feeling like a well-trained parrot.

The PD glanced at the monitor and gave a thumbs-up. “Perfect! Alright, let’s take a break!”

As the crew scattered from the studio, I stepped outside with my manager, Byung-ho, trailing closely behind.

“That’s good, that’s good,” Byung-ho muttered as he scrolled through the schedule on his phone, already gearing up for the next gig. “Alright, what’s next? A magazine shoot, another ad, and... oh! This one might be a game-changer!”

But I wasn’t really listening. My attention had already drifted elsewhere.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and without thinking, I grabbed it with an immediate sense of urgency.

Could it be...? A message from...?

But my excitement evaporated as quickly as I had yanked my phone out.

It's just another love declaration from Sun-hee.

“Oppa... how are you? Did you know that when we first met at that BBQ gathering with friends, I already knew you were the guy from the coffee commercial? I had the biggest crush on you for the longest time...”

Her message was followed by a sticker of a giant rabbit shyly tapping its index fingers together.

As usual, I left it on read. I had no interest in continuing the drama with my ex.

Ever since our breakup, Sun-hee texted me a few times a week—sometimes saying she missed me (which I doubted), sometimes asking if we could talk (nope), and sometimes sending messages like this. Confessions that felt... fake.

“Hello? Are you listening or not?” Byung-ho waved a hand in front of my face.

I shoved my phone back into my pocket. “Yeah, yeah, sorry...” I muttered, forcing my attention back to him. “You were saying?”

“I just got an email about an audition opportunity—for the Yoon sisters’ next drama. It’s a second lead and a villain role, but still... if you land it, you’ll be acting alongside Hyun-Bin and other A-listers! This could be huge for you!” He pumped his fist in the air, like we’d just won the lottery.

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I smiled at his excitement, but I couldn't quite mirror it. "Send me the details. I'll go."

My mind was elsewhere. Almost unconsciously, I checked my phone again—just in case. Just maybe...

Seo-yeon.

I hadn't stopped thinking about her since Paris. Was she still with her agency? How was she handling her family? Was she counting calories again? Had she started chasing her dream of working in music? Had that jerk of an ex tried to crawl back into her life?

More than anything, I just hope she's not sad. I hope she's doing well.

I lost count of how many times I hovered over my phone's keyboard, typing out messages only to delete them before hitting send.

In the end, this was how it had to be. We had an agreement. The days we spent together in Paris—they were just that. A moment. A dream. A scene from a movie. Not reality.

In reality, we weren't meant to be. I had nothing to offer her, especially not with the life of comfort she came from.

"What's up with you, huh?" Byung-ho took a drag from his cigarette, eyeing me closely. "You've been looking a little down since you returned from Paris. Something

happened over there?”

I shook my head.

It was just a beautiful dream, I reminded myself.

“Nothing... I was just thinking,” I murmured. “I wonder if I could still change my career—do something more musical instead of acting or modeling.”

Byung-ho’s jaw practically dropped. He stared at me for a solid five seconds before blurting out, “Wait... are you saying you want to be an idol or something?”

I let out a dry laugh. “No, it’s way too late for that.”

I paused before adding, “I mean something like becoming a musician or a producer. You know I already perform solo at that jazz café once a week. They don’t pay me much, but I love doing it. I just... want to do more of that.”

Byung-ho nodded, considering my words. “Oh... well, do you have any experience in producing music? Have you ever written a song or anything?”

“Hmm... no, not yet,” I admitted. “But maybe it’s time to start.”

“Yeah, I bet it’s not that hard. Just take anything around you and write it down,” he said, eyeing his cigarette. “Like, for example, I could write this: Oh, cigarette, cigarette, you burn my wallet and my lungs, but oh, how I love you so?” He sang his newly invented song in a tone-deaf voice.

Byung-ho is the most practical person I know, and I love him as my manager—but when it comes to anything artistic, he has zero sense.



I burst out laughing. One could always count on Byung-ho to lighten the mood.

We kept talking—about the commercials, the audition, and the opportunities ahead. Before long, we called it a day.

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In the next few days, between photo shoots, gym sessions, performing at the jazz café, and preparing for my audition, my mind kept circling back to one thing—music.

What kind of artist did I want to be? Should I focus on playing an instrument? Producing? Singing? A little bit of everything? Stick with jazz or venture into classical? What kind of sound would define me?

No matter how much I thought about it, I wasn't making any real progress. Frustration gnawed at me as I stared at my notebook, still blank, as if mocking me.

I sighed, recalling Byung-ho's words. I bet it's not that hard. Just look around you and write.

Right. Simple advice. So why was it so damn difficult?

Determined to at least start, I picked up my bass. Fingers on the fretboard, I plucked out a melody—something slow, something thoughtful. A tune that carried the weight of unspoken emotions.

On the second run of the song, I heard a soft knock on my door.

"Come in," I called, setting my bass aside.

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The door swung open, and Ye-bin practically bounced inside, her signature grin in place. “Oppa, annyeong! Got a sec?”

I smirked at her usual energy. “What’s up?”

She flopped onto my bed dramatically, arms stretched over her head. “Just wanted to tell you—we’re planning to visit Auntie soon, maybe next month! Mom and I are staying for a couple of days. You should come too.”

She rolled onto her side, propping her head up on her palm. “It’ll be fun! No cameras, no schedules, just fresh air and homemade food.”

I exhaled. “Tempting, but I’ve got the audition coming up. I have to prepare.”

She pouted. “Ugh, I know it’s not Paris... but still... you should come with us!” she teased. “One of these days, I’m dragging you out of this city whether you like it or not.”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “We’ll see about that.”

She sat up abruptly, her face lighting up as if she’d just remembered something important. “Oh! I got a part-time job.”

I gave her a doubtful look. “Where?”

She grabbed a pillow and tossed it at me. “Rude. I’ll have you know I’m now officially employed at a bookstore.”

I caught the pillow and smirked. “Were they in their right mind when they hired you?”

She rolled her eyes. “Whatever. Point is, I get to be around books all day, and I won’t have to mooch off my famous actor big brother forever.”

I snorted. “You never mooched off me, dummy.”

She drummed her fingers against the bedframe. “Still, I wanna start making my own money. Feels kind of nice, you know?”

I didn’t say anything, just looked at her for a second. This is Ye-bin—the same kid who used to beg me for extra ice cream money—talking about financial independence. Weird.

Instead of saying something sappy, I reached over and ruffled her hair roughly. “Well, don’t screw it up.”

She groaned, swatting my hand away. “Ugh, you’re the worst.” Then her eyes flickered to my bass. “Wait—were you playing just now?”

“Yeah, just messing around.”

She gasped dramatically. “Ooooh, is Oppa finally writing his first song?”

I let out a dry chuckle. “Trying to.”

Ye-bin jumped to her feet and pressed down on a few random frets. “Well, don’t overthink it! Inspiration’s everywhere, you know?”

I groaned. “Not you too.”

She grinned. “What can I say? I spit wisdom. Anyway, don’t fry your brain over it.”

She skipped out of the room, humming some death-metal tune under her breath. I shook my head with a smirk. Ye-bin’s mind must be a terrifying place—like an Energizer Bunny trapped in a mosh pit.

I looked down at my bass, fingers itching to play again.

Maybe Ye-bin was right. Maybe I was overthinking things.

Taking a deep breath, I plucked the first note.

And this time, I let the music lead.

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“Baekhyun-ssi, you’re up,” the assistant called.

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The day of the audition had arrived before I knew it.

I'd read the script a hundred times, practiced my lines until they were second nature, and studied how some of the best actors in the industry carried themselves. Yet, as I stood outside the audition room, gripping the script, my heart still pounded.

I took a steady breath. No matter the outcome, I reminded myself that I'd walk away knowing I gave it my best.

Inside, a long table of casting directors, producers, and even the Yoon sisters themselves sat waiting. I took my place in front of them. The role was a villain—quiet, calculating, the kind of presence that made people uneasy. For a split second, I almost laughed. Why does it feel like this role was made for me?

The cameras rolled. I became him.

Every line came smoothly, every movement deliberate. I kept my tone sharp but restrained, letting the weight of each word settle. The tension in the room shifted—whether it was from them or from me, I couldn't tell.

When I finished delivering my last line, a brief silence filled the room.

Then, one of the directors gave a small nod. "That was... impressive."

I bowed. "Thank you."

Stepping outside, I let out a slow breath, feeling the tension finally leave my body.

My palms were damp with sweat—I hadn't even realized how nervous I was. Inside that room, I had shut everything else out, losing myself completely in the character.

But it didn't matter anymore. I had done what I could. Now, all I could do was wait.

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A week later, the call came.

“You got the role,” Byung-ho's voice practically exploded through the phone. “You got the role!! Baekhyun, this is huge! The Yoon sisters don't just cast anyone. You're going to be acting alongside A-listers!”

I sat on my bed, staring at the floor. “That's... wow.”

“‘Wow’?! That's all you have to say? This could change your career forever!”

“I know,” I muttered.

A brief pause. Then, Byung-ho's tone sharpened. “But...?”

I hesitated. “They're filming in Japan for most of the scenes...”

Byung-ho snorted. “So? You spent months whining about wanting to be cast in a AAA project. Well, congratulations—this is it.”

I leaned back, staring at the ceiling. “I know. It's just...”

I couldn't say it.

What if Seo-yeon reached out to me?

It was stupid. Irrational. She probably had no intention of ever seeing me again.

But the thought lingered, refusing to let go. What if she came looking for me... and I wasn't here?

And then there was something else.

The more I thought about it, the more I wasn't sure if I wanted to spend the next several months just acting. Ever since I got back from Paris, I had felt restless. The jazz café performances weren't enough—I wanted to create. I wanted to make music, and I think I might be close to finishing a song.

But now, I had a chance at a role most actors would kill for.

“Hello?” Byung-ho's voice snapped me out of my thoughts. “Are you seriously hesitating right now?”

I ran a hand through my hair. “Hyung... You know I've been thinking about music more seriously. Not just performing—I want to produce.”

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There was a pause. Then—

“Yeah, you’ve told me... but what about The Man from Seoul? I kind of told them you’re in.” His frustration was obvious.

I exhaled. “I know, but if I take this, I won’t have time for music at all.”

He let out a long breath. “I might know someone,” he said reluctantly. “A friend of mine runs a music studio. He uploads songs to streaming platforms—makes good money from it.”

That caught my interest. “Really?”

“Yeah. He’s always looking for new songwriters. I can ask. You don’t have to be an idol or anything—just put the music out there, and if people like it, you get paid.”

I leaned back in my seat, intrigued. That... actually doesn’t sound impossible.

“Look,” Byung-ho added, “why not just film the drama first? It’s only a few months. Then you can focus on music. Or even work on it while you’re there. We’ll send over your guitar, tambourine, whatever.”

He let the offer hang in the air before adding, “So? Deal?”

I sighed. “Let me think about it.”

A groan came from his end, but I hung up before he could argue.



I stared at my phone.

Japan or music? Acting or creating?

I need to decide.

11

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Seo-yeon

I used to think reinvention was something dramatic—a bold decision, an act of defiance. But in reality, it was quieter, messier—more like fumbling through the dark, searching for a light switch.

It had been weeks since I'd last stood in front of a camera—weeks since I received my dismissal letter, along with a fine from my agency for leaving without notice. No scripts, no rehearsals, no carefully crafted persona to uphold. Just me—free at last.

It should have felt liberating.

Instead, I'm restless.

I'm in a very fortunate situation where I have enough savings to pay the moderate fine, and even though I was let go by my agency, the drama and the fallout were minimal.

But that didn't change the gnawing sense of aimlessness. With nothing to fill my days, I had too much time to think—to wonder what came next.

“Well, you always loved music,” Yae-rin said one afternoon as we sat in a café inside our family’s company building. She had finally agreed to take a quick break after I had been continuously nagging her about my existential crisis and how unbearably bored I was staying at home.

“Why don’t you do something with that?” she added, slurping her caramel latte.

I stirred my drink absently. “I don’t know. It’s not like I have any experience performing a piano concert.” I sighed. “And I’m too old to go back to school.”

Yae-rin tilted her head, giving me that sharp, older-sister look. “Who said anything about performing or going back to school?” She leaned back, tapping her fingers against her cup. “You could produce your own music, play at soirées or weddings... or even teach piano to kids.”

Teach?

The thought had never even crossed my mind before.

“That’s... not a bad idea,” I admitted slowly.

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“You should look into private lessons too—parents in Gangnam pay crazy money for a good teacher.”

I let out a small laugh. “That does sound tempting.”

Yae-rin smiled. “You were always happiest when you played. It doesn’t have to be a big deal—just something for yourself.”

I hesitated, but since we were already on the topic, I asked anyway. “Eonni, why do you work so much? Don’t you ever just want to hire a manager, sit back, relax, and travel the world?”

She gave me a look—not even blinking, like I’d just said the dumbest thing imaginable. After a solid minute, she finally answered.

“Because... that’s just how it is,” she said with a shrug. “And besides, a little stress is good for you. Keeps you sharp.”

I hummed, letting her words sink in.

Then she checked the clock, grabbed her bag, and stood up. “Anyway, I have a meeting in five.” With a quick wave and a wink, she disappeared back into her world of deadlines and conference rooms.

I stayed there for a while, staring at my coffee, her words lingering in my mind.

Just something for yourself.

Maybe that's what I needed—teaching piano.

I had played since I was a child, spent hours practicing scales, perfecting my touch. I didn't have any teaching experience, but if I could go back to my younger years, I would've loved a teacher who made music feel less like a rigid routine and more like a language—something expressive, something alive. Or maybe like a dance—fluid, exciting, and fun.

For the first time in a while, I felt like this could lead to something.

But even as I tried to move forward, there were still pieces of my past that refused to let go.

At home, over dinner, my mother watched me carefully between bites of rice and banchan. I knew what was coming before she even said it.

“You still haven't called him, have you?”

“Mom.” My tone carried a warning.

She sighed, setting down her chopsticks before carefully placing a piece of vegetable onto her plate. “I'm just saying. You're not getting any younger, you know.”

I felt like an old cow being auctioned off for marriage. But I didn't say it—I just shook my head.

“You're making things more difficult for yourself,” she continued, her voice laced with quiet frustration. “You had everything set. A stable future. Do you really think you'll find something better?”

I took a deep breath. “Mom, please, just let it go.”

She pursed her lips. “Or just tell me if you’re done with him. I can arrange a blind date—I have a lot of connections, and some of them have single sons.”

“Thanks, but I’m okay.” My voice was curt. I knew I couldn’t win against my mom in a conversation like this. “Anyway, I’m full. Thank you for dinner.”

I set down my chopsticks, and before she could say another word, I disappeared into the piano studio.

There, I pulled out my phone and started searching—how to become a piano teacher for kids, whether there was still demand for it (considering anyone could learn anything on YouTube these days), and if I needed any training.

I got lost in my research for the rest of the day.

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A few days later, suffocated and restless from being cooped up at home with my mom, I escaped for some window shopping with Ji-a.

“Hi, girly!” Ji-a pulled me into a hug before leaning back to study my face. “Oh... you look... um, how do I put this... haggard?Gwenchani?”

What a nice way to say I looked terrible. I scoffed—leave it to Ji-a to say whatever was on her mind without a filter.

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“I’m... okay. There’s just a lot on my mind lately.”

I clutched her arm as we crossed the zebra crossing near Konkuk University.

“Not enjoying your new unemployed life?”

“I should, shouldn’t I?” I let out a dry laugh. “But I think it’s in our nature as Koreans to feel restless when we’re not working. I mean... I’m lucky—I don’t have to pay rent, and I still have some savings, so unemployment isn’t the end of the world for me.”

We stepped into a cosmetics store. A few people glanced in my direction, curiosity flickering in their eyes, but nothing more. Ah, the perks of being a minor actress.

“Yeah, and you’re from achaebofamily. You don’t need to earn a salary like us normal people,” Ji-a said offhandedly, swiping a lip gloss across the back of her hand. “What do you think of this color?”

I shook my head—both at the shade and at her comment about my family.

Yes, we lived comfortably, but our wealth is nothing compared to other conglomerate families. Still, I couldn’t help but wonder... would they cut me off if I chose to be with Baekhyun?

Just like they did with Uncle Suk-jin?

Baekhyun.

His name had basically become He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named in my mind—the one thing I kept telling myself not to think about, which, of course, only made me think about him even more.

It had been a few weeks, and he still hadn't contacted me. At first, there was still hope. But now? I just felt hopeless.

So... this is it, right? Game over?

I should just move on. Bury our memories. Pretend it never happened.

But my brain refused to cooperate. I still found myself wondering what he was doing. If he was okay. If he ever thought about me, too.

“By the way... I haven't told you everything about Paris,” I murmured, running my fingers over a row of blush compacts, desperately trying to bring him back into the conversation.

Ji-a turned to me, intrigued.

I hesitated, unsure if this was the right place for it—but honestly, I just needed to say his name out loud. “Do you remember Yang Baekhyun from Princess of Cosmos?”

She frowned, caught off guard by the random mention. “Yeah?”

“Well... we met in Paris. Completely by chance. And... I ended up spending some time with him.”

Ji-a's eyes widened, almost cartoonishly round. “Wait, you mean like... coffee-and-casual-small-talk spending time? Or...?”

I gave a small nod, confirming what she wasn't saying. "Yeah.Or."

She clapped a hand over her mouth—whether in panic or excitement, I wasn't sure—before smacking my arm with a series of small punches. "What?! How?! And you've waited this long to tell me?!"

I rolled my eyes, grabbing her wrist and pulling her out of the cosmetics store. "Come on, let's go somewhere less crowded."

Once we were seated at a small café, I stirred my drink, debating how much to say. A part of me wanted to relive every moment with Baekhyun, to spill everything. But another part wondered—was there even a point?

"Yeah, so... he originally went to Paris with his girlfriend. By pure chance, we ran into each other at Opéra de Paris. Then they broke up," I shrugged. "And... yeah." I trailed off, unsure how much more I should say.

Ji-a squealed, hitting my arm again, unable to contain herself. "So?! What happened next? Where is he now?"

I brushed my arms, pretty sure I'd have bruises by now, but before I could get a word in, Ji-a was already diving into another round of interrogation.

"Oh, I always liked him... You two had such great chemistry on set! And I got the feeling he's not just a pretty boy—though, let's be real, that face." She fanned herself dramatically. "The thick brows, the sharp jawline... Sure, he's a model, but there's something else about him. Something... different." Then, with a frown, she added, "And he's so much better than that jerk ex of yours."

Her words came like tiny pinches, each one poking at something I was trying to ignore.



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“He is,” I admitted with a small smile. “But... we decided that what happened in Paris should stay in Paris. So... we’re not in contact anymore.”

Ji-a’s face fell. “Oh, butwhy?! Do you like him?”

I nodded.

“Do you get butterflies when you’re with him? Do you have a lot in common? Do you never run out of things to talk about?”

Three more nods.

“Then why?” she protested, her voice a little too loud. I quickly hushed her, glancing around to make sure we weren’t drawing attention.

But I couldn’t answer right away.

Because, honestly? I was embarrassed by the real reason. That my family wouldn’t approve. That they were shallow and materialistic. That I was too afraid to fight them on it.

Ji-a studied me, then softened her voice. “Did he make you happy? Even if it was just for a few days?”

I exhaled, my fingers tightening around my cup.

“The happiest I’ve felt in years,” I whispered before I could stop myself.

“Then go for him, girl! I watched you for six years with your ex—bored out of your mind. It’s like he sucked the life out of you! Now you’re finally free, you’ve met someone who actually makes you happy. What are you waiting for?”

When I didn’t answer right away, she doubled down.

“It’s not easy finding someone special, you know. Take me, for example. I haven’t dated anyone in years. The dating scene in Seoul is brutal. Brutal, I tell you. Believe me, you do not want to go back out there.” She shook her head, exasperated.

Then, as if something clicked, she narrowed her eyes at me. “Oh. Wait. Is this about your mom? She wants you to end up with some rich guy, doesn’t she?”

Bullseye.

“Bingo,” I admitted weakly, shame creeping in.

She sighed, pulling a face like she was trying to solve an impossible math problem. But in the end, nothing came out.

“Yeah... family is hard,” she finally admitted, her voice quieter now.

We both fell into silence, lost in thought as we sipped our matcha lattes.

Then Ji-a suddenly perked up, tilting her head. “Oh! I’ve been hearing this song everywhere lately! No idea who sings it, though.” She held up a finger, as if to say, Listen!, before nodding along to the tune.

A soft piano melody filled the room. I’d never heard the song before, but something about it pulled me in. Then came the voice—deep, soulful, laced with quiet melancholy.

She smiled like she had all the time in the world,

As if Paris itself whispered in her ear.

She told me her dreams, her voice like a melody,

Fingers dancing on ivory keys, lost in the moment.

A chill ran down my spine.

Then, after a brief piano interlude, the voice returned.

Was it her? Or was it just Paris?

I froze.

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Ji-a looked up, frowning. “Hey... what’s up? You look weird.”

Her voice barely registered. My hands trembled slightly around my cup.

That voice.

That song.

No way. It couldn’t be... could it?

I shot up from my seat. “Ji-a, what day is it today?”

It was the kind of question only an unemployed person would ask—but at that moment, I was too stunned to make sense of what had just happened.

She blinked. “Uh... Saturday?”

My heart pounded. “I need to go somewhere.”

Ji-a’s frown deepened. “What? Where?”

Grabbing my coat, I barely managed to get the words out. “The jazz café.”

And before she could ask anything else, I bolted out into the night.

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The all-blue jazz café in Gangnam was small and cozy, tucked away from the busy streets. Inside, a small crowd gathered around a dimly lit stage, all eyes fixed on the performer. Clearly, the live music was the main attraction here.

I stood at the back, stretching my neck to see if he was on stage. He told me he performed here every Saturday, but I had no idea what time.

My heart pounded so hard it felt like it might burst. After more than a month of not seeing each other... what was I supposed to say? I had rushed here without thinking. Should I be happy? Angry?

Was he really the one who wrote and sang that song?

And if he was—was it really about me?

I finally managed to peek past the crowd, but my excitement dimmed when I saw two women setting up for a duet instead of Baekhyun.

A passing waiter caught my eye, balancing a tray of drinks. I stepped forward quickly. “Excuse me... do you know if Yang Baekhyun is performing tonight?”

He nodded, glancing his watch. “Yeah, he’s scheduled to go on in about two hours.”

Two hours.

My fingers tightened around the strap of my bag as my pulse quickened. I hadn’t really thought this through. What was I even going to say to him?

The waiter adjusted his tray and gestured toward the bar. “If you want to order something, you’ll have to do it over there.”

I murmured a thanks and found a quiet corner, ordering a Long Island to settle my nerves.

As the evening went on, the performances blurred together. The music faded into background noise, my mind elsewhere. Every time someone stepped onto the stage, I held my breath.

And then—finally—I saw him.

Baekhyun.

The moment he appeared, the atmosphere shifted. Conversations faded into murmurs, heads turned. He moved with quiet ease, adjusting the mic stand.

“Hello,” he said, his voice low and steady—never one for small talk, never saying more than necessary. “I’m Baekhyun, and this is a new song.”

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With that, he took a seat at the piano. A moment later, his fingers brushed the keys, and the first notes filled the room.

And then, he started to sing.

She smiled like she had all the time in the world,

As if Paris itself whispered in her ear.

She told me her dreams, her voice like a melody,

Fingers dancing on ivory keys, lost in the moment.

Was it her? Or was it just Paris?

Golden lights on the Seine, your laughter in the air,

Footsteps on Pont Alexandre, wind in your hair.

The city was a dream, a scene from a film—

But tell me, did Paris ever feel like home?

My breath caught.

I sat frozen, listening.

Baekhyun sang with his eyes closed, his expression raw, lost in the music. Every note, every word pulled me back—streetlamps glowing against the river, the way Paris wrapped around us like something out of a dream.

When the song ended, the café erupted into applause, but I barely heard it over the pounding of my heart.

And then it happened.

Baekhyun looked up.

Our eyes met.

For a moment, neither of us moved. His lips parted slightly, like he was about to say something. Even from across the room, I saw the flicker of recognition, the hint of surprise.

But before anything could happen, someone else reached him first.

A girl near the front clapped eagerly, her voice light and teasing as she stepped onto the stage. “Oppa! Congratulations on your song! It’s about Paris... and me?”

I stiffened.

Something in the way she spoke—so familiar, so easy—made my stomach twist. I didn’t know who she was, but I didn’t have to. The realization struck, cold and sharp.

His ex.

Of course.



Of course, she would be here. Of course, she would think the song was about her.

And me? What was I even doing?

Heat crawled up my neck, shame settling deep in my bones. I had rushed here, breathless with hope, convinced this song—this moment—meant something. But maybe I had been foolish. Maybe I had misunderstood everything.

I needed to leave.

The café suddenly felt too small, the air too thick. I pushed away from the crowd, head down, heart pounding. My fingers trembled as I set my empty glass on the bar, slipping past tables, past strangers who didn't notice me faltering.

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Then, I was outside. The cold hit my skin, sharp and biting. My pulse raced as I walked faster, the city buzzing around me.

But just as I turned a corner—

“Seo-yeon!”

Baekhyun’s voice.

I kept walking.

“Seo-yeon, wait.”

Footsteps behind me. Quick, determined.

Before I could take another step, a hand wrapped around mine, warm and familiar.

I stopped. With no other choice, I turned to face him, my pulse unsteady. Tears stung my eyes, but I blinked them away.

For a moment, neither of us spoke. The sounds of the city faded, leaving just the two of us standing in a quiet alley—not in Paris this time, but in Seoul.

A voice in the back of my mind whispered doubts. Maybe she’s not his ex. Maybe they got back together. Maybe that’s why she’s here tonight—why she thought the song was about her.

Baekhyun finally broke the silence, his tone firm but laced with emotion.

“You know the song is about you.”

When I didn’t respond, he said it again, softer this time.

“You know that.”

I let out a shaky breath, but I still couldn’t bring myself to speak.

Baekhyun’s grip on my hand loosened slightly, like he was afraid I’d pull away. His eyes searched mine, waiting, but I wasn’t sure what for. An answer? A reaction?

The night air was cold against my skin, but my thoughts were louder than anything else.

You know the song is about you.

His words echoed in my mind, but I didn’t know what to do with them.

I swallowed hard, still staring at the ground. “Then why didn’t you call?”

It was the only thing I could say, the only thing I could think about. If I had meant something—if Paris had meant something—why had he disappeared?

His jaw tensed, and for the first time, he looked away. “Because I was scared.”

I frowned, lifting my gaze. “Scared?”

Baekhyun exhaled, running a hand through his hair. “You said it yourself, Seo-yeon. What happened in Paris... stays in Paris.” His voice was quiet, measured. “I didn’t

want to ruin it.”

I stared at him, my heart twisting in ways I didn’t know how to stop. “So you just let it end?”

He didn’t answer right away. Instead, he took a small step closer. “I tried to move on,” he admitted. “I thought maybe you wanted me to.”

The honesty in his voice made it hard to breathe. I felt a lump in my throat. “And now?”

His gaze held mine, steady. “Now, I just want to know... if I was wrong.”

I didn’t answer right away. Instead, I just looked at him—really looked at him.

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The way his brows knit together, the slight tension in his shoulders, the unspoken hope in his eyes. He was bracing himself for disappointment, waiting for me to walk away, to prove him right.

But I wasn't going to.

I exhaled, the weight in my chest easing just a little. "Well... You were wrong."

A breath of something—relief, maybe—flickered across his face. Then, so softly I almost missed it, he smiled.

The tension between us didn't break immediately. We just stood there, the hum of the city fading into the background, exchanging stolen glances and swallowed smiles. Then—

Baekhyun tilted his head slightly, as if something had just occurred to him. "Oh," he said, his tone shifting. "My place is empty tonight. Family's visiting Auntie in Sunchang."

I blinked at the sudden change in topic. "...Okay?"

He shoved his hands into his pockets, lips quirking up just a little. "So... wanna come over and have some instant noodles?"

That made me laugh—an actual, real laugh that bubbled out before I could stop it. I swatted his arm lightly. "Are you serious right now?"

His expression was all wide-eyed innocence. “What?” Then his grin deepened, eyes twinkling. “I’m just being thoughtful. It’s past dinner time. What if you haven’t eaten yet?”

I shook my head, biting my lip to keep from smiling too much, feeling the last bit of tension melt away.

Baekhyun squeezed my hand lightly, waiting for my answer.

Maybe it was reckless. Maybe it was stupid. But with Baekhyun, I always followed my heart, not my head.

“...Alright,” I finally said, pretending to hesitate. “But only if you actually cook them properly this time.”

He let out a dramatic sigh. “Fine. I’ll even add kimchi. Happy?”

Just like that, he took my hand again, leading me away—from the alley, from the café, from all the doubt I had carried with me tonight.

And this time, I didn’t look back.

\*\*\*

I never imagined Baekhyun actually grew up living above a small restaurant.

Before long, we arrived at his family’s house, and even though I knew nobody was home, I still tiptoed inside.

It felt strange being in an empty restaurant, surrounded by vacant tables, the smell of jjampong and jjajangmyeon still lingering in the air.

“By the way, is it okay for you to just leave the café like that?”

Baekhyun blinked, as if just realizing. “Right! I need to make a call...” He excused himself and stepped into a quieter corner of the restaurant.

As he walked away, I wandered further inside, taking in the quiet atmosphere. My fingers trailed along the edge of a table before my gaze drifted toward the kitchen.

I’d never been inside a restaurant kitchen before, but something about this one—small, lived-in—felt warm. It wasn’t hard to picture a younger Baekhyun here, washing dishes for his mom or doing his homework at an empty table while she cooked.

A moment later, Baekhyun returned, stretching his arms above his head. “Crisis averted. The café can survive one night without me.”

I smirked. “Good to know. Wouldn’t want your fans rioting.”

He chuckled, but as I studied his face, my tone grew more serious. “And... did you talk to the girl who was cheering for you at the café?”

There was a slight pause before he nodded. The air between us grew heavier. “Yeah... that was Sun-hee. My ex. The one I went to Paris with.” He exhaled, rubbing the back of his neck. “You knew that we broke up, but... she still contacts me all the time. I don’t think she really gets that it’s over. But I think she finally gets it now.”

I gave a small nod, understanding all too well. It was the same with me and Min-seok.

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Baekhyun shrugged, breaking the moment. “Anyway, since you so graciously agreed to eat at my place, I figured we should actually cook something instead of just making instant noodles.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Are you suggesting we cook?”

“Well, I am. You... I don’t know. Can you cook?”

I hesitated. “Define ‘cook’?”

He groaned. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. Okay, I’ll keep it simple—let’s make kimchi fried rice.”

I nodded like I knew exactly what I was doing. “Sounds easy enough.”

Baekhyun clapped his hands together, quickly pulled out a frying pan from a drawer, set it on the stove, and turned on the heat. Then, stepping back behind the counter, he gestured for me to take over. “Alright, step one: put the rice in the pan.”

I spotted a rice dispenser in the corner, grabbed an empty bowl, and filled it to the brim with rice. Then, without hesitation, I dumped the entire thing straight into the pan. “Like this?”

Complete silence.

I turned to see Baekhyun staring at me, his mouth slightly open. “...Uh, you need to cook the rice first.”



I blinked. “Wait... so the rice isn’t supposed to be cooked in this pan?”

He let out a long, dramatic sigh, pressing his fingers to his temples like he suddenly had a headache. “You need to boil the water first—” He cut himself off with another sigh. “Forget it, let me check if we have any leftover rice in the fridge.”

“Well, sorry, but the instructions weren’t clear!” I huffed in frustration.

As he rummaged through the fridge, I noticed his shoulders shaking.

“Are you—are you laughing?”

His back moved up and down. “No.”

“You are.”

Baekhyun cleared his throat, but his voice still shook with laughter. “So you are indeed a prin—”

I immediately clamped a hand over his mouth. “Don’t.”

His eyes crinkled with amusement. Then, instead of prying my hand away, he gently lifted it from his lips, holding it for a second before leaning in—just enough to place a soft, lingering kiss against my lips.

“I missed you.” His eyes still twinkled with laughter. “But I really need to take over now before you burn my mom’s kitchen.”

With an easy roll of his sleeves, he got to work. He pulled out a cutting board, peeled a few cloves of garlic, and diced them with effortless precision. Then, moving on autopilot, he grabbed a container of kimchi from the fridge, along with some ham and

a bowl of perfectly chilled, leftover rice.

I watched him from behind, quietly impressed.

He'd make a good husband one day.

"What?" he asked suddenly, not even turning around.

I blinked, caught. "Nothing, nothing."

Baekhyun finally turned to me, a small smirk playing on his lips, as if he already knew what I was thinking. But instead of calling me out, he simply shook his head and went back to cooking.

He mixed the ingredients in the pan with practiced familiarity, the sizzle filling the kitchen as he poured in some sauce and a drizzle of sesame oil. The rich, savory aroma of kimchi and garlic thickened in the air, making my stomach grumble before I could stop it.

Baekhyun glanced over, his mouth curved into a lopsided smile. "Almost done," he said as he plated the fried rice, then cracked two eggs, frying them sunny-side up to place on top.

"There, all done," he announced proudly, setting the plates on the table.

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I slid into my seat, inhaling deeply. “Wow, this smells amazing.”

Baekhyun grinned as he sat across from me. “I still prefer instant noodles, though.”

I shot him a glare but was too hungry to argue. Instead, I raised my spoon and took the first bite. The flavors hit instantly—savory, spicy, with just the right amount of tang from the kimchi. “It’s so good!” I squealed.

Baekhyun looks pleased, but before he could say anything, I shook my head in disbelief. “Seriously, is there anything you’re bad at? You can play music without even trying, speak French like it’s nothing, you have a nice voice, a nice face...”

His smirk deepened. “Go on.”

I rolled my eyes, shoving another spoonful of rice into my mouth to stop myself from feeding his ego any further.

As we ate, Baekhyun glanced at me, his voice softer than before. “So... how have you been?”

I paused, spoon hovering over my plate. There was something about the way he asked that made me want to unwind everything.

“I’m okay,” I said after a beat. “Busy, mostly.”

He studied me for a second, as if searching for a deeper meaning behind my words. “Really?”

I let out a small breath, pushing my food around. “Well, during my escapade to Paris... my ex called my family.”

Baekhyun’s expression darkened instantly. “What?”

“Yeah. Just... out of nowhere. Like we didn’t break up. Like he didn’t cheat on me after six years together.” I scoffed. “My mom didn’t know, of course, so she kept pushing me, asking what happened and why I ran away to Paris.”

Baekhyun set his spoon down with a sharp clink, his jaw tightening. “And?”

I let out a dry laugh, shaking my head. “And I reminded him that we’re done. Told him he should stop being delusional.”

His lips pressed into a thin line, and he exhaled through his nose.

“Anyway, I really don’t want to talk about him anymore. Actually, I don’t want to talk about my life much at all right now—nothing good has happened since I left Paris,” I said with a chuckle, then added, “I’m officially unemployed too—my agency dropped me for leaving without notice.”

Baekhyun reached for my hand and gave it a squeeze. I glanced up and smiled, as if to tell him not to worry. “So... let’s talk about you instead. How have you been?”

He frowned slightly, his fingers still wrapped around mine, but stayed quiet.

I raised my eyebrows, silently urging him. Well? I’m listening.

Finally, he exhaled, a small smile tugging at his lips as he rested his arms on the table. “I’ve been busy too.”

“You heard my song. I met with a producer and spent some time in his studio.”

I sat up a little. “Tell me more about it.”

He nodded. “Yeah. Turns out, it’s pretty easy to produce and self-publish music nowadays. He helped me upload a track to a streaming platform, and I got a couple hundred listens in the first few days,” he said, like it was the simplest thing in the world.

My eyes widened. “Baekhyun, that’s amazing!”

He grinned. “I think it’s really about luck and how you promote the song. This producer knows what he’s doing, so... who knows? It could turn into something, or it could be nothing. But I like making music—more than acting or posing as a model. And that’s what matters.”

I reached across the table and lightly squeezed his wrist, a mischievous smile playing on my lips. “Since you wrote a song about me, shouldn’t I get a percentage of the royalties or something?”

He squinted at me and clicked his tongue in mock disapproval. “Look at you, diving straight into business.”

I laughed. “Well, as an unemployed person, I need to get creative about making money.”

He grinned, shaking his head. “You’re unbelievable.”

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After a brief pause, he leaned in slightly, curiosity flickering in his eyes. “Alright, enough about me. What’s your plan, then? Still busy being a responsible adult?”

I shot him another glare but then sighed. “Actually... I’ve been thinking about becoming a piano teacher.”

His eyebrows lifted slightly, as if just realizing that was an option. “A teacher?”

“Well, teaching still keeps me around music,” I said. “And I like the idea of helping kids fall in love with it the way I did.”

Baekhyun nodded, a thoughtful look on his face. Then, after a moment, he smiled. “I think you’d be really good at that.”

I felt my heart skip a little. “You think so?”

He nodded. “Yeah. You make people feel comfortable around you. And you’re not just into classical music—you love anime and manga soundtracks too. I think that’d be a great way to connect with kids.”

I smiled at him, appreciating the encouragement. His confidence in me meant more than I could say. I was truly happy for him—for how he was moving forward. Still, a quiet part of me couldn’t help but wonder if I was figuring things out at a much slower pace.

After dinner, we headed upstairs. The second floor housed his mom’s and younger sister’s rooms. We climbed another flight of stairs to reach the third and final floor.

The moment I stepped inside, I felt it. His room was so Baekhyun. Minimalist, yet warm in a way that didn't feel intentional.

Nothing flashy, but enough. It suited him.

I glanced around, taking in the small bookshelf tucked neatly in the corner, packed with a mix of music theory books, old comic books, and a few well-worn French novels by famous writers like Victor Hugo and Marcel Proust.

Against the slanted ceiling was a single bed, perfectly made, almost as if he never let himself get too comfortable.

Next to it, a compact desk sat free of clutter, positioned by the window. Near the desk, a modest keyboard was lined up against the wall, and an electric bass leaned against its stand beside it.

I pressed a key softly, the sound barely filling the room. "I didn't know you played bass too."

He smirked slightly. "There's a lot you don't know about me."

I rolled my eyes and continued scanning the room, but my heart beat a little faster. The house is quiet—just the two of us. And for a fleeting moment, I wondered... what would happen next?

Letting out a small breath to steady myself, I turned back to the desk. That's when I noticed a photograph near the edge. The image was slightly blurry, but I could still make out a young boy grinning widely, a soccer ball in his hands, standing beside a man with a small, reserved smile.

Without thinking, I picked it up.

Flipping it over, I saw a name scribbled on the back. Yang Hae-jin and Baekhyun. 1998.

I felt Baekhyun's presence behind me and turned to face him, the photo still in my hand. "This is...?"

"My dad," he confirmed in a quiet, almost distant voice. "I took that from my grandma's house."

His expression was hard to read. "I just keep it there so I won't forget how he looks."

Then, something in his gaze shifted. Without another word, he took the photo from me and placed it back on the table, face down—like closing a door he wasn't ready to walk through.

A second later, his arms wrapped around my waist, pulling me into him. His smile was soft, almost teasing. "At least this room is better than that closet I rented in Paris, right?"

I didn't answer. Instead, I gave him a small, nostalgic smile and let my hands rest on the back of his neck—just like the way we danced that night in that questionable nightclub in Paris.

This feels nice.

And in that moment, I realized just how much I had missed him.

He smiled back, and I felt his fingers move slowly against my back, his touch lingering.

Then he leaned in until our lips met—slow, searching, as if trying to lose himself in



the moment.

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But just as his grip tightened, a sudden noise from the first floor broke through the quiet.

We froze.

Baekhyun stiffened beside me, his arms slowly dropping from my waist.

“They’re supposed to still be at Aunt’s place,” he murmured, voice barely above a whisper.

Another muffled voice drifted from downstairs, followed by the sound of footsteps.

I glanced at him. “Should we...?”

He exhaled sharply and nodded. “Yeah. Let’s check.”

We carefully made our way down the stairs, the low hum of conversation growing clearer. It was definitely two women talking—one voice familiar, a little teasing, the other laughing softly.

As we reached the bottom step, the sight before us confirmed what we already knew.

His mom and younger sister stood in the middle of the restaurant, their bags half-dropped by the floor.

“Mom? Ye-bin?” Baekhyun’s voice carried more surprise than anything else.

His sister turned first, her lips freezing mid-chatter the moment she noticed Baekhyun wasn't alone. Her eyes flickered to me, widening slightly, but before she could say anything, their mother's gaze followed—first to Baekhyun, then to me, standing beside him.

Baekhyun straightened. "I thought you were staying at Auntie's place until Thursday?"

Ye-bin answered, oblivious to the tension. "Auntie's bathroom is broken, so we couldn't shower. We figured we'd just come back early." She resumed unpacking their bags, then after a brief pause, her gaze returned to me. "Oh. Hello!"

Baekhyun's mom didn't say anything at first, just studied me carefully before turning back to her son.

"Baekhyun."

He tensed. "Yeah?"

Her gaze flicked between us again before she let out a quiet sigh. "Well. Are you going to introduce us?"

I swallowed and quickly stepped forward, bowing. "I'm Seo-yeon. It's nice to meet you."

Her eyebrows lifted slightly, as if recognizing the name. "Seo-yeon," she echoed, then looked at Baekhyun again. "That Seo-yeon?"

Baekhyun cleared his throat, shifting. "Uh... yeah."

Ye-bin's eyes practically sparkled with mischief. "Wait. The Seo-yeon? As in the

actress? The one from—”

“Yes,” Baekhyun cut in quickly, already exasperated.

“Oh my God.” Ye-bin turned to their mother. “Mom, she’s famous! You watch her dramas all the time.”

Their mom hummed, crossing her arms. “I do. You were in a drama with Baekhyunnie once. I love that drama!”

I wasn’t sure what to say to that, so I just stood there awkwardly, nodding with a small smile on my lips.

Then, as if this entire situation were just another normal evening, Baekhyun’s mom sighed and asked, “Have you eaten?”

Baekhyun muttered, “Uh—yes?”

“Oh, that’s why the kitchen smells like garlic and kimchi,” Ye-bin noted.

His mother shook her head, already making her way toward the kitchen. “I’ll heat up some food. You can join us if you want.”

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Baekhyun groaned. “Mom, it’s fine—”

His mother ignored him. Instead, she turned to me. “Seo-yeon, do actresses eat normally, or do you all survive on air these days?”

“Uh, yes, I eat normally,” I said, though it wasn’t entirely true. My mind went blank for a moment, and I couldn’t think of a better response.

“Good. Is bibimbap okay for you? I think we have enough leftovers for that.” His mom checked the fridge, her tone casual.

I still couldn’t believe how unfazed his family was by my presence—like it was completely normal for me to be here, in their home, in the middle of the evening. As if I were just another family member visiting. If this had happened in my family, it would have caused an uproar for sure.

We took our seats at the table, watching as Baekhyun’s mom mixed together the leftover ingredients. “Well, it’s nothing fancy, but after hours on the road, we’re starving,” she said, setting the food down along with a few banchans.

For the longest time, I thought it was normal for children—no matter how old—to be at least a little afraid of their mothers. A quiet kind of fear, the kind that made you sit up straighter, mind your words, and measure every response carefully.

But sitting here, with Baekhyun’s family, I realized how different things could be.

Ye-bin talked and talked, filling the room with an easy, cheerful energy. She barely

paused between bites, launching into a story about how they'd spent their days at their aunt's house, picking apples and trying to get their little cousins to help—only to end up doing most of the work themselves.

“And then, Mom nearly fell off the ladder trying to reach the last apples—”

“I did not nearly fall,” their mom interrupted, scooping another spoonful of rice into her bowl. “The ladder was just a little... wobbly.”

Ye-bin grinned. “Sure, let's go with that.”

Baekhyun let out a small laugh, shaking his head. “I can't leave you two anywhere.”

His mom rolled her eyes but smiled before turning her attention back to me. “What about you, Seo-yeon? Do you have any family outside of Seoul?”

The question caught me off guard. I quickly swallowed my food, hoping to steady myself.

“Uh, yeah. My grandparents live in Busan,” I said, keeping my tone light. “But everyone's usually busy, so we don't get together much.”

Baekhyun shot me a quick glance—subtle, but enough for me to know he wished he could steer the conversation elsewhere.

His mother hummed. “That's a shame. No matter how busy life gets, family meals are important.”

I forced a small smile, not trusting myself to respond.

Because in my family, on the rare occasions when all four of us—Mom, Dad, my

sister, and I—sat down for dinner together, the conversation was either about work, or there was no conversation at all.

But here, even the silences felt warm.

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Baekhyun

I rolled my shoulders back, exhaling slowly as I glanced at the thick stack of papers in front of me. We had just wrapped up our chemistry read at the main building of the film production company.

This was one of the rare times I had the chance to work with some of the biggest names in the industry. I'd been nervous at first, but we quickly warmed up to each other, and the room soon filled with an easy, comfortable energy.

Across the table, Byung-ho sat flipping through his tablet, his expression sharp—focused, professional, and maybe just a little smug about how much work he was about to pile onto me.

“This is your schedule for the next six months,” he said, tapping the screen. “As you know, most of the filming will take place in Japan—mainly in Fukuoka and the surrounding rural areas, with a few scenic locations for key outdoor shots. You’ll be flying out in two weeks.”

Two weeks. The words barely settled in my mind before he continued.

“The shooting schedule in Japan is tight. You’ll need to adjust quickly.”

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I should be used to this by now—the packed days, the constant hustle. But this time, it felt different.

I haven't told Seo-yeon yet.

Not because I don't want to, but because I'm not ready to see that look in her eyes—the same one from last time, when we said our goodbyes in Paris. And selfishly, I'm not ready to let her go.

Byung-ho kept talking about the production team, the co-stars, the early script revisions. I nodded along, responding at the right moments, but my mind was elsewhere.

I should tell Seo-yeon soon. I knew that.

The thought lingered as the session wrapped up. The director gave a few final notes, my co-star stretched with a tired sigh, flashing a small smile before gathering her things.

Byung-ho was already on his phone, coordinating my next gig, but I barely registered the conversation.

By the time we stepped outside, the sun had dipped lower, casting long shadows on the pavement. The city buzzed with early evening energy—cars honking, voices overlapping, people rushing home or heading out for the night.

I drove back home in silence, my fingers tapping absently against the wheel.



When I pulled up near my house, I caught a glimpse of Mom inside the restaurant. She was wiping down the counters, her movements slow, almost absentminded.

The place was quiet. Too quiet. It was sad to see the restaurant so empty at peak dinner hour.

I let out a slow breath and pushed the door open.

“Mom.”

She looked up, her face still creased with focus from her task, but it brightened slightly when she saw me. “You’re done with work for the day?”

I pulled out a chair and sat across from her. “Something like that.”

She set the rag down and sighed, hesitating for a moment before meeting my gaze. “Baekhyun, there’s something I need to tell you.”

She looked serious, so I straightened, bracing myself. Better to let her speak first before mentioning my six-month shoot in Japan.

She smoothed a hand over the counter, her gaze distant. “I think it’s time to close the restaurant.”

The words were quiet, almost casual, but they hit like a punch I didn’t see coming. This place is more than just a business—it’s home. The backdrop of Ye-bin’s and my childhood. The place where I used to help out as a server or dishwasher to earn pocket money. Where Ye-bin grows up, filling its walls with laughter and memories.

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. She continued before I could find the words.

“It’s not profitable anymore,” she said gently. “And honestly, I think it’s time. Your aunt offered me a place in her village. It’s quieter there, and I can help out at her orchard.”

I frowned. “What about the house?”

She let out a small huff. “Well, you and Ye-bin could still live here, but it’d be a little weird having someone else running a business downstairs. Or we could rent out the whole place—it’d easily cover the cost of a new place for you and Ye-bin in Seoul.”

I shook my head. “You don’t have to do this. I can—”

“Baekhyun.” Her voice was firm, yet gentle. “You’ve done enough. More than enough. You took care of us when you shouldn’t have had to. But now... Ye-bin is growing up. And I’m ready for a new start.”

I felt a lump form in my throat at her words—at the acknowledgment I hadn’t even realized I needed.

When I didn’t respond, she reached over and squeezed my hand. “I’m proud of you. And I’ll pay you back for everything.”

I scoffed. “You know I won’t take it.”

She laughed softly. “I figured.”

I swallowed, nodding as I tried to process it all.

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It makes sense. It really does.

But it still felt like the end of an era.

Breaking the silence, my mom cleared her throat. “So... you look like you have some news to share too. What is it?” she asked, bringing the focus back to me.

I snapped back to the moment. Right, I needed to tell her about Japan.

She listened quietly as I explained my next project, nodding along, a spark of excitement in her eyes when I mentioned the A-listers I’d be working with.

“Wow,daebak! Your next drama sounds amazing. This is a huge opportunity,” she said, beaming. Then, after a beat, she added with a teasing smile, “No pressure, but make us proud.” She squeezed my hand again, her voice softening. “Like you always do.”

I let out a small laugh. “I’ll try.”

She studied me for a moment, as if noticing something else. “Are you happy?”

I hesitated, the answer lingering on my tongue. Finally, I exhaled, offering a small smile. “Yes, but...”

“Seo-yeon?” she guessed right away, raising an eyebrow.

I pressed my lips together, then sighed. “Yeah.”

When I didn't say anything more, she simply smiled, warm and understanding. "Then don't keep her waiting."

I exhaled, pushing back my chair. "I should get going."

As I stepped outside toward my car, I pulled out my phone, Seo-yeon's number already on my screen.

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We had agreed to meet at the park near her house. As I drove through the area, I quickly noticed how different it was from the crowded, high-rise districts of Seoul. Instead of towering apartment buildings, there were actual houses—mansions, even.

Which meant her family really was chaebol.

Only the insanely rich could afford to live in Seoul in a standalone house, let alone in a gated community like this.

Pushing those thoughts aside for now, I parked in front of the park and spotted Seo-yeon not long after. She was dressed casually in a hoodie and jeans, like she was trying to go incognito.

I got out of my car and met her near the playground. The moment she saw me, her face lit up with that warm, familiar smile.

God, she is beautiful.

"Hello, beautiful," I greeted, stealing a quick peck on her lips.

She pushed me back, eyes wide in shock. "Are you nuts? People could see us!" she

hissed, glancing around in panic.

I just grinned. “So? Why do you care?” I said, casually hopping onto one of the swings.

She shot me a glare, trying to look fierce, but the pink dusting her cheeks completely ruined the effect.

Cute.

“I have something to tell you,” I said, deciding not to dance around the news.

She looked intrigued. “Okay... I have something to tell you too. But you go first.”

I glanced at her, curious, but she was already watching me, waiting for me to continue.

“I got a role in Yoon’s sister’s next drama.”

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Even before I could finish, her eyes lit up.

“I decided to accept it, even though I want to focus more on music now, because... well, opportunities like this don’t come twice, and I’m not exactly in a position to turn down offers.” I let out a short, cynical laugh.

She grabbed my shoulders and gave me a little shake. “Baekhyun, that’s so cool! What’s the drama about?”

“It’s really interesting—I was hooked the moment I read the script. It’s about a high-profile Korean who flees to Japan after a scandal back home. At first, he thinks he’s safe, but then he discovers that someone in Korea has hired the Yakuza to track him down. While trying to lay low, he falls in love with a Japanese woman, which makes his situation even more complicated. Now, he has to decide whether to risk staying for love or escape before it’s too late.”

I scoffed. “And of course, I’ll be the villain—the Yakuza boss.” Shaking my head, I added, “And I have to speak some Japanese lines too. I know the basics, but I’m nervous. I really need to practice.”

Somehow, she looked even more excited than I had been when I first heard the news. “Wow. That’s so...wow. I’m really, really happy for you!”

I smiled, meeting her eyes. “Thank you.” I cleared my throat before continuing. “There’s a catch, though.”

Her eyes widened, waiting for me to explain.

“Most of the filming will take place in Japan. So... I’ll have to be there for about six months.”

Her expression shifted instantly. Her shoulders slumped, and she let go of my arms. “Oh.” That was all she said.

“Yeah... oh.” I echoed like an idiot.

Then, an idea popped into my head—a crazy one, maybe, but I had to say it. Half a year without her was too long. Even one month already felt unbearable.

“Come with me,” I said simply.

She blinked. For a moment, she just stared, then—

“Wow. Okay. Now I’m convinced,” she said flatly. “I had my suspicions before, but this just confirmed it.”

“Confirmed what?”

“That you’re absolutely insane,” she replied.

I let out a short, dry laugh. “Well, maybe I am. But think about it—you could start your transition to becoming a piano teacher while in Japan. Nothing’s tying you down here. And you said it yourself—your dream is to leave Korea one day. Six months isn’t forever. Think of it as a trial period. If you don’t like it, you can always come back.”

I paused for a moment before adding, “And besides... we lived in a dream in Paris. Don’t you want to try living in reality with me? To be driven crazy by me, to argue over who does the laundry or washes the dishes?”

She sighed, rubbing her temples. “Baekhyun, we’re skipping so many steps. I mean... are we even dating? Am I your girlfriend?”

I took her hand, gently stopping her rambling. How is that not clear to her? Of course I wanted her to be my girlfriend. But... the way she questioned it, it felt like something was holding her back.

“Do you want to be my girlfriend, Seo-yeon?” I finally asked, slightly afraid of what her answer might be.

She didn’t answer right away. Instead, the floor suddenly became the most interesting thing in the world as she kept staring at it.

“I want to... but my family...” Her voice trailed off as she chewed her lip. “They’re... not exactly open to new people.”

Ah. So that’s it.

Not the distance. Not the uncertainty. Me.

I shouldn’t be surprised. Achaebolddaughter and a guy from a tiny restaurant (one that’s failed, no less)—our worlds couldn’t be more different. I could still remember that night at my place, the way she looked at the cramped space, the way she hesitated before sitting down.

Was she scared? Scared of what the future might look like if she stayed with someone like me?

I’m not naïve. I know what people like her parents think of guys like me—unpolished, unworthy, temporary.



And maybe, deep down, she's starting to think the same. Not because she wants to, but because she's been raised to. Maybe she's wondering if love—or whatever this thing between us is—can truly bridge the gap between our worlds.

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I leaned back against the swing set pole, folding my arms. “So, let me get this straight. Even if I’m the nicest guy in the world—if I hold doors open, treat you right, do everything I can to make a good impression—it still wouldn’t change anything?”

She didn’t answer. But she also didn’t meet my eyes.

That silence was enough.

I exhaled through my nose and nodded slowly. Alright. Got it.

It stung, but I couldn’t let it get to me. I’m not going to spend my life trying to prove myself to people who might never see me the way she does. What mattered isn’t them. What mattered is her.

I reached for her hand again, lacing my fingers through hers. “Look, I know the way we met was crazy and... not exactly conventional. But that’s just how it happened. I like to think it was fate—that we met in Paris by chance and...”

I caught myself just in time before blurting out, and I fell in love with you, knowing it would probably freak her out even more. “We... shared something real,” I said instead.

As I said it, I felt a certainty rising within me, one that couldn’t be ignored.

I’m not letting her go.

“We don’t have to follow the usual steps just because that’s what everyone else does.

I did that before, and my relationship still failed. And you..." I trailed off, realizing I don't need to finish that sentence.

She finally seemed to consider my words, resting her chin on her hand as she thought it over. "Let's say I agree," Seo-yeon started, hesitation lacing her tone. "My family will disown me this time."

I stared at her, not having an answer to that—but a slow grin tugged at the corners of my mouth anyway. "Then let's make it worth it."

Before I could say anything else, she threw her usual punch at my arm. I caught it mid-swing, grinning, and pulled her into a hug, her warmth pressing against me.

"When are you leaving?" Seo-yeon muttered, her voice muffled against my chest.

"In two weeks," I said, pulling away just enough to look at her—but not letting go. I tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, my fingers lingering a second longer than necessary before pressing a soft kiss to her cheek.

"If you want this... will you at least think about it?" I whispered near her ear.

She didn't answer right away. Instead, she just stared at me in silence, her eyes searching mine, like she was weighing something only she knew.

I didn't want to press her further, so I shifted my tone, still holding onto her hands. "So... you said you have something to tell me?"

She blinked, caught off guard, like she'd completely forgotten about it. But then, I noticed something else in her eyes. Was it guilt?

She huffed, nibbling on her lip awkwardly. "Well yes, but... promise you won't get

mad?”

I raised an eyebrow, leaning back slightly. “It depends,” I said, my curiosity piqued. “Is this going in the direction of ‘I signed us up for a cooking class’ or ‘I just murdered someone and need your help to dispose of the body?’”

She gave a nervous chuckle, but something in her eyes made me realize this wasn’t going to be as light as I’d hoped.

“I could’ve found your dad.”

I froze, staring at her for a solid ten seconds, unsure if I’d heard her right. “What?” The word came out low, disbelief creeping into my voice.

She fidgeted with her hands, clearly uncomfortable. “When I saw your dad’s name on that photo, I... I asked Ji-yong for help. He has connections, and—”

“Seo-yeon.” My voice was quieter than I intended, a chill creeping into it.

She bit her lip, her gaze dropping. “He lives nearby. He changed his name, but... he’s here.”

She reached for my hand, her fingers brushing mine, careful and hesitant. “I just thought... maybe you’d want to know. To tie up loose ends.” She glanced at me, her eyes searching for any sign of anger. “But... it’s up to you.”

I exhaled slowly, my grip tightening around the metal bar in front of me.

I had so many questions for her. Why did she try to find my dad? How did she and Ji-yong manage to track him down? And why would he change his name...?

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I guess, maybe, all this information is easier to come by than I realized, but my family never tried.

We were too hurt by him—the way he just abandoned us without a word.

To tie up loose ends.

I'm not sure I know how.

The thought of facing him felt like stepping into a different life, one I wasn't sure I could walk back from. What would it even be like to see him? To listen to whatever justification he might offer? And if I did—then what? Would it change anything? Or would it just tear open a wound I'd spent years trying to close?

I looked down, fingers still gripping the metal bar.

Maybe it was better to just leave the past where it was. Maybe I didn't need answers from him, not if it meant reopening all the old scars. But Seo-yeon... she was waiting for me to make a decision, offering me this chance.

“Are you sure about this?” I finally asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

She nodded, her gaze steady but soft. “He... works in a shop in Anyang. I can give you his whereabouts if you want... and... you can do whatever you'd like with this information.”

She reached out to take my hand again, her fingers brushing mine gently. “I'm sorry,

Baekhyun. I didn't mean to be nosy or intrude on your personal life, but... it just seemed like the right thing to do."

I squeezed her hand gently, unsure of what to say. "Why are you doing this?" I finally asked, the question slipping out before I could stop it.

She gave me a soft, almost hesitant smile. "Because I care about you, Baekhyun. And I just thought... if you want to know, you should have the choice."

We stayed quiet, both lost in thought. When it was time to leave, I walked her home—stopping far enough to stay out of sight from anyone inside or the guards. The silence wasn't awkward, just full of things we weren't ready to say yet.

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The next few days, I found myself near the neighborhood Seo-yeon had told me about—Anyang. I had no plan. No clue what I would say when I saw him. But I waited.

Hours passed. I leaned against a wall, my gaze fixed on the entrance of a small repair shop where he supposedly worked.

And then—

A man stepped out.

Older than I remembered, but unmistakably him. The same sharp features, the same build. He was carrying a small bag, adjusting his jacket as he locked up the shop.

There's something strange about seeing your parents grow old. Especially when it's a parent you haven't seen in almost twenty years. He didn't seem as tough as I

remembered him. Now, he is just an old man.

Before I could stop myself, I moved.

“Hey.”

He turned, frowning slightly as his gaze landed on me.

And for a long, suffocating moment, we just stared at each other.

Then something flickered in his eyes—recognition, maybe.

I swallowed, my fists clenched at my sides. My mind spun with all the things I wanted to say.

Should I punch him? Yell at him? Ask why he left? Why he never came back?

But in the end, the only word that came out was—

“Why?”

His gaze lingered on me, confusion and something else—guilt?—flashing across his face. He opened his mouth, then closed it, like he wasn’t sure where to start, or if he should say anything at all.

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“Why?” I asked again, my voice barely above a whisper, but louder than I intended.

He shifted uncomfortably, as if the weight of those years pressed down on him. “I... I never wanted to hurt you.” His voice cracked, the words coming out hoarse, like they hadn’t been spoken in a long time.

I clenched my fists, the anger and confusion building up inside me. I let out a small, sarcastic chuckle. “You never wanted to hurt me? Then why leave? Why disappear without a word?”

The words stung as they left my mouth, but they felt necessary. He didn’t respond right away, and I was pretty sure he might turn away again, like the coward he was.

“I have a huge debt. I borrowed money from the wrong crowds. And I don’t want you, Ye-bin, or your mom to get involved in it.” His eyes flickered with something I couldn’t quite place—guilt, regret, maybe even shame. “I’m sorry,” he said simply, his shoulders slumping low like a deflated balloon. And for a moment, I thought he might break down and cry.

I couldn’t tell if his words were genuine or just desperation. But I realized I didn’t have the answer either. I wasn’t sure if I could ever forgive him. Or if I even wanted him back in my life.

The silence between us stretched again, heavy and stifling. I wanted to say something—anything—but the words wouldn’t come. What could I even say to him? The man who had been absent for years? The one who made me abandon my dreams and forced me to become the head of my family while I was still just a teenager?



His admission hung in the air—debt, the wrong crowds. Was that why he left? Was that why he disappeared? To protect us? Or to protect himself?

I met his eyes, and for the first time in all these years, I saw something—vulnerability. He wasn't the strong, untouchable figure I remembered.

“Why didn't you tell us?” I asked, my voice quieter now, the anger replaced by a mix of confusion and hurt. “Why keep it a secret? Why leave us in the dark?”

“I was ashamed,” he confessed, his voice trembling. “I thought if I stayed away, you'd be better off. I thought... I thought I could fix things without dragging you into it.”

“Baekhyun...” He called my name for the first time—the first time I heard it in almost twenty years. “I know I don't deserve forgiveness. I don't deserve to be a part of your life. But if you ever need me... I will be there.” His voice hung in the air, heavy with regret.

“I don't know if I can forgive you,” I said, my voice soft but firm. “I just... wanted to tie up a loose end.”

His face fell, but he nodded, understanding, though it was clear that it hurt.

With that, I turned and began to walk away. I felt a strange mixture of relief and sorrow. Relieved that he was still alive and well. Sorrow, because... I didn't know if I should tell Mom and Ye-bin, or keep this to myself.

For a long time, I wondered why my dad left our family. Now at least I know. What to do with this information—that's something I'll deal with another day.

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Seo-yeon

Should I go to Japan with Baekhyun?

That was the million-dollar question, and I couldn't stop turning it over in my head.

It sounded crazy. Just a few months ago, I wouldn't have even considered it. Back then, I was ready to marry my ex and spend the rest of my life with him—even though I already knew we don't belong together.

If I go with Baekhyun... what would people say? Living together before marriage? What would his colleagues think? Those A-list actors? The industry was small, and even the tiniest rumor could spiral into a scandal. Anything remotely controversial had to be avoided at all costs.

And then, of course... my parents. They'd never forgive me once they found out.

But then again... I'm not an actress anymore. Not even a model. No projects, no agency, nothing tying me down.

So why should I care? I'm an adult, after all—old enough to make my own choices. And isn't it time I started living life on my own terms?

But Baekhyun and I—what exactly are we? Had we even been on a proper date in Korea? Aside from that night at his place... where I also met his entire family?

I sighed, pacing restlessly around my room.

Japan isn't even that far—just a few hours by plane or even a ferry ride from Fukuoka

to Busan. I can visit my grandparents. It's been ages since I last saw them.

So, it's not like I'm disappearing forever. But still, packing up and leaving like this... it feels huge.

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Am I really ready for this?

I need to clear my head, to sort through everything swirling in my mind. So, when Baekhyun texts me later that day, I figure meeting him and talking things through might help.

Funny—this might actually be our first real date.

I arrived at the charming café at the time we had agreed on and spotted him already seated at a table.

The café was decorated with vintage ornaments—a phonograph sat in the corner beside large bookshelves—and it was pleasantly uncrowded, a big plus for us. Even though we were just minor actors, there were still times when people recognized us in public, and the last thing I needed right now was a scandal or rumors.

Baekhyun looked more exhausted than usual—his hair slightly messy, faint shadows under his eyes.

“What’s going on?” I asked as I sat down.

He let out a slow breath and said simply, “Met my dad.”

I blinked. “You did?”

“Yeah.” Baekhyun leaned back in his chair, staring at the ceiling for a long moment before looking back at me.

“It was... weird,” he finally said. “Weird to see him after almost twenty years. I don’t even know what I was expecting, but it wasn’t that.”

I stayed quiet, giving him space to say as much or as little as he wanted.

“He told me he had a huge debt. Borrowed money from the wrong people, left because he thought it was the only way to protect us.” He let out a dry, humorless laugh, shaking his head slightly. “I don’t know if I believe that.”

“Have you told your mom? Or Ye-bin?” I asked gently.

He exhaled, rubbing the back of his neck, and nodded. “Yes... but I don’t know if I should.”

A beat of silence. I reached for his hand, giving it a small squeeze. He squeezed back but didn’t say anything.

Guilt pricked at my chest. I was the one who started this. The one who gave him his father’s whereabouts, thinking it was something he needed.

But now, looking at him—at the way he seemed torn between anger and something deeper, something I couldn’t quite name—I wondered if I had done the right thing.

“I’m sorry,” I said at last. “I shouldn’t have...”

“No.” He cut me off, his voice firm yet gentle. “Thank you.”

He met my gaze, and for the first time, there was a quiet sincerity in his eyes—a steadiness that hadn’t been there before.

“I don’t think I’d forgive myself if I never saw him again... It’s just—” He exhaled,

running a hand through his hair. “Family is complicated, you know?”

I nodded. I did know. It reminded me of my own situation at home.

A small pause, and then he continued, “Also, my mom decided to move to the village with Auntie. She’s closing down the restaurant.”

I looked at him, surprised. “Oh, really? Then... where will you and Ye-bin live?”

“I’m looking for an apartment in Seoul for Ye-bin, but it’s not easy,” he said with a weary smile. “But we finally found one. Today we visited six apartments, and one in a good area accepted my deposit, so she’s all set.”

He continued, “And I’ll figure out my own place when I get back from Japan.”

Right. Japan.

Only a few more days before he left for Japan, and I still hadn’t made up my mind.

He hadn’t brought up his offer again, and I had a feeling he was holding back—afraid of pushing me too hard.

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“Ah... how about your preparations for Japan?” I asked, avoiding the real question lingering between us.

He took a sip of his coffee before nodding. “Going well. My visa’s issued. I started packing, and I’ll be shipping some of my stuff over soon.”

He said it casually, like it was nothing. But something in the way he spoke made me wonder if he was waiting—hoping—that I’d give him an answer before he left.

Under the table, he took my hand and gave me a small smile. “Seo-yeon, whatever happens in the next six months, I want to try with you. I want to give my all to this. I just want you to know that whatever decision you make, we can make this work.”

His words touched me, and I couldn’t find the right words to reply. So instead, I just squeezed his hand back.

I really don’t want him to go.

“I might not be able to reply to your texts right away... The PD said the schedule is going to be packed, especially with all the outdoor action scenes. But I promise, I’ll text and call you as much as I can.”

He watched me, waiting. I felt the weight of his words, the quiet hope in his voice.

I swirled my coffee, stalling for time. Then, with a small smile, I looked up and said, “You know, I still can’t believe you’re actually leaving. Have you figured out where you’ll be staying in Japan yet?”

Baekhyun studied me for a second, as if trying to decide whether to push for a real answer. But then, he let out a quiet chuckle, knowing exactly that I was dodging the real question.

I just raised a brow, waiting for him to answer. He sighed, playing along. “Yeah, the film crew helped me find a place in Fukuoka. Nothing fancy, but practical. I might have to travel to rural areas sometimes, so I’ll probably be staying in rental lodgings or whatever the production team arranges.”

The conversation shifted, but the unspoken questions still lingered between us.

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Back home, I had to deal with my own family. And unsurprisingly, it didn’t go well.

“So, what’s your plan? You’ve been cooped up at home all day, playing the piano... it’s been months,” my mom sighed over dinner from across the table.

I exhaled, already exhausted before the argument had even fully started. “Can you just give me a little space—”

“And you’re not with Min-seok anymore, are you?” she cut me off. “Fine. That’s your choice. But what now?”

My dad, who had been quiet, finally spoke. “Your mom’s right, Seo-yeon. You’re not getting any younger. And you too, Yae-rin. I have a friend whose son—”

“Why am I being dragged into this?” Yae-rin protested mid-bite.

“Actually, yes.” My mom looked dead serious. “Mr. Kang’s younger son just got back from the States—”



“Oh my god,” I groaned. “Please, stop talking.”

Everyone at the table froze, staring at me, mouths slightly open. I had always been the obedient child—the one who never caused trouble, the one who rarely spoke up or raised her voice. Tonight, I must’ve seemed completely out of character for them.

“Seo-yeon... you...” My mom looked so stunned she couldn’t even finish her sentence.

“I don’t want to date anyone, okay? Did you ever think about that, Mom? Have you even once asked me how I feel?”

They continued to stare at me like I had suddenly sprouted two heads. But the dam had been broken. I’d been quiet for far too long.

Then my mom squinted her eyes, as if sensing something. “Ah,” she said, as if she had a sudden realization. “You’ve met someone, haven’t you?”

I took a deep breath, trying to summon patience, but the thread was getting too thin. I felt like I was about to burst. I wanted to scream, yell at the top of my lungs.

Yae-rin set her spoon down with a sharp clink. “Mom, Dad, come on. Just let her be.”

I turned to look at her, feeling a rush of gratitude. Even though she was practically groomed to take over the family business while I was off chasing my dreams, she always had my back.

But my mom wasn’t having it. “And you think you’re any better?” Mom retorted at Yae-rin before turning to me. “Who is this guy?”

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“Mom, please.” Yae-rin shot back, her tone just as sharp. “You always push her around.”

The argument spiraled from there. Voices grew louder, my dad tried to step in, his tone suddenly firm but calm. “Enough,” he said, his voice carrying weight. “This isn’t helping anyone.”

My mom refused to back down. “This isn’t about me pushing her—”

And then I snapped.

I shot up from my seat, tears welling in my eyes, and stormed to my room. I yanked my suitcase out of the closet and began throwing clothes into it without thinking. I wasn’t even paying attention to what I was packing; I just needed to do something—anything—to escape the suffocating atmosphere.

A few minutes later, Yae-rin appeared in my doorway, arms crossed. “So that’s it? You’re just going to run away again?”

I zipped up my bag, my heart still pounding. “I’m not running.”

She gave me a knowing look. “Aren’t you?”

I hesitated, gripping the handle of my suitcase a little tighter. “I’ve made up my mind.”

Yae-rin sighed, stepping into the room. “Have you even thought this through?”

I sat down on the edge of my bed, suddenly feeling drained. “I have,” I muttered. “Kind of. I’m going to join him. In Japan.”

She paused, her expression softening slightly. “So, you’re leaving.”

I nodded, my voice faltering just a little. “I don’t want to keep living like this. I need to break free, to be independent. I can’t let people decide what to do with my life anymore.”

Yae-rin sat beside me, her tone quieter now. “Look, I don’t know if this is the right decision or not. But if you really want to go, then go. Live your life. You’ve always been the one chasing after your dreams.”

I looked at her, a little surprised. “And you?”

She shrugged, her voice distant. “I don’t know. I just... never questioned anything. Stayed here. Worked for the family company. Did what I was supposed to do.”

There was a quiet sadness in her voice that I hadn’t heard before, a vulnerability she hadn’t shown in years. For the first time in my life, I realized Yae-rin might have envied me just as much as I had envied her.

I reached for her hand, squeezing it lightly. “You know, it’s not too late for you, too.”

Yae-rin raised an eyebrow, her gaze lingering on me for a moment, before she gave a small nod and a small smile. “Yeah, well. Maybe one day.”

I nodded, exhaling deeply. “So... you’re not mad at me?”

“No.” She nudged me playfully. “Just don’t come crying to me if you hate it there.”

I smiled, feeling lighter than I had in a while. “Deal.”

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A few days have passed since I moved into our shared apartment in Fukuoka, and to be completely honest, it’s been harder than I expected.

First of all, the apartment itself isn’t that big—it’s really meant for just one person. It only has one bedroom, with a small kitchen and living room combined into a single space. It’s also a bit outside the city center, but conveniently close to the temporary studio where Baekhyun is filming his drama.

Secondly, everything is difficult when you don’t speak the language. Simple things—like buying groceries or asking for directions—feel nearly impossible. Visiting a foreign country as a tourist is one thing, but actually living here is a whole different challenge. There are things I have to deal with that travelers don’t—like securing a visa, getting a transportation pass, and setting up a local phone number.

Still, I give myself time to settle in, doing my best to embrace the slower pace of life. When I’m not practicing piano in our apartment, I spend time outdoors, taking long walks through the park alone while Baekhyun is out filming all day. The silence is unfamiliar but not unwelcome.

It’s not easy for him either. His schedule is so packed that he’s barely home, often leaving early in the morning and returning close to midnight. He only gets a few breaks on Sundays, but he tells me he’s enjoying shooting the action scenes, and that the good vibes from his colleagues and the drama crew make things easier.

So far, no one knows about this arrangement except for Byung-ho, Baekhyun’s manager.

My parents call non-stop. But instead of answering and arguing with them, I just send a short text: “Don’t worry about me. I’m doing well.”

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Then, suddenly one day, the calls stopped. I knew exactly what that meant—my mom had entered one of her silent treatment phases.

I kept in touch with Ji-a and my sister regularly, though. Yae-rin told me that Mom was still freaking out, desperate to find out where I am and who I'm living with. But Yae-rin refused to give her any information, worried that Mom might do something drastic—like hire a private investigator to track my whereabouts.

As the days passed, I started to feel more and more certain.

Even without the unlimited credit card funded by my parents, no personal chef at home, or the other comforts I took for granted in Seoul, I still feel like I made the right decision. Now, I'm living off my savings (thankfully, I have enough to live a simple life for at least a few years), and it feels liberating.

This is my first taste of freedom. For the first time, I can be myself without pretending. No more trying to meet anyone's expectations—just living for me.

I'm learning to live my own life, slowly but surely. And with that newfound freedom, I start exploring more of the city.

During one of my daily walks, I stumbled upon a small piano school just a few blocks from our apartment. From the faded sign to the weathered building, it looked like it had been there for years.

I found myself peering through the window, taking in the neat rows of pianos inside. After a moment of hesitation, I decided to step through the door.

“Irashaimase!” A woman greeted me warmly in Japanese.

In a mix of broken Japanese and English, I asked about lessons. She nodded enthusiastically, her smile encouraging, and before I could overthink it, I signed up. If I wanted to teach piano one day, I needed to experience being a student again first.

Between my lessons and hours spent practicing, music already filled most of my days. And whenever Baekhyun had breaks between shoots, we made music together—something we both love, something that felt like ours.

But living together also meant discovering new things about each other—the good and the bad.

Like how he had a habit of dodging difficult conversations, changing the subject the moment things got too serious. Or how I struggled with even the simplest everyday tasks, from cooking to doing laundry.

That evening, the rain pattered heavily against our window. I sighed, feeling unexpectedly content just being at home with him, doing laundry—this time, confident I was doing it right.

We were in our home, I realized. It still sounded strange, but this time, things were different. What happened here wouldn’t just stay here anymore.

“I’m telling you, the whites and colors need to be separated,” Baekhyun groaned after the washing machine stopped, pulling out a now light-pink shirt that was supposed to be white.

I winced. “Okay... my bad. I really thought washing everything in cold water would be fine.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “That’s not how it works.”

I sighed, holding up the ruined shirt. “Fine, lesson learned. But while we’re on the topic of things that don’t work... maybe you could actually sit down and talk about things instead of avoiding them?”

His jaw tensed slightly, but then he sighed, stepping closer. “I’ll work on it.”

I looked up at him, surprised. “Really?”

He nodded, wrapping his arms around my waist. “Yeah. But first, I think we need to get you a laundry lesson before you destroy the rest of my wardrobe.”

He landed several playful kisses as his “punishment,” and I giggled, turning back to try and dodge them.

Soon, playful kisses deepened into something more. Baekhyun’s lips trailed along my bare shoulder, and at some point, my shirt had already slipped to the floor. His hands, warm and familiar, traced over my skin, as if memorizing every inch of me.

“You’re so beautiful,” he murmured against my skin from behind, his voice low and reverent. I wanted to turn around and see him, to embrace him, but he gave me no chance to do so.

Pinned against the washing machine in our living room, I surrendered to his caresses along my back and his touch at my core. Instinctively, I rested my upper body on the machine for support, giving him unobstructed access to the rest of me. With deliberate skill, he slipped two fingers inside me from behind, sending a delicious surge of sensation through my body.

“Baekhyun...” I murmured, my voice a mix of moan and plea, begging him to let me



turn and reciprocate. I longed to reach out and touch him, but Baekhyun just let out a soft tsk-tsk behind me.

“Not yet,” he said, still pinning me facing the washing machine. “Stay put, or I’ll bring out the ‘buzzing friend’ I used in Paris—the one you liked so much.”

My cheeks burned. I really do want to use that ‘friend’ again.

His touch grew hotter as he repeatedly hit that perfect spot with his fingers. And as if that wasn’t enough, I felt something wet against my core—his tongue, kissing me from behind... down there.

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He is on his knees, his lips and tongue moving in rhythm with his fingers as they caress me over and over. Before long, I scramble to the washing machine, gripping it tightly as I erupt in a scream of pleasure.

“Shhh,” he whispered in my ear, now off his knees and standing behind me. “We don’t want to get into trouble with our neighbor again, do we?” Even without turning to look at him, I could tell he wore a smug grin.

Still not letting me turn toward him, he holds both of my hands behind me with his own. I felt his hardness inside me as he took me from behind, and I moaned again—quieter this time—as our bodies pressed together and he moved deeper inside me.

I heard a soft groan from him as he quickened his pace, a sound that betrayed a moment of vulnerability. Finally, he released my hands, giving me the chance to turn toward him. Feeling a spark of playful defiance, I knelt down and promptly kissed him... right where it mattered.

He began to moan and writhe with pleasure, and I felt satisfaction as his hands held my head, guiding my movements while I took him into my mouth.

“Not yet,” he groaned, stopping me. Obeying, I stood up, and when we were eye to eye, I whispered with a smirk, “Not so loud. Think about our neighbors.”

He grinned, growled playfully, and then lifted me, carrying me to our bedroom.

“Tell me,” he said, gently laying me on the bed, “what would you like me to do,

Princess?”

I threw him a glare, though I knew that “Princess” had become his cute nickname for me whenever we were alone. “I just want you to love me like you always do,” I replied, meeting his eyes.

Something sparked in him as he pressed his body against mine. My fingers tangled in his hair as I pulled him closer. It felt different this time—more than just need, more than mere passion. It was grounding, reassuring—a silent promise that no matter how chaotic everything else was, this... us... were real.

The sheets tangled around us as our breaths mingled, and in the quiet of the night, with only the sound of rain tapping against the window, nothing else mattered.

Later that evening, as we lay sprawled on the couch, Baekhyun lazily strummed his electric bass. I mentioned that I’d signed up for piano lessons.

“That’s great,” he said, his eyes lighting up. “And Japanese lessons too?”

I nodded. “I figured it’d be easier if I could actually say more than just ‘thank you’ and ‘sorry.’”

He smirked. “Well, those are the most important words, after all.”

I roll my eyes, but a smile tugs at my lips. “Also, I was thinking... since we’ve been working on music together, shouldn’t we come up with a duo name?”

He raises an eyebrow. “Like a band name?”

“Yeah. When our song comes out. I mean, we can’t just be ‘Seo-yeon and Baekhyun’—that sounds too plain. Plus, it’d make it too easy for my parents to track

us down.”

He hums thoughtfully. “What about...From Paris to Seoul?”

I stare at him, warmth blooming in my chest. “I like that.”

He grins. “Maybe we could even try singing a French song one day.”

I wrap an arm around him and giggle. “Or even a Japanese song,” I add, pressing a kiss to his temple. “Whatever it is, let’s make something great together.”

As I curl up next to him, listening to the soft hum of his electric bass, I realize that, for the first time in my life, I’m not just chasing a dream. Even though I haven’t got everything figured out... I’m living it.

## Epilogue

The van rumbled down the road, passing stretches of Japan’s breathtaking autumn colors as Baekhyun hummed along to the soft music playing in the background. Seo-yeon sat beside him, absentmindedly flipping through a travel guide—more out of habit than necessity—since she already had a list of places she wanted to visit.

Not that they were in a rush. This wasn’t just a trip—it was how they lived now.

For the past few months, they had been settling into their new life in Fukuoka, finding their own rhythm. Seo-yeon spent her days at the local piano school while continuing to improve her Japanese, and Baekhyun had finally wrapped up filming his drama in Japan.

The first episode of *The Man from Seoul*—a drama blending Japanese and Korean storytelling—had aired a few weeks ago, earning high ratings and praise for its

unique mix of both styles.

With the project behind him, Baekhyun was now flooded with offers for dramas, modeling gigs, and other projects. But for the first time in his life, he had financial security.

His earnings from the drama allowed him to comfortably pay for his sister's entire tuition and send money regularly to his mother, who was now living peacefully in the countryside. He was even considering investing the rest into passive income, ensuring a stable future beyond acting.

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But before figuring all that out, they decided to take a road trip across Japan—living in a van, exploring one city after another, making music along the way, and experiencing a kind of freedom neither of them had ever known.

It wasn't the high-pressure, fast-paced life they used to have, but that was exactly the point.

Truthfully, it had been one of the easiest decisions Seo-yeon had ever made. She had spent too much of her life worrying about what was expected of her. Now, for once, she was choosing what she wanted.

And what she wanted was this.

Baekhyun.

Her own quiet life.

The freedom to just be.

“Next stop: Ginzan Onsen,” Seo-yeon announced as they caught sight of the picturesque little hot spring village. “Oh, it looks so pretty! I knew it was famous for its winter scenery, but I didn't realize autumn here would be just as beautiful.”

After circling for a while to find parking, they finally secured a spot and strolled through the village.

Baekhyun nudged her toward a small shop in the middle of town, and Seo-yeon

immediately knew why.

Every time they arrive somewhere new, Baekhyun sends postcards to his family—short updates with little sketches in the margins. So far, his dad has received only one.

Seo-yeon had started doing the same, writing to her parents, even though she wasn't sure they ever read them.

As they sat in a cozy little café in Ginzan Onsen, sipping matcha lattes and scribbling on postcards, Baekhyun glanced at the one in her hands. "Writing to them again?"

"Yeah," Seo-yeon murmured, tapping her pen against the edge of the card. "I don't even know why I bother. I should be careful not to send them too many, or they might figure out where I am. But... I still don't want them to think I don't care."

Baekhyun leaned back, studying her face before replying. "Maybe not now. But maybe one day, they'll understand. And I'd like to meet them too, when you're ready."

She sighed, giving him a small smile before setting the postcard aside. When she looked up again, Baekhyun was sliding another one toward her.

The front showed a picturesque shot of the lantern-lit streets of Ginzan Onsen at night. "What's this?"

"Just read it."

She picked it up and turned it over.

There was only one sentence.

I love you.

Seo-yeon blinked, a gentle flush rising in her chest as she looked up at him.

Baekhyun met her gaze with a small smirk. “What? I’m sending postcards to everyone—including you.”

She let out a soft laugh, shaking her head. “You’re unbelievable.”

“Well... I meant it,” he admitted, his smile reaching his eyes before his lips.

Seo-yeon rolled her eyes, but her fingers curled around the postcard, tucking it safely into her bag. “I’m keeping this forever.”

Baekhyun grinned. “You better.”

As Seo-yeon idly glanced at her phone, she noticed the numbers climbing on the screen.

“People are actually streaming it,” she said, sounding a little dazed.

Baekhyun grinned, peeking over her shoulder at her phone. “Of course they are. It’s a good song.”



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Before they started the road trip, they had released their first song on a streaming platform as an anonymous duo, From Paris to Seoul, and somehow, it was already gaining traction.

They hadn't expected much. It was just something they had written together, a song about fleeting moments and unexpected love. But apparently, people liked it.

Baekhyun stretched, leaning casually against his chair. "Guess we should record more, huh?"

She smiled. "Of course."

They moved on to other things, but the thought stayed with them.

That evening, as they settled onto the futon at one of the hotels in Ginzan Onsen, preparing for sleep, Seo-yeon checked her phone again, excitement bubbling within her.

"They finally offered me a teaching position in Fukuoka!" she exclaimed, holding her phone up to Baekhyun, barely able to contain herself. "Well, it's just a maternity leave cover, but still..."

Baekhyun grinned. "I'm so proud of you." He paused before prompting gently, "And?"

"I think I want to take it." She exhaled, surprised at how easily the words came. "I like it there."

She glanced at him, his face softly illuminated by the hotel room's warm light. Encouraged by his gentle smile, she continued, "It's not just the place. I love the freedom—how no one knows me as Seo-yeon, the minor actress everyone's waiting to see do more. Here, I can start fresh. I can finally be who I want to be," she added. "And it's so close to Busan, I can visit my grandparents anytime."

She thought back to visiting her grandparents in Busan a few weeks ago, when she had mentioned in a quiet voice that she was off on an adventure—and that some things were best left unsaid to her parents.

Her grandparents had only exchanged a knowing smile, as if to say her happiness was all that mattered. They never interfered; they simply wanted her to live well.

"And... I like living with you. I like the life we've built," Seo-yeon continued.

Baekhyun's smile grew. "So, you're saying I'm the best decision you ever made?"

She huffed a small laugh, shaking her head. "No," she said. "I'm saying I want this. I want us. I want to stay."

Baekhyun didn't hesitate. He took her hand in his. "Then let's stay."

No grand plans, no elaborate schemes. Just the quiet certainty that, for now, this was enough.

And maybe, for the first time in their lives, they were exactly where they were meant to be.