



Public Image, Private Heart (K-Drama Love Story #1)

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Category: Romance

Description: In the glittering world of K-dramas, where scripted romances unfold under the spotlight, real-life love stories often remain hidden in the shadows. Rising star Han Yumi never expected her off-screen life to mimic the dramas she stars in, but when she's paired with South Korea's most beloved actor, Ryu Ji-yong, the lines between fiction and reality begin to blur.

Despite their best efforts to keep things strictly professional, their on-screen chemistry ignites a wildfire of attraction—cue the dramatic music and longing gazes.

But can an actor and an actress star in a romantic drama without catching feelings off-screen?

As they dive into new projects with other co-stars, they start questioning whether their emotions are real or just the magic of the script.

Navigating the ups and downs of fame and the darker side of showbiz, will they give in to their feelings and let their off-screen romance bloom, or will they play it cool and protect their public image?

Public Image, Private Heart is a heartfelt read about love, loss and the struggle to find your true self in a world where appearances are everything.

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Yumi

“Y umi, your lines were off again! Please focus!” The main writer scolded me for the third time today.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the rest of the production team sharing glances of disapproval. Someone let out a subtle “tsk-tsk,” and I swear I heard the Producer-Director (PD) let out a barely audible sigh that could rival a gentle breeze.

This wasn’t my first chemistry read, but today, nerves were doing the cha-cha inside me like never before.

I stumbled over my lines repeatedly, each mistake magnifying my anxiety and turning my brain into a circus tent.

Every blunder felt like a slapstick comedy skit gone wrong, and I was the unwitting star.

As an actress, confidence is supposed to be my bread and butter, yet here I am, serving up a whole buffet of nerves. It’s ironic, really. We’re supposed to sell confidence, but behind the curtain, we’re juggling anxiety like pros. Ah, the magic of showbiz.

There’s a peculiar buzz in the air today, especially when I’m face to face with my potential co-star—the one with shoulders so broad they could eclipse a

doorway—Ryu Ji-yong.

Like many in South Korea, I developed a major crush on Ji-yong after watching his performances in romantic dramas.

He always appeared impeccably dressed (which probably wasn't surprising, considering he likely had a personal stylist), and he exuded kindness and a fun-loving demeanor on-screen.

I'm curious to discover if his off-screen persona aligns with the charm he portrays in his roles.

Ji-yong stands tall at 1.87 meters, with an enigmatic voice, thick lips, and warm-looking wide eyes that seem perfect from every angle on TV.

But in person, he exceeds all expectations.

His presence effortlessly fills the room with a youthful, masculine (yet charmingly cute) energy.

I can't help but notice how generously he shares his smile.

"Now, let's start again from Ji-yong's line before yours." The writer flipped through her notepad and scribbled something on it with intensity, as if summoning her patience.

Ji-yong glances at me, and I feel my heart skip a beat. Then he gives me a smile and a wink—a wink! It's as if he's roping me into some playful scheme.

I silently rehearsed my lines in my head, preparing for our run-through of a forbidden love scene.

The historical Joseon dynasty drama, titled Princess of Cosmos , is set with Royal Princess Hwa-young getting lost in the forest while traveling with a group of soldiers.

Among the dozen soldiers, only one remains—her love interest, Hyun-woo.

“And... action!” The PD gave us the cue.

“Ahem,” Ji-yong clears his throat before starting to read his lines again. “I’ve never been as attracted to someone as much as I am to you, Princess,” his voice was gentle yet insistent. “I don’t know what to do with these feelings.”

I called upon every deity in the world to help me calm down.

My go-to trick of imagining everyone naked usually works, but unfortunately, when applied to Ryu Ji-yong, it only made things worse.

I took a deep breath and gathered my courage, reminding myself that I was here to portray my character, Hwa-young, and I needed to forget Yumi for a moment.

With resolute determination, I fixed my gaze on Ji-yong and delivered my lines as Hwa-young.

“I... I can’t deny the attraction between us, but we both know we can’t be together.

The army from the north will catch up to us soon, and I don’t even know if we’ll survive until tomorrow.

” My voice softened, laden with a sense of defeat.

Ji-yong’s response was immediate and intense.

He grasped my arms firmly, his fingers pressing into my skin with a blend of urgency and protectiveness.

“I will protect you with everything I have, until my very last breath!” His deep voice resonated with conviction.

“I’m not afraid of any army from the north. ”

He broke our gaze and looked down at the floor before continuing, “So you don’t need to be afraid, Princess. In two days’ ride, we should be able to reach the capital.”

The tension between us lingered in the air, thick with unspoken emotions.

There was a hint of vulnerability in my voice as I answered, “Hyun-woo, returning to the capital sounds promising, but... there you will be back as a knight, and I will return as the Royal Princess. Our worlds are as different as day and night.”

Acutely aware of the charged energy between us, our eyes locked in a silent exchange that spoke volumes. We held our positions, each moment stretched taut with unspoken longing and the weight of our impossible circumstances. Finally, the director’s voice broke the spell with a decisive, “And cut!”

Ji-yong released my hand and we stepped back. The director approached us, beaming. “That was perfect! Now let’s try another role.” She handed us new scripts to read.

Today was the final round of casting and I was almost positive that I would be chosen for this drama. The only thing up in the air was which role I’d land: the leading lady paired with Ji-yong or a supporting role with the other actor, Yang Baekhyun.

Baekhyun wasn’t exactly lacking in the looks department, but he wasn’t your typical heartthrob with a Herculean build.

While he had his own unique charms and allure, he projected a different vibe from Ji-yong.

Instead of Ji-yong's masculine build and easygoing charm, Baekhyun had a brooding, melancholic, and mysterious vibe—like he'd just stepped out of a dramatic film or a hauntingly beautiful ballad.

I put on a polite smile as Baekhyun stood in front of me. We were acquaintances—not quite strangers, but not friends either. He was my co-star from previous music video shoot.

I try to focus on my lines for the character I'm portraying while trying not to steal too many glances at Ji-yong, who is observing us behind the camera.

The director calls for action once again. Baekhyun turns his sad eyes towards me and delivers his line, "I don't have much time left to live."

My eyes widen with shock as I reply, "But Your Highness, what is this nonsense?"

He steps closer and whispers in my ear, "Don't let the adversaries know. I can only trust you in this court." My heart races as he stands so close to me. My next line comes out hesitantly. "Your Highness... Please, stop saying these things."

Baekhyun searches my eyes before letting go and saying, "I'm not afraid to die. I just don't want my sister, the Royal Princess, to suffer the same fate."

"And cut!" the director says. "Excellent work, let's take five."

Ji-yong flashed me a thumbs up before sauntering off to rehearse with another actress, Oh Seo-yeon, on the opposite side of the stage.

Their voices carried over, filled with easy banter that made me acutely aware of their chemistry.

Seo-yeon was stunning and talented—a lethal combination. A twinge of jealousy snuck up on me.

I caught a snippet of Seo-yeon’s comment that made Ji-yong burst into laughter, his eyes crinkling in that annoyingly attractive way. He fired back with a teasing remark, and she playfully swatted his arm. I couldn’t help but feel a pang of envy again.

Part of me wished I could be that at ease around Ji-yong.

But our few interactions so far had left me tongue-tied and nervous.

I took a steadying breath. I had to remain professional.

This role could be my big break, a chance to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with South Korea’s hottest up-and-coming actors.

While it’s clear that Ji-yong has snagged the lead role and Baekhyun is slated for support, the production crew is still deliberating over whether Ji-yong’s leading lady will be me or Seo-yeon.

Quietly, I send up a prayer for the lead role in this drama. It would not only mean more screen time and a bigger paycheck but also, let’s be honest, a chance to spend more time with Ji-yong on set.

Unlike Ji-yong, who’s practically a household name with a string of hit dramas on every streaming service and network TV, I’m still waiting for my big break. This could be my ticket to the big leagues.

As the chemistry read dragged on, tension filled the air as we awaited the final decision. The director paced back and forth, occasionally stealing glances at us with a pensive expression. My heart raced with anticipation, hoping that my performance would sway them in my favor.

A few days passed in anxious suspense, and then, back on set, the assistant director called us to attention, signaling that the moment of truth had arrived.

The PD stepped forward, her eyes scanning over us before settling on me.

“Congratulations,” she announced with a warm smile.

“You’ve been selected to play the lead opposite Ji-yong.”

Relief washed over me as I exhaled a breath I didn’t know I’d been holding.

Beside me, Baekhyun offered his congratulations with a nod.

On the other side, I caught Seo-yeon clapping enthusiastically and shooting me a warm smile.

The PD continued with thanks and announcements about our roles and the shooting schedule.

Filming was set to kick off in the next few weeks and stretch over six intense months of daily shoots, including some Saturdays. Many scenes would take us to a traditional Korean house offsite, shuttling us back and forth between our Seoul studio and a quaint countryside base camp up north.

As the director outlined the grueling schedule, I took a deep breath. Live productions always demanded sweat and tears to keep up with the tight broadcast deadlines. With

elaborate costumes, intricate sets, and action-packed scenes, this project was shaping up to be my biggest challenge yet.

But none of that mattered right now because I'd snagged the lead role opposite Ji-yong! I squealed internally and pushed aside my worries, knowing they'd haunt me soon enough. This was my moment, and I was determined to savor every second of it.

Ji-yong approached me and offered his congratulations. I congratulated him in return, feeling a bit awkward, since this might just be routine for him. Then he moved closer and asked, "Would you like to grab coffee? I'd love to get to know my co-star better."

My pulse quickened at the invitation. "Sure," I blurted out eagerly.

I beamed at Ji-yong as we walked off set together. The audition had gone perfectly, and I couldn't have hoped for a better outcome than this. Now, I just had to make it through the coffee without turning into a bumbling mess around my unfairly handsome co-star.

We strolled over to the nearby coffee machine. I watched as Ji-yong reached up to grab a cup from the overhead compartment, his broad shoulders shifting under his fitted shirt.

"So tell me about yourself," he said, while handed me a cup. "What's your sign?"

I laughed. "Starting with the hard questions, I see."

We fell into easy conversation as I told him about my hometown, my recent projects and how I got into acting. He listened intently, chiming in with funny anecdotes and thoughtful questions. I was impressed by how down-to-earth he was despite his celebrity status.

“What about you?” I asked. “What’s the real Ryu Ji-yong like off-camera?”

He grinned. “Pretty much the same guy you see onscreen. Minus the costume.”

I playfully rolled my eyes. “Good to know fame hasn’t gone to your head.”

He laughed and said, “I’m looking forward to working together.” He clinked his coffee cup against mine. “Here’s to our partnership and a great drama.”

A jolt ran through my stomach, yet our banter felt natural. I could already envision the on-screen chemistry we would have.

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Ji-yong

I settled into the worn chair (a prop); my script clutched in my hand as the makeup artist dabbed at my face with a powder brush, expertly concealing any imperfections. The writer hovered beside us, discussing last-minute changes to the dialogue and scene flow.

This was it, our first day of filming.

“Ji-yong, try not to move too much,” the makeup artist chided gently, her focus never leaving my face.

“Sorry,” I murmured, my thoughts drifting towards the other actors and crew members scurrying about. There was something exhilarating about the organized chaos of a film set, each person playing their part to create something beautiful, something worth watching.

I quickly turned my head as Yumi, my co-star and on-screen love interest, arrived.

She greeted everyone with a polite but nervous “Hello” and a small bow.

Though she looked sweet and cute, she was brimming with nervous energy, which only added to her charm.

I was thrilled that she had been chosen for the role of Hwa-young, a delicate yet

fierce princess—one that seemed like it was made for her.

Even though this was her first leading role on television, she had been working in the industry for years, mainly in theater productions. I remembered attending one of her plays and being blown away by her performance; she truly was a talented actress.

She had a natural beauty that seemed to beam from her flawless complexion, full lips, almond-shaped eyes, and petite stature.

Standing beside me without heels, she barely reached my jawline.

There was something intriguing about her, something special that piqued my curiosity.

I couldn't help but wonder if shy and introverted people were like onions—lots of layers to peel back—and I had a sneaky suspicion that Yumi was hiding some delightful surprises.

As she made her way towards me, a smile instinctively appeared on my lips.

It was a mix of greetings and playful teasing—all meant to ease her nerves.

She held onto her tumbler with coffee (judging from the aroma) with one hand, while clutching her script tightly in the other.

Her eyes were focused on the pages as she repeated her lines quietly.

“Hey!” I greeted her cheerfully, breaking her concentration. She looked up, surprise evident in her widened eyes. “What are you reading that’s so interesting?” I teased her with a smirk, gesturing towards the script in her hand.

She shot me a playful glare (at least, I hoped it was playful), but didn't retaliate. Instead, she muttered, "I don't know whose brilliant idea it was to shoot the third scene from the fourth episode on our first day of filming."

Unfortunately, an assistant PD overheard her and chimed in, "It was my idea. With the snow today, we couldn't waste the opportunity to shoot this outdoor scene."

We all knew it was a bit "unfortunate" that, in the third scene of the fourth episode, we had to kiss under the snow—despite it being our first day working together.

We'd only had a quick ice-breaking session with the cast a few days earlier, followed by our table reading, and now we were expected to lock lips right off the bat.

I shrugged it off as just another day at work. Being an actor could be quite comical at times, getting paid to kiss an attractive co-star who is practically a stranger. Not exactly the worst job, if I do say so myself.

"See, looks like we don't have to work too hard on remembering our lines for that scene," I teased her, winking mischievously. Her cheeks flushed and a hint of red appeared on her pale skin. She tried to give me a stern look, failing miserably because she still looked adorable and tiny.

We moved outside to find the full crew bustling with activity. Some were setting up lighting equipment, others were adjusting bounce boards to reflect the light, and microphones were suspended on poles, ready for action.

"Let's get started. Ji-yong, Yumi, can you two rehearse the kiss scene?"

Remember to position yourselves so that your faces are visible during.

.. well, during the kiss," the director said nonchalantly as she adjusted some cables on

the camera.

It was as if we were being asked to do a simple task for school instead of locking lips on camera.

Yumi's expression resembled someone who had just been summoned to the dentist's office, her eyes searching for help from her manager. She swallowed hard and set down her tumbler and script.

"Rehearse?" she squeaked in panic.

I nodded. "Yes, what's the issue?"

She gave me an exasperated look and whispered, "I didn't realize we needed to rehearse for this kind of... scene. This is my first time doing something like this."

"Kissing?" I asked with surprise. We were both in our thirties, so it was hard to believe she had never kissed anyone before.

She shook her head in frustration, as if it should have been obvious. "No, I mean filming a kissing scene in front of a camera."

I nodded in sympathy as I move in closer, while keep maintaining a professional distance as I whispered, "Don't worry too much about it.

It's just another day on the job. Just focus on your acting and follow my lead.

.. alright?" I comforted her, before adding, "Although, I could smell coffee on your breath."

She looked panicked once again and nearly sprinted to her manager for a mint.

“I was just joking, you know how I love coffee.” I grinned, unable to resist the temptation to tease her.

As I spoke, I inched closer to her, bringing my face within a few centimeters of hers.

She appeared taken aback by my sudden proximity.

Carefully mindful of the camera’s placement, I tilted my head slightly to the right and then to the left.

I gestured towards her, seeking permission with my eyes before gently placing my hand on her shoulder to guide her movements during the staging and blocking rehearsal.

Once she signaled me to proceed, I adjusted my hand placement, striving to achieve the perfect positioning for the scene. I could feel her breath gently brushing against my face.

“OK, I think this angle will work.” I told her. “Want to give it a try?”

She appeared uneasy, but still gave me a slight nod before asking hesitantly, “Um, excuse me, but the script just says that Hwa-young is surprised when Hyun-woo suddenly kisses her. It doesn’t mention how long we should kiss for.”

I couldn’t hold back my snort, and I could hear the director and some of the crew snickering as well. Did she really expect the script to provide every detail? Like it’s a step-by-step guide? It’s our job as actors to breathe life into these moments with our skills, obviously.

“The PD will let us know if it’s a good take or not,” I explained between stifled giggles.

“Oh, OK. So we might have to do several takes?”

“Sure. Not just for the duration of the kiss, but also for the type of kiss, our body and hand positions, camera angle, lighting, and makeup... If we need to redo it, we’ll retake the scene.” I clarified patiently, feeling a twinge of guilt for finding her panicked expression so amusing.

“What exactly do you mean by ‘type of kiss’?” She nervously played with her fingers.

“You know, like if it’s supposed to be a quick peck or a passionate kiss, or if we should really go for it, or if I’m supposed to do all the work while you just stand there in surprise.” I explained all the details and added in a whisper with a subtle wink, “But definitely no tongue involved.”

She blushed again and stayed silent before I leaned in close again and asked her, “Are you ready?”

Whenever people asked how I could resist developing feelings for my attractive co-workers, these were the main reasons: the setup on a shooting set was the opposite of romantic.

The bright lights cast harsh shadows on our faces as we stood awkwardly close to each other, trying to convey passion and desire while fully aware of the dozens of production crew watching our every move.

I could feel Yumi’s hand rested on my waist with a gentle pressure, but it felt more like a choreographed dance than a genuine embrace.

A romantic scene in a drama was nothing more than an act, carefully constructed and rehearsed.

We had to get everything just right—from the angle of our heads to the placement of our hands—all for the camera's sake.

And when things weren't perfect, we had to reshoot, sometimes more than 10 times.

I remember one particular kissing scene in the past where my jaw ended up hurting from the repeated takes with different co-star. It was somewhat funny, but mostly exhausting. In this industry, everything was fabricated and scripted, even something as intimate as a kiss or a steamy bed scene.

The powdery snow delicately brushed my cheeks as I studied Yumi's face once more, lifting my eyebrows in silent confirmation that she was prepared for our kiss.

“Action!” the PD called out.

With a slight nod from her, I leaned in, being mindful to be gentle since it was her first time filming a kissing scene.

Her lips were cold, like two slabs of butter. I reached out and gently squeezed her arms, hoping to thaw her frozen nerves. As our lips met, she let out a soft gasp, parting them slightly, which gave me the green light to subtly deepen the kiss.

A tingling sensation spread across my skin, a curious blend of goosebumps and a mild electric shock, fizzing through my stomach and upper body.

Strange. I had never felt this way before. Was it the snow?

Even after we pulled apart, the lingering tingle of her frosty kiss remained.

Feeling a bit lightheaded, my vision gradually cleared enough to see her face. “Are you alright?” I asked, my voice laced with concern.

She nodded and touched her lips with her thumb. Strangely, that small gesture sent another jolt through my stomach.

The director and crew watched us closely and commented, “You two are doing great! Let’s practice a few more times before shooting the scene for real.”

“What? Can’t we just film it now?” Yumi croaked out. A part of me felt a twinge of disappointment; did she not enjoy our practice?

The director shrugged, “I think we can try from a different angle. But keep the same energy, it’s perfect. And make sure Hwa-young looks surprised by the kiss and doesn’t kiss Hyun-woo back.”

We made a second attempt, but it was quickly interrupted by the PD. “Yumi, try to respond more like you did in the first take. Don’t kiss him back as much.”

I couldn’t help but smile widely, feeling oddly pleased that she couldn’t resist kissing me back. Yumi looked like she might faint from nervousness. I placed my hand on her lower back to support her.

“We can do this, let’s aim to nail it in one take,” I said, trying to boost her confidence. “It’s chilly out here, let’s wrap this up and head inside.”

Unexpectedly, she took hold of my hands and rubbed them gently for a moment. With a shy smile, she tilted her head and asked, “There. Does that help warm you up?”

Perhaps it was just my sense of the moment, but this simple gesture seemed more intimate than any of the kissing scenes we had rehearsed. And for once, I was the one blushing.

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Yumi

Few months of shooting flew by in a whirlwind as we burned the midnight oil to wrap up each episode.

Our hard work finally paid off when our first episode aired successfully a few days ago.

While it didn't break viewer records, it caused quite a stir on a popular streaming platform.

Our drama even earned a spot in the top ten historical dramas, leaving everyone on set feeling upbeat and motivated.

As Ji-yong and I settled into a rhythm, our initial awkwardness melted away, replaced by a comfortable camaraderie on set. Long hours together forged strong bonds not only between us but also with our co-stars like Seo-yeon and the entire crew.

They were a dedicated team who provided crucial support during those late-night shoots and early-morning calls. Bus rides to distant locations, shared meals, and spirited karaoke sessions became our off-screen adventures, revealing more about each other beyond our characters.

One thing I quickly learned about Ji-yong is his laid-back, carefree personality.

He's a jokester who loves to crack silly one-liners and jump headfirst into new adventures with a nonchalant "Let's do this!"

"—consequences be darned. He also has a special talent for falling asleep anywhere and anytime, often taking power-naps on set in unconventional places.

Ji-yong's carefree demeanor started to rub off on me. I found myself laughing more, stressing less, and occasionally joining in on his mischievous pranks on the crew. His contagious energy was hard to resist.

At times, I couldn't help but envy him. Unlike Ji-yong, I struggle to fall asleep even in my own bed, and I tend to overthink things, which often holds me back from trying new experiences.

I'm also shy and awkward in unfamiliar social settings, whereas Ji-yong effortlessly charms everyone around him, putting them at ease with his charm and wit.

Today promised to be a day filled with filming challenges, especially since we had a scene involving a horse.

I've always had a soft spot for animals, so when the majestic creature arrived on set, I couldn't contain my excitement.

Despite my stylist's warnings about potential costume stains, I couldn't resist rushing over to give the beautiful animal a gentle pat on its soft muzzle.

Its coat was a mesmerizing blend of grey and dark spots, adding to its allure.

Clearly, this horse was a seasoned pro when it came to film shoots.

The plan was for me to ride alongside Ji-yong for a short distance.

The good news: it would be a leisurely walk with no fancy maneuvers required.

The bad news: I've never actually ridden a horse before (a childhood pony doesn't count).

Fortunately, Ji-yong had some equestrian experience, so he would take the reins while I awkwardly sat in front.

But as we began rehearsing with the horse, a wave of dread washed over me at the thought of displaying my lackluster riding abilities in front of the entire crew.

With each attempt to mount the horse, nerves got the best of me, causing clumsy stumbles over my own feet.

The bulky princess costume only added to the challenge.

Rather than getting frustrated, Ji-yong kindly dismounted and effortlessly lifted me onto the saddle before taking his place behind me. I was amazed at how he managed it so effortlessly—seriously, why does everything seem so easy for him?

As if he could hear my unspoken thoughts, Ji-yong's voice came from behind me, playful and teasing. "Maybe this is news to you, but... you're tiny." I gave him a light punch on the arm, matching his playful tone.

Settling into the saddle somewhat awkwardly, I clung tightly to the reins as Ji-yong guided the horse forward with practiced skill.

The rhythmic sound of hooves on the ground beneath us was both soothing and nerve-wracking, a constant reminder of how high off the ground we were.

But Ji-yong's calm presence and his arms around me as we held the reins together

provided a reassuring sense of security.

As we meandered through the picturesque countryside, my initial fear slowly gave way to exhilaration.

The wind tousled my hair, carrying the earthy scent of the fields we passed.

Ignoring the crew of cameramen and PD trailing us at a distance, I stole a glance at Ji-yong's profile, bathed in the golden light of the setting sun, and felt a flutter in my chest that had nothing to do with nerves.

Stay focused, Yumi! I scolded myself as my mind drifted off with thoughts and fantasies. I knew that this fabricated on-screen romance was just for show, but I couldn't help but enjoy it. In real life, there was no way anything could happen between us.

Dating a celebrity in South Korean society was not an easy task, especially for someone like me who wasn't as well-known as Ji-yong.

My career was still in its early stages, while he had a devoted fanbase mostly made up of fangirls.

They would definitely not too thrilled if they found out that their beloved oppa was dating someone. .. especially someone like me.

As actors, we may have fewer strict social restrictions compared to idols, but the public relations challenges of developing a real-life relationship while portraying lovers on-screen are still a major concern for both our agencies.

It's even stipulated in the contract that we must refrain from actions that could jeopardize the airing of the drama and potentially lead to financial losses.

And even without actively seeking it, rumors were already spreading like wildfire on the internet. Ji-yong had been romantically linked with his past co-stars from romantic dramas before, and his agency was quick to deny any such speculations.

The pressure wasn't just about dating; it was about navigating relationships under the constant scrutiny of netizens and managing a complicated shooting schedule.

Some celebrity couples faced intense backlash when they broke up or divorced, adding to the weight of the situation.

With netizens so quick to judge and cancel celebrities nowadays, it wasn't wise to take such a big risk that could mess up our careers.

But the more I tried to shove those thoughts aside, the closer Ji-yong seemed to get.

His teasing smiles and playful banter extended beyond our scripted scenes.

They followed us into breaks, lingered in our off-camera moments, and even popped up during brief encounters in the makeup trailer.

I found myself simultaneously thrilled and terrified by his constant presence.

I couldn't help but wonder if he had this effect on all his co-workers in dramas. Was this why he always seemed to end up falsely accused of romancing his co-stars off-screen?

With his striking looks and charming personality, surely he had plenty of other gorgeous co-stars vying for his attention, right?

As the horse gently trotted, Ji-yong appeared completely unaware of my thoughts as he sat on the horse.

Since there was no dialogue in this scene, we had taken off our microphones and were free to chat.

“Hey, Yumi, your favorite food must be tteokbokki, am I right?” Ji-yong suddenly asked with a playful gleam in his eyes, leaning back in his saddle.

“Huh?” I blinked, pulling myself out of my thoughts, surprised by this random question.

“I’ve noticed that whenever we have tteokbokki on our food truck, you always take double portions and become noticeably happier for the rest of the shoot,” he said with one of his signature grins.

“You should see the way your eyes light up when you see something you love,” he teased. “It’s quite fascinating.”

Add ‘flirting’ to the list of things that he could do effortlessly. “Well, who doesn’t love tteokbokki,” I pretended to scowl.

“True,” he agreed nonchalantly. “Especially when it’s super spicy.”

I nodded in agreement. “And speaking of favorite foods, yours must be kimchi-jjigae. I’ve never seen someone eat a bowl of soup as quickly as you do when we have kimchi-jjigae,” I chuckled.

Ji-yong brightened up. “Oh yeah, I love it when they put ham and tofu inside. It just hits the spot,” he closed his eyes and imagined a steaming bowl of kimchi-jjigae in front of him. “It’s perfect for this kind of weather. Now I’m getting hungry.”

I secretly have a newfound hobby: watching Ji-yong eat. It surprises me that he doesn’t do more food commercials because everything he eats looks absolutely

delicious. Maybe it's the way he closes his eyes and savors each bite, revealing an adorable dimple on his left cheek.

Yumi, you're losing it! I scolded myself again, shaking my head to dispel the distraction.

Focus, Yumi, focus . But despite my best efforts, the image of Ji-yong savoring kimchi-jjigae lingered in my mind—his eyes closed in bliss, his surprised exclamations of appreciation for the taste, and the dimple on his cheek deepening with every satisfied bite.

“My butt is starting to feel numb. Can we wrap this up soon?” I interjected, trying to distract myself from thoughts of Ji-yong devouring his meal.

He burst into laughter, clearly amused by my comment. “Your butt? That's a new one,” he said between laughs.

I blushed a little, but at this point, I felt comfortable enough around him to let down my guard and joke around. “Oh come on, don't tell me yours isn't feeling a little sore too,” I teased.

He gave me a lopsided smile, “You got me there. My tush is feeling the burn too,” he admitted, with the grin never leaving his face. The laughter in his eyes was infectious and I found myself chuckling along.

“Don't laugh too hard, or we'll have to redo this scene!” the PD, trailed by a gaggle of cameramen, scolded us through her megaphone.

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A sudden jolt from the horse sent us both lurching forward, our bodies pressed together in an unexpected closeness. My grip around the reins tightened instinctively, but there was no sign of panic in Ji-yong's face. Glancing back at him, I found his eyes surprisingly gentle despite the surprise.

“Don't worry, Yumi,” he said calmly, his voice cutting through the sound of our horses' hooves pounding against the ground. “The ride is almost over.”

I tried to focus on his words, but the close proximity between us was intoxicating. I reminded myself once again of our roles as mere co-workers, and not lovers like our characters in the drama. But it was becoming increasingly difficult to separate reality from make-believe.

Even after we finished filming for the day, Ji-yong's words stayed with me. “Don't worry.” But how could I not worry? The line between reality and fantasy seemed to blur more each day, creating a tumultuous mix of emotions that left me spinning.

The steamy bed scene we shot the other day now lived rent-free in my head.

It was an intensely provocative scene, and I couldn't help feeling anxious as dozens of filming crew watched us in minimal clothing and compromising positions.

I remember how gentle Ji-yong was, always keeping his hands where they felt safe and whispering comforting words, clearly aware of my uneasiness and doing his best to ease my nerves.

The director, striving for authenticity, provided detailed and sometimes

uncomfortable instructions. She paused frequently, adjusting our positions and describing the exact movements for each scene.

We were preparing ourselves on the futon, Ji-yong lying on top of me, careful not to crush me with his weight. His shirt was half-open, revealing his glorious abs.

“Ji-yong, I want you to look into Yumi’s eyes like she’s the most important person in your world.

Caress her face gently, then kiss her softly, and open her shirt a little before.

.. er, the main deed in the intimate scene,” the director instructed, while the writer nodded silently behind her like a shadow.

“Yumi, I want you to respond to his touch naturally and go with the flow, consumed by your passion. Grab his head to deepen the kiss.” Her words, while professional, made me acutely aware of Ji-yong’s proximity and the intimate nature of our roles.

I was hyper-aware of every touch, every breath.

Sensing my agitation, Ji-yong went out of his way to make me feel comfortable. With a somewhat awkward smile, he leaned in and whispered, “You’re doing great, Yumi. Just concentrate on your acting, okay?”

I nodded in acknowledgment, but I sensed that he was nervous too; being so close to him, I could feel his heartbeat racing.

As we followed the director’s instructions, our eyes met and lingered a bit too long, blurring the lines between acting and reality. One particular moment stood out: Ji-yong was supposed to brush a strand of hair away from my face. The touch was light, but it sent a shiver down my spine.

When his lips finally met mine, my hand instinctively moved to draw his head closer, intensifying our kiss. We were careful not to deepen it further or use our tongues, but the raw passion coursing between us was palpable—almost primal.

His body moved rhythmically atop mine, while his hand slid to the top of my traditional costume, carefully unbuttoning it to expose the base of my neck. His kisses traced the path of his fingers, sending a thrill through me, and a soft sigh escaped my lips, as if craving even more.

The director noticed the chemistry and capitalized on it. “That’s perfect! Keep that energy. I want to see that connection.”

When the director finally called cut, there was a shared moment of contemplation. Ji-yong and I exchanged a glance, acknowledging the unusual intimacy of the experience.

“That was... intense,” Ji-yong remarked softly, his eyes searching mine for a reaction.

“Yeah, it was,” I replied, still processing the emotions the scene had stirred up.

As we took a moment to decompress, the crew began resetting the set for the next scene. The director approached with a satisfied smile, praising our performance and seamlessly moving on to preparations for the next scenario, as if it were just another routine part of her day.

I shook my head, trying to forget the intimate scene, but the sense of connection between Ji-yong and me lingered. I couldn’t shake the feeling that something had subtly shifted between us.

When I finally making my way back to my dressing room, I was eager to escape into my favorite game on my phone.

“Just one mission,” I promised myself as I closed the door behind me.

But before I could even start, a loud knock made me jump.

In a panic, I quickly hid my phone under a stack of scripts.

“Come in,” I called out, trying to compose myself.

The door cracked open and Ji-yong’s head peeked around the corner. “Mind if I join you?”

I stared at him, wide-eyed. “How did you...?”

He chuckled as he walked over and plopped down next to me on the couch. “I saw you sneaking in here. Thought maybe you’d want some company while playing.”

To my surprise, he took his phone from his pocket and showed me that he had the same game installed. I squealed in excitement, “Ooh, what level are you on now?”

“I’m on level 59, just one more until the final one, but it’s been half a year and I’m nowhere near,” he replied while shifting his focus to his phone.

As the hours slipped past midnight, a comfortable silence enveloped my dressing room. It felt as if we were just two ordinary people enjoying each other’s company, rather than co-stars who had shared intimate moments only a short while ago.

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Ji-yong

As we near the end of filming, two contrasting moods fill the set. Everyone is visibly exhausted from sleep deprivation and weary of the long hours and repeated takes. Yet, there's also a palpable sense of satisfaction and bittersweetness as we approach the final days.

Despite the challenges of outdoor shoots, everyone has collaborated seamlessly over the past few weeks, and I feel privileged to be part of such a talented and committed team. Our ratings are on the rise, and preparations for an international release are underway.

Even after we wrap up filming the main episodes, there will still be promotional shoots for the drama, which means another opportunity to see Yumi. The thought brings a smile to my face.

Meanwhile, my manager has already booked my next project with a brand-new cast and filming crew in the next few weeks.

It will be a new adjustment to get into character, work with different co-stars, and follow a new script, but I have no reason to complain.

That's what I've signed up for as an actor.

As we sit down for lunch, I turn to my fellow actors and ask about their plans for the

upcoming day off next week.

“I’m thinking of visiting my grandparents in Busan,” Seo-yeon answers, still dressed in her handmaid costume with hair adornments. “I hope it’s warmer there; I can’t stand this cold weather anymore.”

“My uncle also lives in Busan,” adds Baekhyun as he takes off his traditional hat, but still wearing his costume. “Maybe I’ll visit him too.”

“What about you, Yumi?” I turned to her, noticing her silence. I wondered what was on her mind.

She hesitated before answering, “Me? Honestly, I don’t have many plans... I might just sleep and hibernate for a week, and maybe work on a small play at a theater.” There was a hint of melancholy in her voice.

“I would love to see your play,” I said enthusiastically, hoping to lift her spirits.

She glanced at me, surprise coloring her features. “Really? You’d want to come?”

With a grin and an enthusiastic nod, I replied, “Of course! I’m sure you’re amazing on stage.”

A tiny smile played on her lips as she answered, “Well, if you insist...”

Our conversation drifted into comfortable small talk as lunch continued. Ideas for fun days off were thrown around, laughter filled the air, and for a moment, I allowed myself to bask in the joy of belonging.

As lunch ended, however, reality came crashing back. The sound of our director’s voice cut through the chatter like a knife.

“We have one more scene to shoot today,” she announced with a stoic face that masked the weariness underlining her words.

I sighed inwardly as we all rose from our seats, preparing for another grueling round of filming. As we made our way back to set, I stole glances at Yumi. She seemed lost in thought, her brows slightly furrowed as she stared blankly ahead.

“Hey,” I called out lightly, catching up to walk beside her. “You okay?”

She jumped slightly before turning to me with a forced smile that masked whatever was plaguing her mind. “Yeah... just thinking about the scene.”

I offered a small nod of understanding before leaving it at that. After all, there was no point in pressing when she obviously didn’t want to share.

We continued to wrap up our scene, but somehow I kept forgetting my lines and messing up between takes.

Yumi suggested we “cheat” by jotting down some tricky words in the most unusual spots, like on the back of my hand or on a post-it hidden behind some props.

We tried those methods until the PD caught us and scolded us, leaving us cackling.

Later that night, I found myself still awake, staring at the ceiling of my trailer.

Scenes from the day’s filming replayed in my head, each word, each expression, and each touch.

The last scene was especially memorable: our characters, deeply in love and finally admitting their feelings after so many episodes.

Yet once the director yelled cut, we just awkwardly laughed it off.

Despite my best efforts, I couldn't stifle the laughter bursting out of me.

A flush of pink tinted Yumi's cheeks as she burst into laughter beside me.

"I'm sorry, I can't stop laughing," she managed between giggles.

She laughed so hard that she had to dab his eyes as tears came along.

It was remarkable how much we had both evolved since our initial days on set.

Where she had once been a bundle of nerves, she now found amusement in even the more romantic scenes.

I shook my head vigorously, attempting to compose myself. "Believe me, it's not just you," I managed to admit amidst our fits of laughter. We ignored the PD and other film crew members who shot us puzzled glances, as if we were insane. It felt like we were in our own little bubble.

After our laughter died down and we caught our breath, I couldn't help but notice the delicate lines at the corners of her eyes, crinkling as she laughed heartily.

Her eyes formed the shape of two 'n' letters, as if she were truly happy in that moment, completely letting herself go.

It was like seeing her in a new light; the reserved co-star, Han Yumi, disappeared, and all I could see was this fun-loving, charming woman with a beauty that was entirely her own.

"Last scene tomorrow," she said quietly, breaking the silence that had settled between

us.

“Yeah,” was all I managed to say, feeling an unexplainable sense of melancholy washing over me.

I wondered what it would be like not having her around every day, not getting to rehearse scenes with her or share casual banter between takes.

Suddenly, the prospect of moving on to my next project felt less exciting and more daunting.

Over the next day, we shot the final scenes of our drama with a mix of exhaustion and bittersweet anticipation. With each completed scene, there was a palpable sense of finality that hung in the air, thick and heavy like a fog.

It was another tricky day of shooting, this time in a tideland.

We spent several hours running back and forth on the muddy, sticky surface.

At one point, Yumi’s foot got stuck, and I had a blast trying to pull her out.

She made the funniest expression: a mix of sheer panic and amusement—while trying to wriggle herself out of the hole.

“Okay, this is it, the last scene for you two,” the PD announced, looking excited. Behind her, the filming crew made some commotions and clapped their hands.

“Ready?” The PD checked the camera and the monitor. We gave her the nod.

“And... action!”

I slipped into character as Hyun-woo. “Are you alright? I told you this path was risky.” I took Yumi’s hand to help her up.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just a little stuck, that’s all. You worry too much.” Yumi, who was playing Hwa-young, laughed softly and brushed the mud off her skirt.

“Well, someone must keep an eye on you. You have a knack for getting into trouble.” I stared into her eyes softly, with what I hoped was the look of a man deeply in love with the woman in front of him.

“And you have a knack for pulling me out...” Yumi began, her face breaking into a warm smile. As she held my gaze, her smile widened until she couldn’t contain herself. She stifled a laugh for a moment, but soon burst into full-blown laughter.

The PD didn’t need to announce a cut; we all knew it wouldn’t make it into the final scene.

She covered her mouth with her hand. “Sorry,” she said. “I just... I remembered my foot getting stuck in the mud and how you pulled me out.”

I laughed along with Yumi, not minding her blunder, not even a bit.

“Okay, let’s start again,” the PD interrupted.

“And... action!”

We repeated our lines, but midway through, I made the blunder this time.

As I stared into her expressive eyes, I couldn’t help but laugh.

It might have been my imagination, but it seemed like there was a hint of laughter in

her eyes too, and I had to join in.

The way she quickly caught on to our shared amusement made me feel like she was experiencing the same thing.

For a moment, we forgot that the camera was still rolling.

“Cut,” the PD announced, frustration creeping into her voice.

It was cold, and the sun was starting to set, casting a beautiful reflection over the tideland. With the water and sticky mud in our costumes, everyone seemed a bit impatient to wrap up the scene.

We composed ourselves as we saw the PD let out a sigh. After checking to make sure we were ready, she called out, “Take three... action!” and clapped the film slate.

This time, we nearly made it to the end, but just before we declared our love to each other, as we stared into each other’s eyes, we burst into laughter again—together this time.

“Guys, please...” The PD’s impatience was evident. “We don’t have much time left; we can’t shoot when the sun’s position shifts.”

“Sorry, sorry. We can do it,” I said, wiping tears of laughter from my eyes and taking a deep breath to compose myself. “Right, Yumi?”

Still deep in laughter, Yumi could only nod. She also took a deep breath to calm herself before confirming, “Yeah, yeah. For real this time.”

“Okay, here we go,” the PD sighed once more. “Take four... action!”

When we finally heard the director's satisfied "Cut," everyone on set broke into applause. We had completed filming our drama, despite a few mishaps in the final scene, as if we were reluctant to let the moment end and wished to linger just a bit longer.

Returning to base camp, we were met with smiles, bouquets of flowers, and tears of joy as we congratulated each other on our hard work and perseverance over the six months. A celebratory atmosphere filled the air that night as we gathered for one last toast to our success.

Despite the lively atmosphere filled with laughter and shared joy, I found myself drawn to the small figure standing slightly apart from the crowd. Her intense gaze was fixed on the now-empty set.

I politely excused myself from a conversation with Seo-yeon and Baekhyun and made my way to her side. "Hey, Yumi," I greeted her, giving her a gentle nudge. "Are you doing alright?"

She turned towards me, attempting a smile. "Yeah, just... it feels strange, you know? Like this became our little world in the last six months and now we're expected to leave it."

I watched her as she spoke, the dim light casting a soft glow on her face. In that moment, I felt a strange gnaw in my chest. "I get that," I said softly. "It's never easy letting go."

She hummed in agreement, her gaze once again wandering to the set that had been our temporary home for the past few weeks.

"Yeah," she replied, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "But we did it, huh?"

“We did,” I echoed her sentiment. “You were doing great,” I told her earnestly, unable to suppress my admiration. “A natural talent.” Her performance and resilience had blown me away every single day.

She ducked her head slightly, trying to hide the pleased smile tugging at the corners of her lips. “Thank you,” she mumbled into her scarf. “You were amazing too.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” I teased lightly, trying to lighten the mood. Her laughter echoed around us, adding to the noisy cheerfulness of our surroundings.

Our conversation flowed easily after that, reminiscing over hilarious and heartwarming incidents that occurred during filming.

We laughed until our sides hurt, sharing stories of our initial fears and apprehensions before starting the project.

It felt like catching up with an old friend, comfortable and easy.

I raised my beer to clink it against hers. “To our great partnership,” I said with a smile.

She smiled back, warmth in her eyes. We enjoyed the silence for a moment, finding comfort in each other’s presence without the need for words.

At the end of the celebration, we hopped into the mini-van that would take us back to Seoul and our homes.

There wasn’t much conversation in the mini-van; we all sat quietly, exhausted and lost in our thoughts.

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Yumi

I stretched and yawned, grateful to finally be back in my own bed, with no lines to practice first thing in the morning.

But now what?

My mind wandered back to Ji-yong's invitation to see my play. I imagined him sitting in the old theater, observing me on stage. Would he be captivated? Or would he see the stark contrast between us—not only in fame but also in talent?

Enough of that! I chastised myself. Overthinking tends to lead nowhere good. I sat up on my bed and opted to play video games for a while, hoping to distract myself.

Just as I was getting into the game, my phone buzzed. I glanced over, intending to ignore it until after my game. But I saw his name flash across the screen. It was a text from Ji-yong. my heart gave a little leap and I dropped everything to scoop up my phone.

I saw a bear sticker with a question mark popping up next to his message. “What are you up to?” he asked. Then, a few seconds later, I received a photo from him of a video game exhibition flyer. “Have you seen this? Your kind of thing, isn't it?” he added.

I quickly typed out my reply. “Yes! I've always wanted to go, but never had the

chance.

” I hesitated before hitting send, suddenly realizing what I was doing.

Chatting with Ryu Ji-yong about my interests and opinions like any normal friends would.

When did we become close enough to share these things?

Before I could think too much into it, my phone vibrated again with his swift reply. “Then let’s go together!” he suggested.

I stared at my screen in disbelief. Was he really inviting me? Or was this just another one of his playful remarks?

“Are you crazy?” I typed back. “What if someone saw us? What if a journalist took our photo?”

Another bear sticker appeared, this time with three little dots above its head, looking sad. “You’re right,” read his message. “Or, we could pretend to have met by chance if we go there separately.”

My fingers hesitated over my phone, unsure of what to type.

I started to craft a response, only to erase it swiftly, my mind racing as I searched for the right words.

“Nah,” I finally settled on, “It’s too risky.

” The weight of our unfinished drama loomed large in my thoughts.

With the final episode yet to air, any misstep could jeopardize everything we had worked so hard for, not to mention the potential legal ramifications from the production team over stirring gossip and impacting the drama's success.

Seconds turned into minutes as I awaited his response. When it came, I was unprepared for the rush of emotions it stirred.

“Coward,” his message read, followed by a slew of laughter emoticons. Then another message popped up, “Alright, Yumi. We can always try next time when things have settled down.”

I sighed in relief and sent a quick “Sounds like a plan,” before putting my phone away.

It was strange. It was nice. It was confusing.

Maybe Ji-yong and I could be friends, real friends, once everything had calmed down, I thought with a glimmer of hope.

The following weeks were filled with more interviews, fan meetings, and public appearances. Ji-yong and I became experts at hiding our growing friendship from prying eyes, sharing secret smiles and inside jokes while maintaining a professional front for the cameras.

But when Ji-yong lightly brushed his arm against mine during a photo session, I found myself blushing furiously as an unexpected thrill coursed through me. He glanced at me and winked so subtly that no one else noticed.

It was as if the threads of our onscreen and offscreen personas had intertwined, creating a delicate but undeniable bond that sparked with each subtle touch and secret glance.

As the final episode of our drama was aired, the world held its breath. The anticipation was almost tangible; even though we knew how the story ended, seeing it unfold on screen was a different experience altogether.

Normally, I avoid watching myself on screen unless the PD insists on reviewing the footage of our performance on the monitor after each shoot.

There's something cringy about seeing your own actions, especially the steamy scenes with Ji-yong.

It's just too embarrassing. But I managed to muster the courage to watch the final episode.

As our characters professed their undying love, a wave of emotions hit me.

I couldn't help but snicker at the ridiculously long camera shot at the end, with us embracing dramatically against the setting sun, all underscored by a tender and evocative melody with gentle piano and soulful strings.

The editing was impeccable, but I recalled that moment as the actress who lived through it.

We were in the tideland from midday to sunset shooting that three-minute scene, running back and forth with my foot constantly getting stuck in the sand.

Ji-yong and I kept messing up, driving the crew a bit crazy.

I also remembered the late-night rehearsals, early morning shoots, Ji-yong's relentless teasing, and our shared laughter and tears.

After the episode concluded and the credits rolled on my TV screen, my phone

buzzed persistently with messages, including those in our group chat with the cast and production crew, sharing thoughts on the finale.

I chose to ignore most of them, but Ji-yong's text caught my attention. "So... what do you think?" he asked.

In response, I sent him a serious bear sticker, looking as if it was thinking hard.

"Yes?" He prodded further, his curiosity evident and amusing.

"I thought it was beautiful," I finally admitted. "The music was great too."

"Is that all?" he teased back, a playful tone lacing his message.

"And you were fantastic," I relented.

"Only fantastic?" His teasing continued, the playful edge evident. "Are you sure?"

I rolled my eyes at his own self-conceit but couldn't hold back the smile that came with it. "Yes, Ji-yong," I replied, playing along. "You were downright magical."

He quickly fired back with a simple, "I thought so too."

I chuckled at his shamelessness. Checking the clock, I realized it was well past midnight, and I was suddenly struck by how exhausted I felt. Almost as if he could sense my fatigue, Ji-yong sent another follow-up message.

"Get some sleep, Yumi. You deserve it."

It wasn't a particularly profound message, but the simple gesture of concern made me smile.

“And by the way, you are magical too,” he added.

My heart fluttered at his words. “Thanks, Ji-yong,” I replied. “I’m heading to bed now. You should get some sleep too.”

The next morning, I woke to a world that felt different somehow, as if the air had changed with the conclusion of our drama.

A flurry of messages from friends congratulating me flooded my phone, alongside numerous notifications from fans on social media praising the finale episode.

It was overwhelming in the most wonderful way possible.

My manager Da-eun called to congratulate me. “Hey, congrats again on the Princess of Cosmos finale! You’ve got yourself a fan. Daebak!” she squealed. “And I have even more great news. We’ve just received your salary for the last drama. But that’s not all—”

She proceeded to outline my agenda for the upcoming week: a play at the theater, an audition for a gadget commercial, and an interview with a lifestyle magazine.

I felt a twinge of excitement at receiving my first salary for the drama.

As newcomers in the showbiz industry, our lives aren’t as glamorous as people might think.

We usually receive our payment only after all the episodes have aired, and a significant portion is based on bonuses tied to the drama’s ratings.

Additionally, our agency takes a substantial cut, often leaving us with only 50% of the total payment.

Still, it's much higher than my usual earnings at the theater.

After the excitement subsided, I sighed audibly and stepped into the shower.

With no more promotional interviews or photoshoots scheduled for Princess of Cosmos, it truly felt like the end of that chapter.

As the water trickled over my shoulders, a faint smile crossed my face, and thoughts of Ji-yong and the rest of the cast drifted through my mind.

Perhaps our paths would intersect again in another project, another story waiting to be told. Who knew?

Days passed without incident—or so I thought.

Life seemed to have returned to normal. But not exactly.

People started to notice me on the street; some even asked for autographs and photos.

I felt proud but a little weird at the same time.

It's not like I'm a hero or anything; I'm still the same old Yumi who loves tteokbokki above all else and uses old T-shirts as pajamas.

And then Ji-yong's face started popping into my mind at the most inconvenient moments, like during a grocery run or while folding laundry.

I recalled his silly jokes and his laughter.

Before I knew it, I found myself, against my better judgment, glued to the internet, diving headfirst into an abyss of Ji-yong's content.

I rewatched his old dramas, dove into ancient interviews where he talked about existential topics like the best way to eat ramen, and even caught snippets of him goofing around on variety shows.

As I delved deeper into Ji-yong's world, two things became evident: he was so strikingly handsome that it felt almost unreal, and... I missed him. A lot. Unreasonably so. How did this happen? Was I becoming one of his obsessed fans? What an unsettling thought!

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I snuggled into my sofa with a cup of tea in hand and switched the YouTube channel to watch something—anything—other than Ji-yong’s content.

Glancing at the clock above my TV, I realized it was almost 10 PM, and I had done almost nothing today except practice my lines for the upcoming play, squeeze in a bit of exercise, and take care of my skin.

I don’t mind, though; I’m the type of person who could stay home for a whole month like a hermit if needed, as long as I have my game console and a fridge full of food.

I sighed as my phone buzzed. Ignoring it, I mindlessly flipped through channels, landing on a cooking show. The phone buzzed again.

Curious, I picked it up to see what the commotion was. My heart did a backflip when I saw Ji-yong’s name appear. We hadn’t texted in a few days, and I reminded myself that this was normal... because why should we? We were just former coworkers.

“Hi Yumi, what are you up to?” the text read. “If you’re free, let’s meet at this address!”

He texted me the location of an upscale karaoke place downtown.

“And when you arrive there, just tell the guy at reception you want a room with fried chicken and beer,” he added, with a winking emoji. “Remember, those are the secret code words.”

I could feel my heart racing.

Tossing the remote on the sofa, I dashed to my wardrobe, barely suppressing a squeal. I didn't want to reply too quickly and seem too eager. Flipping through my outfit choices, I held them against me, looking for something casual but not too casual.

Was this... a date? Or something else entirely? And at a... karaoke place?

I assumed he knew what he was doing, taking precautions against paparazzi and such, given the emphasis on the fried chicken and beer code.

Deciding on a soft lavender chiffon dress with lace accents and a belted waist, paired with faux leather ankle boots, I thought, "This is it." An effortlessly chic look for early spring (even though nothing about it was effortless, obviously).

As I started applying makeup, I typed a reply, "Sure, be there in 20 minutes!"

Another squeal escaped me; I couldn't contain my excitement to meet Ji-yong.

I hopped in my car and drove with anticipation until I reached the venue.

These days, with masks being the norm, celebrities could hide their faces more easily.

I wasn't quite at that level of fame yet, but I covered my face with a mask anyway.

Once I reached the receptionist, I removed it and said, "I'd like a room with fried chicken and beer, please. "

He nodded knowingly and guided me to the designated room. As we neared it, I could hear the sounds of giggles, chatter, and off-key singing coming from behind the door, which masked the thumping of my racing heart.

As I held my breath, the door swung open to reveal what felt like a portal to another world, with around twenty faces turning to look at me. I scanned the room until I spotted Ji-yong standing behind the microphone.

“Hey, Yumi! You made it!” He announced enthusiastically, a hint of tipsiness evident. He waved at me and continued singing with a group of people.

The rest of the group nodded to acknowledge my arrival before diving back into their activities. Some sang along with Ji-yong, others clinked glasses of soju and beer, and a few attempted conversations over the booming karaoke.

I found a quiet corner to settle in and awkwardly waved to the smaller group nearby, all stunningly good-looking and clearly high-profile.

Among them, I noticed Seo-yeon and some famous models.

Jun-ho, who played a minor role in Princess of Cosmos for two episodes, was also there.

It dawned on me that Ji-yong had invited Yoon Min-hee, his co-lead actress from an upcoming romantic drama, as well.

Okay, so this was definitely not a date.

In fact, it was as far from a date as one could get.

As a song ended, Ji-yong made his way over with a fresh beer in hand.

“Hey, where’s your cup?” he asked casually, presenting me with a choice between a large beer cup or a smaller one for soju. He raised his expressive eyebrows, awaiting my decision. I weakly pointed to the smaller one. Tonight called for stronger spirits.

He nodded understandingly and poured me a cup of soju.

“By the way, if you’re feeling too tipsy to drive later, I’ve got a chauffeur on standby for everyone,” he said with a wide grin.

As an introvert navigating the social seas past 10 PM, I was starting to question if this outing was worth the effort. Small talk with strangers, especially the high-profile kind, was not exactly my forte.

My brain raced for a polite exit strategy after the obligatory amount of time had passed.

“Let me guess,” Ji-yong interjected, scanning my face with a smirk before leaning in to whisper, “you’re already plotting your escape strategy.”

I nearly choked on my soju, surprised by his accurate insight. “No, not at all,” I replied, attempting to save face. “Actually, I was hoping you could introduce me to your friends here. Are they close to you?” I raised an eyebrow, challenging him a bit.

“Let’s see... there’s Tae-hyun and Hyun-ki, both models. My manager Sangwook, and then Seo-yeon and Jun-ho—you already know them. We even shared a few classes in university. By the way, Jun-ho is also cast in my new drama, *Hometown Whispers*, along with Chungho and Min-hee over there.”

After introducing the crowd, Ji-yong gestured towards me. Some heads turned in my direction, met with a few waves and I gave a small wave back, trying to play it cool amidst the sudden spotlight.

In that moment, it felt like I was seeing a different version of Ji-yong, shattering the image of the carefree and sweet Ji-yong from the *Princess of Cosmos* set.

“So...” I took a small sip of soju, trying to break the sudden awkwardness, “Am I finally getting to meet THE real Ryu Ji-yong tonight? The guy every woman in Korea swoons over? The party animal and all?”

He put down his beer and looked a bit more serious. “Well... sometimes I like to throw parties like this; otherwise, life as a celebrity can get pretty darn lonely, you know?” Ji-yong remarked, rubbing his thumb on his jaw.

“Hmm, I see,” I added weakly. The words ‘Then, why don’t you find yourself a girlfriend?’ were on the tip of my tongue, but instead—fueled by a bit of soju—they transformed into: “Then, why don’t you get yourself a cat?”

There was a moment of silence before Ji-yong burst into laughter.

“A... cat?” he choked out between laughs. “Well, I’m more of a dog person myself, but a cat... why not? They’re low maintenance and good company. I’ll think about it.” He winked mischievously.

Embarrassment washed over me as I realized the absurdity of my suggestion. What was I thinking, telling one of Korea’s most eligible bachelors to adopt a cat to cure his loneliness? I hastily took another sip of my drink, hoping the alcohol would somehow erase my verbal misstep.

“It must be exciting, living the high life with famous friends like this...” I murmured, trying to steer the conversation away from my blunder.

Ji-yong took another swig of his beer before answering, “Sure, being famous and having famous friends is nice, but at the end of the day, I’m just a regular guy, I suppose.

” He shrugged. “I’d love to travel the world, visit amusement parks, or go to the

movies without drawing attention.

And, well, it would be wonderful to meet someone who sees me for who I am, not just as the celebrity Ryu Ji-yong.” He offered a brief, hopeful smile.

I nodded, trying to keep a straight face, but couldn’t resist teasing him a little. “So, basically, you’re a lonely superstar in need of a feline companion and a partner for covert theme park adventures?”

He chuckled, and I couldn’t help but join in, the tension easing as we shared a laugh over the bizarre turn our conversation had taken.

Suddenly, across the room Min-hee’s voice rose above the chatter, calling Ji-yong over for a group photo. Ji-yong excused himself with an apologetic look, leaving me alone amidst his friends.

I watched as they jostled together in front of the flashbulbs, laughing with their arms thrown over each other’s shoulders. I noticed how easily Ji-yong let down his guard around them—his booming laugh mingling with theirs. It’d be nice to be part of that world, I thought.

Checking my phone, I saw it was almost midnight.

Cinderella needed to go home, and the obligatory polite time at the gathering had been fulfilled.

I gulped some water and let more time pass to let the alcohol in my system subside.

Not feeling the least bit tipsy, I was confident I could drive myself home safely.

Saying goodbye to a room full of strangers always made me feel a bit awkward, so I

wanted to make it quick. I nodded to Seo-yeon, bidding her farewell, and said my goodbye to those within earshot.

Scanning the room for Ji-yong, I waved goodbye to him and headed towards the exit.

A few steps outside, I heard the door open behind me and someone catching up.

“Yumi, wait!” Ji-yong’s voice called out, slightly out of breath.

I turned to see him approaching, feeling a mix of confusion and curiosity.

“When can we see each other again?” he asked eagerly.

My heart did a little somersault, and I struggled to compose a response. “I don’t know... soon, maybe?” I replied, my voice tinged with uncertainty.

A broad smile spread across his face. “Soon, I hope.” He then extended his pinky finger, a gesture reminiscent of childhood promises.

He’s so silly sometimes, I thought, a small laugh escaping my lips as I wrapped my pinky around his.

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Ji-yong

In the weeks that followed the karaoke extravaganza, it seems I've become quite the oddball.

On the surface, it's business as usual: shooting dramas, juggling interviews, photoshoots, and even attending mandatory piano lessons (because, apparently, every male drama lead needs to be a piano prodigy now).

My schedule borders on drowning me, yet my manager insists on squeezing in a daily hour-long gym session to keep me in top shape.

But when I'm alone with my thoughts, I found myself drifting into absurd fantasies.

Playful banter and laughter with a certain someone dominated my daydreams. During breaks, I'd compulsively check social media, hoping for a glimpse of them.

I'd even caught myself sneaking glances at my phone, waiting for a notification for a message. It was ridiculous.

As a specialist in romantic dramas, shouldn't I be immune to this? Shouldn't I know best that all of it is just the magic of the camera, exceptional editing, and romantic ballads? Yet, her image pops into my head every ten minutes.

Yes, we've managed to keep it casual and relaxed, exchanging small messages here

and there. Sharing articles or videos about video games and cute cats. Nothing that two friends wouldn't share.

But those texts have somehow become the highlight of my day.

“Ji-yong, you seem distracted. Is everything okay?” Min-hee’s voice snapped me out of my daydream. A former idol, Min-hee stood tall and slender, always impeccably adorned with heavy makeup.

In her late twenties, she continued to navigate her image in the industry. On the outside, she appeared innocent and pure, as society expected, but within her inner circle, she let her guard down and revealed her true self: bubbly, daring and somewhat carefree.

“Yes, sorry about that. Let’s start again,” I apologized, refocusing on our scene.

In my latest drama, *Hometown Whispers*, the plot revolves around a young, ambitious career woman from South Korea who forms a mysterious connection with a man living in a rural area of Korea from a parallel universe.

Given the romantic genre, there’s plenty of physical closeness planned, and we’re currently in the midst of rehearsing some of those moments.

In the softly lit studio, her touch on my shoulder felt delicate yet purposeful, her eyes locked onto mine with a blend of curiosity and warmth.

I mirrored her intensity, my fingers tracing a gentle path along her jawline as we simulated the pivotal moment between our characters.

With each rehearsal, the lines we whispered to each other promised to ignite the screen with a potent mix of passion and intrigue.

But this isn't it, I mused to myself, watching the scene unfold. Despite how good it looked on camera, I could sense it in our touch. It didn't quite evoke the same feeling I had in my latest drama with that particular someone.

"Good, good, you guys are doing great," the PD shared some words of encouragement while we continued our rehearsal.

"You know, there's something about this place that makes me feel like anything is possible," I said to Min-hee's character, leaning in with a playful smile.

She responded with a teasing tone, "Oh really? Is it the charming countryside or the peaceful views that's got you feeling this way?"

I leaned closer, maintaining the romantic mood, "Maybe it's the company," I added with a wink.

Min-hee's character chuckled softly, not letting me off easily. "Smooth talker. But don't think sweet words will get you out of trouble."

I grinned back at her, my confidence unwavering. "I'm ready whenever you are, Miss Director."

"Cut! Great work, both of you. Let's run that one more time, from the top."

The team of makeup artists and stylists intervened to give some touch-ups to our makeup and outfits before we repeated the lines again, this time for the real shoot.

A few moments later, after wrapping up another long day on set, I stumbled into my apartment, tossed my belongings onto the sofa, and collapsed in exhaustion. It was nearly 9 PM, and I hadn't even had dinner yet. My body ached from the day's workouts and shooting schedule.

Suddenly, my phone buzzed, and I saw a bear rolling on the floor animation pop up on my screen, followed by a text: “I’m bored. What are you doing?”

A smile tugged at my lips. Ah, the highlight of my day had arrived.

“Nothing much... at home now,” I replied.

“Alone and bored too.” Usually, I cherish my quiet nights, indulging in brownies and ice cream—a cheat to my usual diet.

But tonight, I don’t feel like being alone.

My apartment suddenly felt too big, too quiet.

You know that feeling when you’ve spent the whole day with so many people, and then when you’re finally alone, you’re just left with. .. silence.

Another bear sticker popped up, this one looking surprised with an exclamation mark.

“Come to my place then,” the text said.

My heart raced a bit at this unusual and bold request. Paying a visit to your attractive ex-co-star’s place alone? Risky. It felt like tiptoeing across an invisible line.

“We could play racing games together,” she added innocently. “And I have some fried chicken left.”

I wasn’t worried about getting caught; a private home was one of the safest places from public curiosity and paparazzi. If I recall correctly, she mentioned that she lived in a studio apartment in the suburbs of Seoul.

With a bit of luck, no one (especially not a journalist) would find out about my visit.

The only other concern was whether I'd be able to drive back home afterward, especially if alcohol was involved.

Oh well, consequences be damned. "Share your address with me again?" I replied.

I grabbed my keys, along with a hoodie and a mask. Punching her address into my phone's map app, I soon found myself in my car, heading towards her place in Seongdong neighborhood.

"On my way," I texted her as I pressed down on the pedal.

I soon found myself standing in front of her door. My heart doing a little thump thump as I rang the doorbell.

Yumi greeted me in a loose T-shirt and a pair of jeans.

Her hair was hastily pulled back into a ponytail, and she appeared to be wearing no makeup (or maybe just a very sheer layer).

I gulped as a wave of realization hit me.

God, she was beautiful. Right then and there, I wanted her—just like I'd yearned to deepen our kiss during our on-screen scene, turning fiction into reality.

"Come on in," she said cheerfully.

I followed her inside, and another wave of realization crashed over me: she was a hoarder.

Her apartment was filled with trinkets and knick-knacks, a stark contrast to my own sparse living space.

Photos adorned the walls, alongside neatly lined-up mini figurines and plushies.

What a geek, I thought, unable to suppress a smile.

“What?” Yumi noticed my grin and arched an eyebrow challengingly, clearly sensing my thoughts.

“Nothing,” I quickly replied. “Is this a limited edition?” I gestured to one of her figurines, trying to observe it closer. I recognized the character—it was from a video game we both played on set.

“Yes! And be careful, I stayed up all night to win this thing in an online auction!” She urged with a protective tone. I chuckled and explored the rest of the knick-knacks.

“Is this your parents? Where do they live?” I remarked upon seeing a photo of a teenager flanked by a man and a woman on the beach.

She formed a small smile, looking a bit wistful as she replied, “Yeah, they were my parents, but they’re no longer here. I lost my mom when I was 23 years old, and my dad not long after.”

A brief silence followed before I said sincerely, “I’m truly sorry for your loss.” I struggled to find the right words, knowing how devastating it must be to lose both parents in such a short span. I felt an overwhelming urge to give her a comforting hug, but I managed to hold it in.

She shrugged. “Well, that’s life.” She didn’t elaborate further and tried to appear cheerful again, as if she were accustomed to discussing such difficult topics.

“Want to eat the fried chicken?”

On cue, my stomach grumbled, prompting laughter from both of us.

We moved to the kitchen area, which featured an open layout with a small dining table that also served as a bar, overlooking the living room.

She dove into her fridge, pulling out leftover fried chicken, some soft drinks, beers, and a bottle of soju.

“You know what, we could also make some cupcakes while waiting for the fried chicken to warm up.” Sparkles danced in her eyes, and in that moment, I had no power to refuse her.

“Okay, but I’m not exactly a pro in the cooking department,” I warned her.

She tossed the fried chicken into the oven somewhat nonchalantly and shrugged again, “Me neither, but I’ve been dying to try baking ever since I bought this cupcake kit on sale.”

She gestured towards the choice of drinks and said, “First things first, choose your fuel.”

I chuckled at her comment. I wasn’t even tipsy yet, but here I was feeling giddy.

“Beer and soju?”

“Beer and soju,” she confirmed with a nod, acknowledging my choice of “fuel”. She then mixed them together in the perfect ratio like an experienced bartender.

As we gulped down the fresh beer and soju, I shared stories of my day with her, and

she reciprocated with tales of hers. It felt relaxed and cozy, almost as if we did this every day.

“Could you believe that? The writer sent me a revised script again. It’s the fifth time this week, and it’s driving me crazy!” I grumbled, trying to “participate” in the cupcake-making process, though I honestly had no clue what I was doing.

She whisked four eggs evenly and poured them into the batter, nodding sympathetically.

“Want to practice lines with me?” She suggested kindly.

“Nah, not right now. I need a break from work,” I confessed. All I wanted was to shut off my brain for a bit and unwind.

“Got it,” she replied, then added, “I think we can put the batch into the oven.”

“Together with the fried chicken?”

She nodded, though I sensed a hint of doubt in her eyes. This might be the start of a culinary disaster, I chuckled inwardly. But being as clueless as her, I simply nodded along and hoped for the best.

A few moments later, we were seated on a small two-seat sofa in the cozy living room area, right next to the kitchen.

Each of us clutched a joystick, nibbling on dried squid and still sipping our mixed beer and soju.

We played a racing game for a while, caught up in heated competition, until we heard the oven ding.

We returned to the kitchen, eager to inspect our culinary creation. Surprisingly, everything looked and smelled delightful.

We attacked the fried chicken like starving wolves, enjoying how well it complemented the beer.

“Time for dessert,” I teased, raising my eyebrows as I carefully plucked one of the still-warm cupcakes from the tray.

“You first,” I said, attempting to feed her the cupcake, but she quickly declined with a mischievous grin. “No way, you’re the guest here. You go first.”

“Fine, I’ll go first,” I conceded, a trace of despair in my voice. I took a small bite of the cupcake, only to have undercooked batter ooze out, melting in my mouth and trickling onto my lips and jaw.

“It’s not fully baked!” I exclaimed, trying to shove the cupcake toward her so she could share in my suffering. By this point, she was doubled over in hysterical laughter, clutching her stomach as she dodged my cupcake assault.

I chuckled along with her, unsure of what was so amusing about our situation but finding it all irresistibly hilarious. Surely the beer and soju were playing their part, but everything seemed even funnier with her.

She reached up to open the upper cabinet, revealing a sliver of bare skin on her stomach, I felt a sudden tingle that had nothing to do with the alcohol.

Seizing the opportunity, I playfully tried to offer her the under-cooked cupcake again.

She giggled with laughter and then revealed her discovery from the upper cabinet: some straws. This sent us both into another fit of laughter as she jabbed one of the

straws into the undercooked cupcake.

“We should definitely keep acting together,” she managed to say amidst her laughs.

“But we should probably be banned from baking together ever again.”

“Definitely,” I replied with a grin. Sure , I thought. All of this was just acting.

Or was it?

The rest of the night became a blur, but I managed to settle a tipsy Yumi onto the sofa before she dozed off. I ended up crashing on a small patch of the floor nearby, grateful for the soft layer of carpet.

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Yumi

Following the chaotic cupcake night, our friendship evolved to be closer than ever.

Ji-yong managed to visit whenever his busy schedule allowed, and our evenings were filled with competitive gaming, board games, scary movies, and shared meals.

Hanging out with him felt surprisingly effortless; he seemed more like a long-lost friend than an acclaimed actor.

Yet, beneath the casual camaraderie, an undeniable tension lingered between us. Every accidental touch sparked a tingling anticipation.

But I valued our current relationship too much to indulge in romantic fantasies. Besides, who in their right mind would start a romantic relationship with me, given my complicated family background?

To completely dispel those romantic fantasies, teaser footage for Hometown Whispers began appearing on video streaming platforms.

Before I knew it, I was knee-deep in the commentary sections, scrolling through a flood of posts and theories about Ji-yong and Min-hee.

One click led to another, and soon I was buried in a myriad of opinions and speculations from fans and curious onlookers alike.

Headlines like “Their chemistry is on fire!” and “Ji-yong and Min-hee look so cute together!” kept appearing, each accompanied by a cascade of conspiracy theories analyzing every detail for hints of an off-screen romance.

Comments like “They look like a real couple!” and “He can’t take his eyes off Min-hee!

” only drew me further into the whirlwind of speculation.

I found myself diving deeper and deeper into the rabbit hole of fan theories and intrigue surrounding Ji-yong and Min-hee’s relationship.

The more I scrolled through the comments and watched the clip, the more my insecurities grew. I couldn’t help but compare myself to Min-hee—her glamorous idol background, her tall and sexy figure, the way she seemed to effortlessly banter with Ji-yong on set.

In one clip, she playfully threw a few light punches at his arm after he made a joke, and he responded by pulling her into a side hug, both of them laughing.

The easy physical closeness between them made my stomach twist uncomfortably.

Had he ever touched me like that during our interview? I couldn’t remember.

I knew I shouldn’t read too much into it.

After all, creating chemistry is part of an actor’s job.

Ji-yong and I had undeniable sparks when the cameras were rolling too.

But seeing their flirty interactions splashed all over the internet for the world to

dissect still stung more than I cared to admit.

With heavy sigh, I closed my laptop with a bit more force than necessary. Why was I torturing myself like this? Ji-yong and I were just friends. That's all we could ever be. The sooner I accepted that, the better.

A ping from my phone interrupted my wallowing. It was a text from the man himself with wink emoji at the end: "Hey, want to grab dinner tonight? I know a great place that just opened up. Super private."

My heart did a little flip as I read his message. Super private, huh? Was he implying ... No, stop. Reading into things is what got me into this mopey state to begin with. It's just dinner between friends. Nothing more.

I hesitated, my thumbs hovering over the screen. A big part of me wanted to say yes, to spend time with Ji-yong again. Our hangouts at my place had been so much fun. But another part worried it would just make these confusing feelings worse.

"Sorry, I can't... Busy with rehearsals for the play. Rain check?" I finally typed back, hitting send before I could change my mind. Technically it wasn't a lie—I did have play rehearsals. But they weren't so intensive that I couldn't spare an evening for dinner.

"No worries, fighting! Let me know when you're free," he replied couple of minutes later, along with a muscle arm emoji.

I tossed my phone back on the bed with a loud groan. Determined not to waste the whole day moping, I hauled myself up and grabbed my script to run lines. At least rehearsing would provide a welcome distraction from my jumble.

The following days passed in a flurry of rehearsals and plays. I threw myself into the

play, relishing the long hours in the theater as a respite from my tangled thoughts about Ji-yong. It felt good to immerse myself in a new character, to temporarily shed the weight of being Han Yumi.

Diving into a character and disappearing into a story had always been my refuge, my way of escaping reality for a while. On stage, I could be anyone—a fierce warrior, a tortured artist, a woman hopelessly in love. The possibilities were endless.

The play itself was a challenging piece, emotionally raw and unafraid to delve into the gritty realities of life. My character, Soo-jin the homeless woman, was a far cry from the princesses I played on *Princess of Cosmos*.

My theater co-stars were a lively bunch, grounded and more relatable compared to the strikingly handsome Ji-yong and his glamorous circle. For the first time in a while, I felt like I belonged somewhere outside the glittering world of celebrity.

While Ji-yong and I still texted sporadically, I kept the conversations light and brief, always citing my busy schedule as an excuse not to meet up.

If he sensed anything amiss in my short replies, he didn't let on.

His messages remained as warm and playful as ever, punctuated with silly bear stickers and teasing remarks.

Opening night for the play arrived sooner than expected.

As I stood in the wings, listening to the expectant murmur of the audience, a familiar tingle of nerves and excitement zipped through me.

This was what I lived for—the thrill of performing live, of feeling the energy of the crowd and letting it fuel my own.

The first act went off without a hitch. I lost myself in Soo-jin's world, enjoying her sharp wit and no-nonsense attitude. After the performance, as I gulped down water and towed off sweat in the backroom, my co-star Jung-hwan sidled up to me with a grin.

"Looks like you've got quite the admirer in the audience tonight," he remarked with a grin, nodding towards a bouquet of flowers taking up half the makeup table. I quickly moved to inspect the bouquet and the accompanying card. It read, 'A star is born!' with a small heart and the initials: R.J.Y.

I almost spilled my water in surprise. Ji-yong was here? At my play?

I glanced around the backstage area, half-expecting to see him lingering somewhere.

Just then, Da-eun approached with a bright smile. "Yumi, you were fantastic in the play today! How about we go out for some tteokbokki?"

"Sure," I agreed, still a bit lost in thought, and let Da-eun lead me to a nearby tteokbokki and oden joint.

Once we arrived, Da-eun placed our orders, and the food was served shortly after.

"Hey, Da-eun..." I began, idly poking at my tteokbokki with my fork, my appetite noticeably absent.

Da-eun has been my manager for the past six years and is also my closest friend. We've navigated many highs and lows together, from one play to the next and through numerous commercial gigs.

When I had just turned 24, fresh out of university with a degree in Fine Arts and reeling from the recent loss of my mother to bone cancer, I was working odd jobs as a

clerk and server while searching for more stable work.

It was in the mini-market where I worked that a scout from my current entertainment agency approached me and asked if I was interested in working as an extra in theater.

At first, I thought he was joking. But mustering my courage, I visited the agency, landed a role in a theater production, and started getting minor parts.

Eventually, I moved on to leading roles in theater and landed my first commercial ad for a car.

As offers for commercial ads, small roles in TV series and music videos continued to roll in, the agency assigned me a manager, and that's how I met Da-eun. Our similar age helped us bond quickly and I've always felt she's more of a best friend than a colleague.

Da-eun studied my face and the untouched tteokbokki with a concerned look. "What's going on?"

"Is it... possible for a guy and a girl to just be friends?"

"Oh boy," Da-eun sighed, pausing to consider the question. "I guess it depends. Are they the same age? Are they both single? Do they share the same sense of humor? Is there any spark between them?"

I nodded in response to each question.

"Hmmm, then... it might be difficult to remain just friends," Da-eun said, sounding concerned.

"And what if... what if they can't be more than friends?"

“Why not?” she asked. Then, as if having an epiphany, her eyes widened. “Wait, you’re not talking about yourself, are you? With Ji-yong...?”

I hesitated, trying to gauge how much to reveal. “Well, maybe,” I admitted, feeling a flush creep up my cheeks. “You know, with the way things were on drama set and these flowers... I’m starting to wonder if there might be something more.”

Da-eun leaned in closer, her curiosity piqued. “So, you have feelings for Ji-yong?”

I nodded slowly, struggling to express the confusion swirling inside me. “I think I might. But it’s complicated. I’m not sure if he feels the same way, and I’m afraid of of the consequences.”

Da-eun nodded sympathetically. “I understand... but I think you should keep your distance from him. I’m not saying this just as your manager, but as your friend,” she said, her tone turning serious.

“Dating an actor isn’t easy,” she continued. “Going public can be really challenging. There are too many actors whose lives have been ruined by rumors and gossip. And you, Yumi, you tend to invest so much emotionally; it would be hard to recover if things didn’t work out.”

She gave my hand a reassuring pat before going on. “I know this might sound harsh, but I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

Her words seeped into me like a cold, sobering truth, making me reevaluate my feelings and the potential fallout.

After a long pause, I groaned in frustration. “Argh! I don’t know. Let’s just finish this tteokbokki.” I jabbed my fork into the tteokbokki with a bit too much force and poured more beer into our cups.

“What about you, then? Any special someone in your life?” I shifted the focus to Da-eun. She blinked in surprise.

“We’re not getting any younger, you know,” I teased. “You shouldn’t work all the time.”

“Yeah, I’ve been working too hard, thanks to someone ,” she replied sarcastically, and we both burst into laughter.

After our laughter subsided, the conversation shifted to lighter topics.

Da-eun began sharing amusing anecdotes from her life—like her little brother’s recent acceptance into a prestigious university and stories about her cat.

The tension from our earlier discussion seemed to melt away as we joked and discussed our schedules for the coming week.

We paid for our food and decided to take a walk to clear our heads.

I was grateful for the distraction. The streets of Seoul’s subdistrict at night were quiet, and the cool, crisp air offered a soothing contrast to the day’s chaos.

We strolled side by side, chatting about everything from future auditions to light-hearted, random topics.

Eventually, Da-eun turned to me with a thoughtful expression. “You know, sometimes it’s okay to take things slow. There’s no rush. Focus on what makes you happy right now.”

I nodded, appreciating her words. “Thanks, Da-eun. I needed to hear that.”

We continued walking until we reached a metro station, where we said our goodbyes and went our separate ways home.

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Ji-yong

I attended Yumi's play a few days ago. It was exceptional and thought-provoking.

Her performance was flawless—an impressive feat considering that in theater, there's no room for error.

I sat in the back row with a mask on, trying to stay out of sight.

I left a few minutes before the end to head to the backstage with a bouquet of flowers, hoping this small gesture would show my support without being too intrusive.

But now I frowned at my phone screen, re-reading Yumi's text declining my dinner invitation. It was unlike her to turn down a chance to hang out, especially with the promise of good food. Had I done something to upset her? I wracked my brain but couldn't think of anything specific.

“Another round, another round!” Min-hee's shout pulled me from my thoughts about Yumi's play as she slid two shot glasses toward Jun-ho. He poured more soju and mumbled a string of incoherent, drunken phrases.

Since we wrapped up our shoot earlier than planned, we decided to unwind with drinks at a new BBQ spot, joined by several cast members from Hometown Whispers

.

By the time we reached our fifth round of drinking game in the restaurant's private room, a few of us were already showing signs of inebriation, even though it was still early in the evening.

Normally, I'd enjoy this type of outing, but tonight I sat quietly with my beer, my mind elsewhere. I was pacing myself because I couldn't afford a hangover the next day. Min-hee should've known better—we had an early morning shoot tomorrow, but she just didn't seem to care.

She was showing her carefree side, which I admired but also found risky for her public image.

Our society can be unforgiving towards such behavior, especially for female actresses.

I kept a vigilant eye, making sure no one was recording videos that could end up on social media.

Even in a private room among friends, you never know.

A few seconds of footage could jeopardize the careers we've spent years building.

But the risk to our careers isn't the only concern. The intense pressure, constant scrutiny, cyberbullying, and fear of public backlash could have devastating consequences. In Korea, the showbiz industry is sadly notorious for its high suicide rates, making the stakes even higher.

"Min-hee, I think it's time to call it a night.

Let me give you and Jun-ho a ride home," I finally suggested, eyeing the two most inebriated people in the room, who showed no signs of slowing down.

I glanced around and caught Chungho's eye; he seemed more sober and shrugged with a hint of amusement.

"Hyung, I can handle the rest of the crew. Just head home," Chungho said thoughtfully.

It's a pity my manager, Sangwook, couldn't join me today. He's at home taking care of his daughter, who's not feeling well. Even though it's not exactly in his job description, sometimes these things just come with the territory.

I sighed and gave Chungho a nod, slipping on my hat and mask for some anonymity. After settling the bill with the restaurant owner, I turned my attention to Min-hee and Jun-ho, who were having a hard time walking straight.

I put masks on them too, keeping an eye out for curious onlookers outside, even though it was only a short distance to my car.

Min-hee and Jun-ho were far from cooperative, giggling and making half-hearted attempts to return to the restaurant.

I let out a weary breath—at least they could still walk.

After a brief struggle, I managed to get them settled in the backseat of my car like two sacks of rice. "You guys better not throw up in my car," I warned them. I pulled out my GPS and asked, "Hey, Jun-ho, you live in Jung-gu, right? It's not too far from here."

Jun-ho mumbled a yes before shutting his eyes and resting his head against the window. Min-hee followed suit, lying across the back seat with her cheeks flushed red.

I sighed again. It seemed like it was going to be a long ride. After driving for a while, I managed to reach Jun-ho's apartment.

"Min-hee, you stay here, okay? I'm just going to drop Jun-ho real quick, then I'll drop you at your place too." I tried to talk to her, but she was already fast asleep in the backseat of my car.

Frustration welled up inside me, but I took a deep breath and focused on one task at a time. I left a tiny crack on the window to let some fresh air into the car for Min-hee and then helped Jun-ho out, draping one of his arms over my shoulder as we made our way to the elevator.

Guided by his slurred directions, we finally reached the 10th floor where his apartment was located.

Jun-ho managed to fumble with the digicode and get the door open.

We were met by his surprised mother. I quickly bowed to her and greeted her politely before helping Jun-ho into his room, easing him onto his bed. At least he was now safe and sound.

"Hyungggggg, I love youuuuu..." Jun-ho mumbled again, his words stretched and garbled. "Thank youuuuuuuuuuu..."

I shook my head with a weary smile, feeling a mix of relief and lingering frustration.

As Jun-ho drifted off to sleep, I took a moment to gather myself, bracing for the 'second sack of rice' still left in my car. Jun-ho's mother apologized profusely at the doorstep, but I assured her it was nothing.

I said my goodbyes quickly and made my way back to the car, where Min-hee

remained fast asleep, her disheveled form sprawled across the seat.

I grumbled under my breath, growing increasingly frustrated.

I'd hoped to enjoy the night, but instead, I ended up playing babysitter when I had far more interesting things to do.

I slipped into the backseat beside her and gave her a nudge, not feeling particularly sympathetic at this point. "Hey, Min-hee, what's your address? It's in Apgujeong, right?"

She stirred, sighing and looking vaguely irritated as she cracked open her eyes. "Opppaaaaaaaaa ..." she mumbled, punctuated by giggles. Her arms flailed playfully, as if she were swaying with the wind.

"You're so handsome," she said, reaching out with wobbly affection and trying to pull me into a hug.

"Hey, hey, watch out," I replied, sidestepping her attempts and trying to keep things from getting awkward.

Suddenly, she shifted and nearly ended up in my lap, attempting to hug me and plant some kisses on my face.

I wrestled with her to keep things under control, knowing we still had a drama to shoot and I didn't want to make things uncomfortable between us.

Besides, I wasn't interested in her that way.

My days of carefree, no-strings-attached fun were behind me, and this wasn't the time or place for that. It wouldn't be right to take advantage of someone who's

clearly had too much to drink. And even though she was charming and fun, she wasn't the one on my mind these days.

After some effort, I finally got her settled back into her seat.

She pouted, clearly displeased with the adjustment.

Once I returned to the driver's seat and confirmed her address, the drive felt like the longest thirty minutes of my life.

When we arrived, I helped her inside and got her comfortably situated on the sofa, utterly exhausted but a little grateful that she lives alone—I didn't have the energy to deal with anyone else.

Looking at her sprawled out on the couch, I muttered, "You really should be more careful." I shook my head with a tired smile. "You're lucky I'm not the type to take advantage of a drunken mess."

She sighed softly in her sleep. "And you'd better show up on time tomorrow," I muttered again as I left her apartment, feeling like an overworked caretaker.

Back at my place, I rummaged through the fridge for a hangover remedy but found nothing that would ease my pounding headache.

I checked my phone again, but still no messages from Yumi.

Feeling a bit disheartened, I grabbed a soft drink and decided to call it a day—one of those days that definitely needed a "handle with care" sticker.

A few more days went by, filled with busy shooting schedules.

I chose to keep the drunken night from a few days ago out of conversation with the crew, maintaining a strictly professional attitude.

Min-hee seemed a bit embarrassed but avoided bringing it up as well.

I wasn't entirely sure how much she recalled from that evening.

Yumi and I exchanging few sporadic messages. But still, a small, petty part of me couldn't help but wonder if Yumi was avoiding me on purpose. Determined to get to the bottom of things, I decided to take matters into my own hands.

If she was too busy to meet me for dinner, then I'd just have to bring dinner to her.

"Are you available tonight? My grandmother sent me way too much home-cooked food, and I could use some help finishing it," I texted, hoping it didn't sound too much like a desperate plea. A few suspenseful minutes later, my phone buzzed with her reply.

"Sure, I'd love to have some home-cooked food! It's been forever!" she responded, throwing in her usual bear stickers and a dash of enthusiasm.

I felt a small victory. My clever ruse seemed to be working. I chuckled at the thought of us and our cupcake disaster another day. No wonder it has been too long since she last tasted a proper home-cooked meal.

After wrapping up my day, I headed over to Yumi's with a collection of containers filled with home-cooked food from my grandmother.

Ever since we lost Grandpa a few years back, Grandma had been on a mission to fill our lives with enough home-cooked dishes to last a lifetime.

Her cooking was legendary (as all grandmothers' cooking seems to be), and I couldn't wait to share some with Yumi.

Following a brief drive, I rang a doorbell that now seemed familiar. Yumi answered, once again wearing an oversized T-shirt that nearly engulfed her petite frame. Despite looking a little worn out, her smile remained as bright as ever. We shared some jokes while she reheated my grandmother's feast.

"Thank you for coming to my play the other day and for the flowers," she beamed, pointing to the large vase in her living room that filled the space with a fresh floral scent.

She looked radiant, and for a moment, I was caught off guard, managing only a shy smile.

I felt like a complete fool. It was like a switch had flipped, and I felt a jolt of something unfamiliar.

"Oh, and guess what?" she continued, her excitement bubbling over. "I've got an audition tomorrow for the lead role in a drama. And if I'm selected, I'll be starring opposite Ryan Kim."

"Oh?" I replied, intrigued. I'd seen Ryan Kim a few times at award ceremonies—he's a veteran actor in his late thirties with international acclaim, though I didn't know him personally.

She went on to explain the plot: a college campus love story between two medical students, one of whom is dealing with a chronic illness.

"You should totally go for it," I said, grinning with pride. "I'm sure you'll be amazing with him."

She gave me a skeptical look, trying to temper her excitement.

“Yeah, but who knows if I’ll even get the role,” she said, managing her expectations as she sipped the red wine I brought, alongside my grandmother’s food, making a bit of a face.

I joined her in drinking the wine and doodled absentmindedly on a scrap of paper I found nearby.

I drew a quick note that read, “Yumi, fighting!” with a cartoonish dog giving a thumbs-up.

Yumi peeked at my doodle, eyes widening in surprise. “Wow, I didn’t know you could draw like this!” she said, examining my artwork. “Is there anything you can’t do?”

I chuckled at her playful compliment. “Hmm, let me think...” I tapped my chin before taking another sip of the red wine. “I’m hopeless at playing the piano, and anything DIY-related is basically a disaster waiting to happen,” I confessed with a smirk.

“But I love drawing. Before I became an actor, I considered becoming a comic book illustrator.”

“Really?” she asked, her curiosity piqued. After a brief pause, she added, “But are you happy with your decision to pursue acting?”

I shrugged and replied, “The pay’s great, and the job is pretty varied—I never have to do the same thing two days in a row.

” I paused thoughtfully before adding, “But it does come with its drawbacks. It’s not the most stable job.

I can't be seen in public, can't even run my own errands, and sometimes I deal with overzealous fans.

Most of them are great, though. Oh, and I have to maintain my figure, which means I can't just eat whatever I want. ”

She smiled sympathetically. “Oh? So these aren't the usual foods you eat? What's on your regular menu then?”

“Salads, eggs, boiled chicken breast,” I said glumly. “Though I do allow myself a few cheat days a week.”

“That sounds awful,” she replied, wrinkling her nose.

She picked up some of my grandmother's food with her chopsticks, took a bite, and her eyes lit up with surprise. “This is... really good!” she said, her eyes practically sparkling. “You should try it too.” She then scooped up a bit of jangjorim and fed me.

For a moment, we both froze, realizing just how intimate that gesture was. We quickly scrambled to regain our composure, trying to distract ourselves with other tasks. I carried the various plates of my grandmother's home-cooked meal on the table, setting them down as if I were at home.

Back at the kitchen, I found her slicing fruit for dessert. “Can I grab some of your soju?” I asked, eyeing her fridge.

She gave me a skeptical look. “Wine and soju? Are you sure about that?”

I nodded with a sheepish grin, feeling a bit like an alcoholic. “Just one shot. It's what makes me unbeatable at Speed Racer Kart.”

“Alright, help yourself,” she said, shaking her head with a chuckle.

Before we knew it, we’d polished off my grandmother’s meal and plunged into a fiercely competitive Speed Racer Kart session.

I found myself feeling more tipsy than usual, and I shut my eyes for a moment.

When I opened them again, Yumi was nestled beside me on the sofa, also showing signs of being both tipsy and food-comatose.

Her head bobbed up and down like a bobblehead on a car dashboard.

I felt the warmth and the gentle tickle of her hair brushing against my shoulder as she rested her head there, adding a cozy and unexpected twist to the evening.

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Yumi

I woke up the next morning with a pounding headache and a stiff back—clear signs of having spent the night in a less-than-ideal position after too much alcohol.

It took me a few seconds to piece together where I was and, more importantly, who was snuggled up next to me on the sofa. One of his arms, pinned beneath my body, was wrapped snugly around my shoulders. The other arm rested on my head, as if it had been caressing my hair throughout the night.

I stifled a yelp as I gradually realized it was Ji-yong. His breathing slow and serene. My heart skipped a beat. Could it be that something happened last night that I couldn't remember?

I quickly checked our attire and felt a wave of relief as I saw that we were both fully clothed. So nothing had happened. Well, almost nothing—just some innocent sleeping and cuddling on the sofa. Like any two friends would. Right??? RIGHT???!

We had managed our past escapades at my place without much trouble, despite the small space of the studio apartment.

Ji-yong once crashed on the floor, and I just went to my bed to sleep.

On other occasions, he managed to drive home.

But last night felt different; it was as if some boundaries had been crossed.

I tried to wriggle free from our embrace, but it was impossible without waking him. My body stiffened as I noticed him beginning to stir and sigh, signaling he was waking up.

When his eyes finally met mine, he looked surprisingly calm. “Oh, hello,” he said casually, sitting up and stretching his arms. “My head hurts,” he groaned. I quickly got up and headed to the kitchen for some hangover remedy.

Returning with a fresh drink, I took in the sight of the living room: a mess from last night’s feast.

Ji-yong still looked tired and was rubbing his temples in an attempt to ease his headache.

I handed him the drink, and he took it gratefully, gulping it down quickly. Then he glanced at the watch on his wrist and exclaimed, “Oh no, I’m late for my shoot!” He dashed towards the bathroom, only to pop back out and ask, “Do you need to use the bathroom? I’ll be quick.”

I shook my head, still trying to process what had happened between us and how it all seemed so normal to him.

A few minutes later, he emerged from the bathroom, looking refreshed and flashing his million-dollar smile. “I feel a lot better,” he said. “I’ve got to run, but let’s hang out again soon?”

Let’s hang out again soon? I thought, slightly incredulous. I half expected him to start discussing the weather or traffic conditions.

But fine, if he wants to keep things casual, then I guess I'll just roll with it. After all, not much happened last night.

“Sure, see you next time.” I waved him off, attempting to act nonchalant. He gave me another dazzling smile and added, “Sorry I didn't help clean up. I'll make it up to you next time, I promise!” before hurrying out the door.

Once the little monkey playing a tambourine in my head finally quieted down, I shook my head to clear my thoughts. I dragged myself to clean the remaining mess at my living room before I groaned and collapsed in my bed.

I spent the rest of the day forcing myself to concentrate on the lines that I need to remember for the auditions of the new drama: ‘Hospital Emergency’.

Self-doubt crept in as I questioned if I truly had the range and talent to make it in this cutthroat industry long-term. Landing the lead in Princess of Cosmos had been a lucky break. Could I do it again or would I fade into oblivion as a one-hit wonder?

The next morning, the day of the audition, I shook off the lingering doubts as best as I could.

After a quick breakfast and a final review of my lines, I gathered my audition materials and headed to the casting office.

I checked my phone one last time and saw a message from Da-eun confirming my attendance and providing the address.

There was also a message from Ji-yong—a photo of a drawing featuring a bunny with its fists raised, accompanied by the word “You can do this!”

The small gesture brought a smile to my face and offered a tiny boost of courage,

even though I was still puzzled by his calm demeanor after what happened last night.

Navigating through the city was more challenging than expected. The streets were unusually crowded for a weekday morning, and I found myself inching along in a bit of traffic. Despite the delays, I arrived at the casting office on time—a sleek, imposing building that seemed to reach up to the sky.

Inside, the receptionist greeted me with a warm smile, though it did little to ease my nerves. I joined a string of other actresses in the lobby and tried to calm my racing mind by repeating my lines.

When my turn came, I walked into the audition room, feeling like it was my first day at a new school.

The panel of judges, including Ryan Kim himself, greeted me with polite nods.

Ryan Kim's presence was magnetic, exuding charisma and confidence as a seasoned veteran in the industry.

I introduced myself, my voice trembling slightly despite my efforts to keep it steady.

As I began my performance, I poured my heart into the role, focusing on delivering a powerful and authentic portrayal. The room seemed to hold its breath as I finished, and for a moment, there was silence. Ryan Kim's approving nod gave me a sense of relief and validation.

After the audition, I left the building with a mix of exhaustion and cautious optimism. I had done everything I could, I thought. Now all I could do was wait and see how it unfolded.

By evening, impatience had me on edge. I paced around my apartment, occasionally

checking my phone in the hopes of seeing a message or call. Just as I was starting to give up on the day, my phone buzzed with an incoming call. I glanced at the screen and saw Da-eun's name.

"Hello?" I answered, trying to keep my voice steady and calm.

"Hi, Yumi. I just got off the phone with the casting director," Da-eun's voice crackled with excitement. "You're selected for the second round of auditions! Congratulations!"

My heart skipped a beat. I could hardly believe it. "Really? That's amazing news!"

"Absolutely," Da-eun confirmed, her tone upbeat. "The casting director was really impressed with your performance. They want to see more of you for the next round. I'll send you all the details soon."

As the call ended, I felt a surge of relief and elation—almost like I'd won a small lottery. The thought of moving on to the next stage gave me enough energy to rival a triple espresso. I jumped into preparation mode, poring over my lines with newfound zeal.

I stared at my phone, contemplating whether to text Ji-yong with the news.

After all, I didn't want to jinx my chances by broadcasting my excitement too soon.

In the end, I decided to hold off on sending the update, fearing that even mentioning it might somehow mess with my good fortune.

Instead, I channeled all my nervous energy into rehearsing, hoping that my enthusiasm didn't come off as just an overly caffeinated frenzy.

The next few days flew by, falling into a rhythm that felt both oddly comforting and increasingly hopeful.

Each day seemed to carry a bit more promise than the last, as I advanced to the final chemistry read and the long-awaited announcement finally came—it was like hitting the jackpot; I had been selected for the lead role!

I managed to keep my excitement in check, refraining from an over-the-top victory dance.

Instead, I graciously thanked the audition crew for their decision and dove into a detailed discussion with the new PD about the shooting schedule and arrangements.

Da-eun was by my side the entire time, nodding thoughtfully, jotting down important details, and throwing in a few well-timed questions.

It felt surreal but incredibly satisfying to see everything falling into place.

A wave of nostalgia washed over me as I thought back to the last time I was selected for a lead role. I remembered the exhilaration of working with Ji-yong and how his easygoing nature made me feel as though I'd known him for ages, even though we'd only just met.

In comparison, my interactions with Ryan Kim so far had been more like bumping into someone at a bus stop. We exchanged a few words, but his aloofness and constant phone-staring made him seem more like a distant cousin who'd rather text than chat.

As if sensing the chilly vibe (but not enough to make them second-guess their decision, I hoped), the PD and the main writer suggested a short ice-breaking session in a private meeting room.

I trailed behind Ryan, struggling to keep up with his long-legged stride.

The sense of dread in my stomach was as persistent as my desire to message Ji-yong for a little emotional support.

I instinctively reached for my phone but quickly reminded myself that personal stuff could wait until after work.

As we entered the meeting room, the cold atmosphere hit me like a blast of icy wind.

Ryan flopped onto the sofa with the grace of someone who had clearly done this many times before, and without so much as a nod in my direction, settled in comfortably.

He seemed to have mistaken this ice-breaking session for a nap time.

After a few seconds of hesitation, I settled down in front of him, the coffee table between us. I heard a scoff from Ryan's end. "I think this is a waste of time," he muttered.

Uncertain of how to respond, I let out a nervous chuckle. "Well, I don't. I'd love to get to know you better. Ever wondered what it's like to play the opposite of your cool, aloof self?" I asked, trying to lighten the mood with a touch of humor.

He glanced at me with a look that suggested he was more interested in the dust particles floating in the sunlight than in my question. "Not really," he replied, his tone as chill as the room.

Undeterred, I decided to give it another shot.

"So, we should probably get to know each other a bit, right? What's your favorite

way to chill out after a day of shooting?

” I almost asked about his zodiac sign, like Ji-yong did with me when we first talked, but it didn’t seem like the right move with Ryan.

He glanced at me quickly, his expression momentarily shifting. “I usually just watch some documentaries or...” He paused, fixing me with an intense gaze as if trying to gauge my reaction, then added with a peculiar smile, “Spend time with girls.”

Given his TV persona—charming lead, occasional comedian, and always quick-witted—his off-screen demeanor was a stark contrast. Moreover, from what I found out online, he’s actually engaged to a well-known actress, which made his comment seem out of place.

I made an effort to mask my disappointment. Perhaps he was just having an off day.

I raised an eyebrow and tilted my head, giving him a look that clearly said, “Seriously?” It was as if he’d thrown a curveball in a game I didn’t even know we were playing.

Before he could respond further, the PD and the main writer burst into the room, carrying a stack of papers and wearing expressions of eager anticipation.

“Alright, let’s kick off this ice-breaking session,” the PD announced, completely unaware of the small but significant thawing of tension that had just occurred.

As they set up, I couldn’t help but wonder if this was going to be an ice-breaking session or an ice-breaking disaster.

After a few moments, some other actors for supporting roles were called into the room to join the ice-breaking session, and the tension gradually subsided. Ryan

visibly brightened up in front of the PD and the rest of the cast, looking much more upbeat.

The day wrapped up with a round of applause and a few more announcements about the shooting schedule. We were set to begin filming within less than a month, mostly in a studio that would be remodeled into a hospital in downtown Seoul.

The tight timeline left me feeling weary, as it didn't leave much room for extra line practice. And the prospect of working closely with Ryan, who now seemed less endearing, wasn't exactly comforting.

I drove home, feeling the urge to unload all my concerns on Da-eun or Ji-yong. However, I kept my worries to myself for now and focused on the fact that I'd been chosen once again for a lead role in a major drama. I should be grateful for that.

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Ji-yong

On a rare day where I didn't have a jam-packed schedule (just a quick photoshoot for a luxury apparel brand I'm the face of), I decided to drop by my grandmother's place for an afternoon tea.

She lives in Suwon, a satellite city just outside of Seoul, so it was quite easy to reach her place with a one-hour ride.

After the short drive, I rang her doorbell, holding a cake that my manager, Sangwook, had helped me pick out.

Knowing her sweet tooth, I was sure she'd be delighted with my gift.

"Halmeoni, hello!" I greeted her with a warm hug, barely containing my excitement.

Visiting her felt like walking down memory lane: school vacations at her house were the best—running through alleys with my brother Ji-sung, engaging in epic "gang fights" with the neighborhood kids, trying to snag the best Monstera cards, and inevitably hearing my grandmother's booming voice at the end of the day, calling us back inside for dinner.

Grandma reached out for a hug. "Ji-yong, it looks like you've grown taller since my last visit!"

” As usual, she playfully “complained” about my increasing height.

I grinned, ready for our well-worn exchange.

“Must be all the delicious food you keep sending me,” I joked, knowing full well it’s her way of showing love.

Stepping into her house felt like stepping into a time capsule.

The old radio was still in its corner, crackling away like it was auditioning for a role in a vintage radio drama.

The TV, with its bulging screen, looked like it had been borrowed from a museum exhibit, and the stack of newspapers, complete with a magnifying glass, seemed more like a set piece from a retro detective show than actual reading material.

I couldn’t help but chuckle at the sight. The house had clearly been stuck in a time warp since the 80s. The decor was almost untouched since my childhood. Even the old armchair, where I was about to plop down, seemed to have a permanent indentation from years of use.

Standing there, I wondered about Grandma’s daily routine.

Did she still spend her afternoons listening to that ancient radio, trying to decode the static like it was Morse code?

And was she using the magnifying glass to scrutinize every newspaper article, or was it just a clever way to avoid getting up for a new pair of reading glasses?

I hoped she wasn’t feeling too lonely since Grandpa passed away. Although she had a circle of friends and stayed active, I still worried about her being alone, especially

with all her children and grandchildren having such busy schedules.

Despite that, she was as spry as ever. I waved the cake at her like it was a prize before placing it on the table, right next to the mountain of empty containers from the last time she sent me a food shipment.

Her eyes sparkled with delight when she saw the cake. At 85 years old, she's a petite dynamo with a no-nonsense attitude that could rival any drill sergeant. Though she might look like the quintessential kind and gentle grandmother, her tongue is sharp enough to slice through any pretense.

"The cake looks delicious," she said, hurrying to the kitchen counter to boil water for tea. "And you finished my food faster than usual! Did you enjoy it with someone?" Her instincts were as sharp as ever.

"Maybe I did," I replied with a grin. "The jangjorim was especially delicious." I smiled, recalling how Yumi had gushed about it.

Grandma tapped my arm affectionately as she took the first bite of the cake. "Ji-yong ah, food is meant to be enjoyed together. It's great to hear you have someone to share it with."

"You know," she continued, "I don't understand what's up with the younger generation nowadays. You all have stopped procreating and now prefer to live solitary lives."

"Halmeoni!" I yelped at her remark about procreating, feeling the heat rise in my cheeks. It was definitely not a topic I wanted to discuss with my grandmother. She let out a soft "tsk," seemingly unimpressed with my prudish attitude.

"It's true," she said. "When I was your age, I already had three children and a fourth

on the way.” She gazed around her living room, as if reminiscing about the past. “You all think too much nowadays, with too many distractions. Ji-yong ah, if you meet someone special, just marry her already. You’re not getting any younger. ”

I choked on my tea. Here we go again, my grandmother’s favorite discussion topic. I ate the cake in silence, trying to focus on it so I wouldn’t have to respond. “Your brother Ji-sung is already married with a kid. You’re good-looking and nice too. I’m sure you’ll have no trouble finding a wife.”

I nodded awkwardly, pretending to check my watch. “Ooh, look at the time, I have an appointment I can’t miss. I need to run now.”

But Grandma saw right through my charade.

“I know I’m just an annoying grandma to you, but I just want to see you happy, Ji-yong.

Don’t work too hard.” She tapped my hand again before diving into her fridge to pull out the next batch of homemade food.

“Take this and enjoy it with your ‘friend’, okay?” she said with a wink.

“Thank you, Halmeoni.” I accepted the container, full of my favorite homemade food. “And you’re never annoying to me.” I pulled her close with my free arm and gave her shoulder a light squeeze. “I’ll come visit again to return your container,” I promised.

“Right,” she mentioned, “Ji-ho’s birthday is in few months, so we’ll see each other then. But come visit me any time before that, okay?”

I nodded, waved goodbye, and stepped outside, wondering what else to do with my

free time. As I walked to my car, I chuckled, thinking about Grandma's relentless concern for my love life. Maybe she had a point, or maybe she was just bored. Either way, I had a lot to think about.

My phone buzzed with a new message, waking me from the accidental nap I had taken on the sofa. I glanced at the screen and saw several messages from my mom, all about the surprise birthday party we were planning for my nephew Ji-ho in a few months.

A chuckle escaped me. My mom could be such a drama queen sometimes—or maybe she was feeling a bit bored like Grandma.

Ji-ho's birthday wasn't for another two months, yet she was already knee-deep in planning and discussing every detail.

I wondered what more there was to plan for a 2-year-old's party.

After all, how much excitement and fanfare can a toddler really handle?

But I tried to sympathize with her. With my busy shooting schedule and my big brother Ji-sung working at a military base in Pyeongtaek, along with his family, we didn't have many opportunities for family gatherings. I should check in with her more, I thought to myself.

Not long after, my phone buzzed again. A quick swipe revealed Min-hee's name.

Wrong person, I thought with a wistful smile, trying to manage my disappointment.

I opened the message anyway and read her invitation for dinner with other actors at a trendy rooftop restaurant.

I considered the offer but politely declined, citing my exhaustion.

I felt like an old geezer for passing up a socializing opportunity.

Determined to blow off some steam and make up for missed workout sessions, I decided to do a few pull-ups on the bar I'd installed at home. I counted to twenty before hearing my phone buzz again. I hurried over to check, and this time it was Yumi.

I beamed at my phone screen as I read her message detailing her first few days of shooting, but it wasn't all good news. She recounted her endless blunders and the nervousness she felt working with her new colleagues, especially Ryan.

She tried to lighten the mood with self-deprecating humor. "I tripped over a cable and almost took Ryan down with me. He looked at me like I'd just set the place on fire," she wrote. "And don't even get me started on how I called the PD 'sir' by mistake. Twice."

I frowned at the text. She seemed a bit tense these last few days, and I really wished I could be there to help ease her nerves.

The earlier conversation with my grandma about procreating popped into my mind again.

Do I have someone in my life that I'd like to procreate with?

How long has it been since I even attempted to procreate ? I realized it's been quite a while.

I dated fellow actresses once in a blue moon, considering we were both in the same line of work. We all understand the challenge of juggling a script and a camera while

keeping certain aspects of our lives hidden despite laying everything else on the table.

It's been years since I last saw someone, but it wasn't anything serious, and we kept it a secret, never releasing it to the press.

Life as an actor isn't as glamorous as it seems; my busy schedule leaves little room for personal matters, and I'm always on edge about who I can fully trust. I've witnessed too many actors and actresses have their careers derailed by blackmail, false accusations, or similar issues from current or former partners—it's a real nightmare.

My mind then wandered to Yumi... With her, it's different. I don't feel like I need to second-guess myself, and I'm never on edge. Time spent with her is always easy and enjoyable, reminiscent of the carefree, innocent days of my childhood, filled with laughter.

And something did happen during our last meet-up.

My mind keeps drifting back to us cuddling the entire night on her sofa.

Oddly enough, it feels quite natural to me, almost like it was something I should have expected.

I haven't brought it up with her yet because I don't want to make things awkward, especially given how nervous she can be. I'm trying to play it cool.

I leaned back on the sofa, a thoughtful smile crossing my face as I typed a quick reply. "Sounds like a tough day, but I'm sure you handled it like a pro."

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Then, a lightbulb flickered in my mind. Instead of just offering words of advice, why not take action?

“Come over to my place for dinner; I might have some samgyupsal,” I typed out and hit send.

I stared at my phone, knowing Yumi well enough to bet that a pork belly BBQ would be hard for her to resist. And it seemed like a good way to show support beyond just words. Plus, I’d really like to see her again.

The only hiccup was that it was a little past 9 PM, and I needed someone to pick up the samgyupsal. I glanced at the clock and frowned.

Time for a rescue mission.

I dialed my manager, Sangwook, hoping he could come through with the task of finding and fetching samgyupsal.

Sangwook grumbled over the phone, “This morning you asked me to bring you a cake, and now samgyupsal? Are you mistaking me for a food delivery service?” Nonetheless, he managed to drop off the samgyupsal just before Yumi arrived.

He didn’t seem to be in the best mood, as evidenced by his (hopefully) joking comment: “This isn’t exactly in my job description, but here you go, Ji-yong-ssi”—with an extra emphasis on “ssi.” Despite this, I genuinely appreciate my manager; without him, I’d probably be hopelessly disorganized.

I rushed to find the indoor BBQ grill, the one I'd received as a Christmas gift that lets you grill with minimal smoke and odor, just as I heard the doorbell ring.

“Samgyupsal?” was the first thing Yumi said upon entering, almost as if it were her greeting. I couldn't help but laugh at her eagerness. As usual, she looks cute in a simple blue knee-length dress with a fitted bodice and a sweetheart neckline.

I welcomed her in, and she seemed genuinely intrigued by my sleek apartment.

I like my place, situated on the top floor of a skyscraper.

It featured two rooms—one for myself and one as a guestroom—a kitchen, a spacious bathroom with a bathtub, a living room adorned with a few designer touches, and an outdoor patio offering a stunning view of the Namsan Tower.

The panoramic vista of shimmering skyscrapers was truly breathtaking.

“Your apartment is so beautiful,” she remarked as I continued showing her around. “But it's missing a personal touch... it feels more like a hotel room than a place where someone actually lives.” She immediately seemed to regret her words, glancing back to gauge my reaction.

I chuckled to reassure her that I didn't take it personally. “You think so? I do have some personal items, but I prefer to keep them hidden. Let me show you...” I opened a large white cupboard in the living room and pulled out a few photo albums, handing one to her.

She settled onto the cream sofa next to the cupboard and eagerly flipped through the album.

“You haven't changed much since you were a kid!

” she said with a laugh. “Is this your grandma who makes the amazing jangjorim?” She pointed to a photo of me as a toddler, sitting on a woman’s lap and clapping my hands.

I nodded. “Yes, that’s my grandma. I actually saw her today.” I then told her about how my grandma had been urging me about procreation, and Yumi laughed heartily, her eyes forming that perfect ‘n’ shape once again.

“Your family sounds like a lot of fun,” Yumi said with a thoughtful smile. “You’re lucky to have such a close-knit family.”

There was a brief pause before I asked softly, “Do you have any family nearby?”

She gave me a wistful look. “I have an aunt, an uncle, and two cousins... but they don’t live close, and we’ve never been very close. So...” She shrugged. “Maybe I should think about procreation too,” she added with a wide grin, trying to lighten the mood.

Then her eyes lit up as if a lightbulb had switched on. “I’ve got an idea! Let’s try out one of those dating apps that everyone’s talking about.”

My stomach dropped upon her remarks. “Dating apps...?” I scoffed in disbelief on her absurd idea.

“Yes! Just try it for fun. Aren’t you curious about the single people around you and who might be matched with you through technology and algorithms?”

Well, I AM curious about the person right in front of me, and I don’t need technology or algorithms to tell me how desperately I want to kiss her right here and now.

I startled at my own thought. The intensity of my feelings caught me off guard, and I

wondered if she could sense the turmoil within me. My heart pounded in my chest, and I could feel my cheeks warming.

She looked at me, her eyes reflecting a mixture of curiosity and something else I couldn't quite place.

For a moment, the world seemed to narrow down to just the two of us, the background noise fading away.

I took a deep breath, trying to steady myself, but my thoughts kept racing. Was she feeling the same way?

My mind flashed back to all the moments we had shared—the cozy cuddle on the sofa, the cupcake fiasco, the laughter and teasing, and all those little gestures that seemed to carry more meaning than they should.

Everything was adding up to something bigger, something I couldn't ignore.

And at that moment, the urge to kiss her became almost unbearable.

She extended her hand, pointing at my phone. I sighed but handed it over, intrigued by where this might lead.

She swiftly downloaded the app and began setting up a profile for me, murmuring as she confirmed the details.

“Height? Let's see... maybe 1.85 meters.

” She scanned me from top to bottom to confirm.

“Likes and dislikes? Hmm, likes: drawing, spicy food, and joking around. Dislikes?

What don't you like? ”

“Nosy people,” I said sarcastically, adding a laugh to show I was joking.

“Let's just write... scary movies and DIY projects,” she decided, looking satisfied with her work. We then reviewed my photos and uploaded a few—some from professional shoots and others just for fun.

Before long, we started swiping left and right on various profiles, commenting on them with a mix of humor. After a few minutes, the app made a ‘ding’ sound, signaling a match. Not just that, but my ‘match’ had already sent a message.

But instead of seeing some nice messages as I had hoped, we clicked on the message and saw: “How dare you use Ryu Ji-yong's photo for your profile, you creep! I'll report you.”

I exchanged a look with Yumi, and we both burst into laughter.

Before we could even send a reply, she had already blocked my profile.

More messages with similar tones followed, accusing me of having a fake profile.

Soon enough, we received a notification that my account had been temporarily banned.

We laughed like hyenas until our sides ached.

“See what you did there...” I managed to say between fits of laughter. “Now I'll never find someone to procreate with.”

We laughed some more, and I teased her about creating a dating app profile for her

too.

Considering the time, though, I moved to the kitchen to prepare the samgyupsal.

It cooked up quickly, and I served it with warm rice and fresh salads for wrapping.

We finished the meal swiftly on my patio, enjoying the warm start of summer with a couple of beers.

Yumi yawned and shifted deeper into her seat, looking cozy. “Mm, that was really good,” she said with a satisfied smile. “But I should head home soon. I have a shoot tomorrow, and... it’s my first kissing scene with Ryan.” She suddenly looked a bit anxious.

Jealousy sparked in my veins, and I blurted out without thinking, “You know... since we’ve done that before,” I began, standing up and leaning against the wall on the patio.

“Yes?” she responded, unsure.

I chuckled nervously, absentmindedly tousled my hair while striving to keep my tone relaxed. I felt a mix of nerves and excitement about what was about to unfold.

“I could help you practice,” I suggested, a playful grin spreading across my face, hoping I didn’t come off like the creep I’d just been accused of being on the dating app.

??

Yumi

My heart was practically doing jumping jacks as I rang the doorbell at Ji-yong's place.

It was my first visit to his home, and I was more than a little curious to see if we'd discuss the "incident" from our last meet-up.

When he opened the door, there he was—tall, handsome, and seemingly perfect in every way.

He smelled great, and his figure was so broad it almost blocked the entire doorway. I remembered playfully complaining on the Princess of Cosmos set about his towering height, joking with the crew that I always needed to be on tiptoe just to have a normal conversation with him.

"Samgyupsal?" was all I could manage to say as I tried to mask my swirling emotions. He welcomed me and quickly gave me a tour of his immaculately tidy and luxurious apartment—so pristine that it made my own place seem shabby and left me feeling embarrassed about the social gap between us.

I couldn't help but wonder why we hadn't spent more time at his place. The apartment was so spotless it felt as though it had been cleaned by a compulsive neat freak.

Before long, we found ourselves entangled in a series of comic misadventures.

He mentioned his day visiting his grandmother, as if being tall and handsome weren't enough, he also played the "affectionate grandson" card.

Then I ended up setting up a dating app profile for him, only to be met with rejection from women who refused to believe that the real Ji-yong was behind the screen.

We enjoyed the samgyupsal and beer on his magnificent patio, with a stunning view of Namsan Tower. The night was great, despite the lack of discussion about the "incident." I chose not to mention it to avoid making things awkward between us.

But I had no idea that the night was about to take an even more unexpected turn.

Just as I was preparing to head home—tomorrow was a big shooting day for me with a kissing scene scheduled with Ryan (ugh!)—Ji-yong suddenly stood up, leaned against the wall, and looked every bit the charming rogue he portrayed in our drama.

"You know," he began, his gaze intense and lips slightly parted, "since we've done that before..."

I raised an eyebrow, my curiosity piqued but my stomach in knots. "Yes?" I replied, uncertain about where this was going.

He chuckled, casually ruffling his hair in that signature Ryu Ji-yong style—as if what he was about to say next wasn't going to shatter the tenuous peace we had established between us. "I could help you practice," he said with an impish grin.

I blinked, my mind scrambling to process his words, and stammered out the only word that came to mind: "What...?"

“I mean, we could just visualize the camera angles and practice staging and blocking—without actually kissing ,” he suggested, guiding me back into his living room.

My heart raced at the speed of light at his suggestion.

I became acutely aware of how full his lips were and how pleasantly they had felt against mine the last time we kissed on-screen.

I couldn’t help but wonder how it would feel if our kiss deepened, if our tongues intertwining in a passionate whirl, and perhaps if we even taking turns nibbling gently on our upper and lower lips. A flush of warmth crept up my cheeks.

With just the two of us in his apartment, high up in the tower and free from the distractions and barriers of a dozens of film crew, my R-rated imaginings felt strikingly plausible.

“So... imagine the camera is here and the light is here ,” Ji-yong continued as he positioned two of his floor lamps.

I found myself let out a soft chuckle, as I was instantly reminded of those chilly winter nights on set, where we had to lock lips repeatedly to perfect the scene.

He guided me, placing my hands at the back of his neck, and I quickly fell into the familiar choreography. Except this time, it felt real.

My breath trembled as he drew his face closer to mine, his breath softly tickling my cheek. I closed my eyes, brimming with anticipation.

“Right, I think this angle will work,” he whispered, his lips just a few millimeters from mine. I opened my eyes in disbelief, feeling a pang of disappointment as I

watched him pull away, creating a small distance between us, as if giving me a chance to back out if I wanted to.

“Ji-yong... I...”

But before I could finish, he moved again, closing the distance between us, and his lips were finally on mine—soft yet demanding.

I melted into his embrace, kissing him back with equal fervor.

Everything I had imagined just moments ago came to life: his tongue deepened the kiss, his hand caressed my cheek, guiding us into a hotter, open-mouthed kiss.

Just as quickly as it began, it ended. He pulled back, his expression a mix of longing and frustration. “So, you do feel something.”

“Of course I do,” I admitted softly. “But—”

He didn’t let me finish. Instead, he kissed me again, murmuring my name softly as his hand explored my neck, sending delicious tingles of desire across my skin.

Before long, we were settled on his sofa, with me straddling his lap. My mind went blank as I surrendered to the intense desire building within me. I kissed him deeply—nothing could stop us now—and I felt his hand exploring under my dress.

“I’ve been dreaming about this,” he whispered in my ear, his lips trailing kisses along my neck and softly caressing it with his tongue. “While we were filming, I wished I could do all of this with you.” His hand gave a gentle squeeze, eliciting a soft moan from me as I craved more.

There was no turning back now; all lines had been crossed and we were too far gone.

I thought to myself, ‘To hell with consequences—this feels too good!’

Though not entirely inexperienced in intimate matters, this moment with Ji-yong felt like a new level of ecstasy. Compared to past experiences, tonight felt like a revelation, as if a blind person had finally seen. Every sense was heightened.

I breathed heavily as my hand mirrored his, trailing down his shirt. Anticipation surged through me as his fingers ventured to unfasten my bra. Growing bolder, I unbuttoned one of his shirt buttons, rewarded by his encouraging smirk.

As I unbuttoned the rest of his shirt, he finally managed to remove my bra, letting it fall carelessly to the floor. With my dress lifted, his lips began to explore my breasts. I moaned audibly at the first touch of his tongue, a shiver of anticipation running through me.

He paused, his hand enveloping my breast completely, and looked into my eyes. “Do you like that?” he asked.

I could only nod in response, overwhelmed by the sensations. Seeing my reaction, he grinned and resumed his kisses and gentle nibbles.

“Ji-yong!” I gasped, nearly overwhelmed by the waves of pleasure he was stirring within me.

“Yes, my dear?” he replied, his smile slow and mischievous, like a cat savoring its prey.

Not yet—not now. He’s all mine tonight, I thought. And I wanted all of him.

Instead of replying, I returned his kisses, descending to his neck, then moving to his abs, my fingers exploring his toned muscles. I smiled victoriously as I heard him

moaning incoherent phrases.

Suddenly, he stood up, carrying me effortlessly to his room as if I were weightless. He gently placed me on his bed and positioned himself carefully on top of me, continuing to place delicious kisses on my mouth, neck, and breasts.

He pulled down the rest of my undergarments, leaving me completely bare.

His breaths grew heavy as his fingers traced the sensitive area between my thighs, and I quivered in anticipation.

He caressed me gently before slipping one finger inside, and I heard him sigh softly.

As his finger moved inside me with a steady rhythm, he added a second finger, increasing the pace and hitting the right spot.

I moaned in response, approaching the edge of pleasure before I stopped him, pulling his fingers out.

My cheeks flushed red as I saw the moisture on his fingers, a clear sign of my desire.

He then guided my hand to feel his own arousal. It was hot, strong, and fully erect. He removed his undergarments, and I gasped at the sight of him; it seemed almost impossible.

He nodded encouragingly and opened his nightstand drawer to retrieve a condom. Tearing it open with his teeth, he carefully donned it. I waited in eager anticipation as he guided himself towards me.

He started by gently inserting the tip, moving very slowly. Noticing my trembling breaths, he asked softly, "Do you want me to stop?"

I gave him a look that said he was being ridiculous—like offering me a delicious cake and then halting the spoon just inches from my mouth.

“Got it,” he grinned, and with that, he entered fully inside me. Our bodies connected, and he began to move rhythmically, sending waves of sensation through me. I tightened my grip on his back, lost in the growing desire for him.

He seemed to know exactly what he was doing.

Even when we were both lost in our desires, he attentively checked on me, carefully assessing my needs before gently pulling me back onto his lap, allowing me to feel all of him.

I moaned at the sensations and moved in a steady rhythm, sending waves of pleasure through him.

He laid me down on the bed again and withdrew from me, leaving me with a sudden sense of emptiness. However, his reassuring smile soon comforted me as he began touching me again, his hand moving expertly, with two fingers caressing me until I nearly cried out with pleasure.

Just as I was on the brink of climax, he replaced his fingers with himself, and we both reached the peak of ecstasy together. I gasped, feeling his weight as he remained on top of me. “What was that...?” I managed to ask, blinking in disbelief at the magic that had just unfolded in his room.

I had never felt such a profound release before. Ji-yong seemed either like a magician or a master of his craft.

He grinned, looking tired but satisfied, as he shifted to lie beside me. “It was us... together.” He pulled me close, as if reluctant to let go of the warmth and connection

we had just shared.

Suddenly, I found myself understanding all the poets' musings about the lengths one might go for love—why Paris, the Trojan prince, chose to abduct Helen despite knowing it would lead to war.

Ji-yong blinked at me, and just as I thought he was about to say something profound, he casually remarked with a mischievous smile, "So... we were just attempting to procreate."

I laughed heartily at his comment, admiring how Ji-yong could lighten the mood with a single phrase.

Once the laughter died down, I realized something a bit embarrassing. "My hair smells like samgyupsal," I said, sniffing it with a hint of awkwardness.

"Mine too," Ji-yong replied, grinning as he tried to sniff his own hair. "But who doesn't love the smell of samgyupsal? Maybe we should find a way to bottle it and sell it as a perfume," he suggested with a playful laugh, returning to the easygoing Ji-yong I knew.

He then led me to his bathroom, where we took turns freshening up and shared a few more tender moments before heading back to his room. We fell asleep quickly, our hands wrapped tightly around each other, enjoying the closeness and warmth we had just shared.

The next morning, reality hit me like a ton of bricks. Even though Ji-yong was still soundly asleep beside me (thankfully, he doesn't snore), I suddenly realized two things: I was incredibly late for my shoot, and we hadn't had the "talk" yet.

In some parts of the world, after a shared intimate moment, people might just get a

silent, mutual understanding about their relationship without needing to label it.

But in Korea, relationships are more formal, so it's important to define them clearly, ideally before any intimacy—though that's a bit late for Ji-yong and me.

Plus, it's hard to be straightforward between us; Ji-yong is one of the most well-established stars in the country, while I'm just starting out, which complicates things further.

Trying to set my feelings aside, I quickly grabbed my clothes and had to recycle yesterday's outfit. I hoped the lingering scent of samgyupsal wouldn't be too obvious and dashed to his bathroom, using his toothpaste as a makeshift mouthwash.

Before long, he joined me in the bathroom, still groggy and rummaging through his cabinet.

He offered me a new toothbrush and, with a sleepy yawn, tried to pull me into a hug.

I brushed my teeth, returned his brief embrace before quickly saying goodbye and rushing to my car, driving full speed to the studio.

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Ji-yong

The beginning of the day seemed unusually bright—not to the point of rainbows or birds singing to me, but almost.

“Hello, Min-hee! Hi, Chungho! How are you, Sangwook?” I practically skipped on my way to the studio, earning some bizarre looks as everyone observed my overly cheerful behavior.

Sangwook moved in closer and whispered, “The samgyupsal really worked, huh?” I just nodded silently with a wide grin. Okay, maybe I needed to tone down my chirpiness, but I couldn’t help it—I felt incredibly happy this morning, like something special had just begun.

My mind wandered to what happened with Yumi the night before, and a sheepish grin formed on my face. I suddenly felt like a teenager again. And it wasn’t just the act of procreation—it was something different, something special.

I tried to focus on my work, but the flashbacks from yesterday kept intruding. Her eagerness, her touch, and the sounds she made when I touched her in the right spot kept replaying in my mind.

I know I need to talk to her and ask her to be my girlfriend—there’s no doubt about that.

But it has to be special. Maybe an elaborate dinner with a bouquet of flowers?

Or why not a secret getaway to another country where no one recognizes me, and we can visit museums, amusement parks, and see movies—just the two of us?

Nah, let's not go overboard with it. It sounds great, but our schedules won't allow it. I kept making plans in my head while following the crew to prepare for the day's shooting.

Suddenly, being close to Min-hee, even though it's just acting, didn't feel right.

“Ji-yong, this is the fourth time we've had to retake this scene.

Please concentrate,” the PD chimed in, looking increasingly impatient.

Min-hee gave me a look that seemed to say, “Yo, what's up with you today?

” I shook my head, trying to regain my focus instead of wondering how Yumi was doing with that jerk Ryan and if I should invite her over again tonight to my place.

“Let's meet at this restaurant tonight?” I excitedly texted Yumi a few hours before the end of my shoot.

I shared the restaurant address and instructions for her arrival so she could be guided into the private room.

Once I received her positive response, I grinned and quickly texted Sangwook for another favor.

The day dragged on, and the difficult shooting conditions weren't helping.

It was exceptionally hot in the studio, and everyone seemed more short-fused than usual.

Both Min-hee and I fumbled in front of the green screen, trying to convincingly portray lovers against a backdrop of an isolated countryside that would be added in post-production.

We needed to shoot another kissing scene, but I felt very uncomfortable. A pang of guilt hit me for kissing someone who wasn't Yumi, especially after what happened last night with her—even though it was just acting.

I knew I had to stay professional; this is part of my job.

Actors receive a script, and we act it out, no questions asked (well, sometimes we do have questions or suggestions, but generally, altering the script isn't our role).

I made sure my lips barely touched Min-hee's, only doing what was absolutely necessary.

As the day wore on with more and more takes, I worried we might have to work overtime, jeopardizing my dinner plans with Yumi. Thankfully, the shoot ended just an hour later than planned. Though I couldn't go home to freshen up, at least I wouldn't be late for our dinner.

I glanced at the seat next to me in my car, satisfied with the large bucket of flowers (mostly roses with some cosmos flowers as our personal touch) that I (or rather, Sangwook) had picked up for Yumi.

Tonight, I planned to ask her to be my girlfriend. I drove to the upscale rooftop restaurant, excitement bubbling inside me.

Upon arrival, I put on my mask and rode the elevator to the 47th floor. Being a Friday night, the restaurant was busier than usual. I greeted the hostess with a nod and handed her my name card. She glanced at it, nodded, and began to guide me to the VIP room.

Just a few steps in, someone tapped my shoulder. I turned around in surprise.

One of my worst fears had materialized—someone had recognized me in public despite my mask.

“Ji-yong, is that you?” a deep male voice called out.

I turned to see an old family friend, the renowned abstract painter Uncle Sung-hoon.

“Oh, hello, Uncle Sung-hoon,” I said, with no choice but to greet him with a polite bow while keeping my mask on. “Long time no see!”

He laughed, his distinctive high-pitched laugh drawing curious glances from nearby tables.

“Ji-yong, how are your parents? I should catch up with them; it’s been ages!” he boomed. “And how rude of me, sorry. This is my Hye-jin.” The young woman beside him, looking awkward, nodded and gave a small bow. She must be Uncle Sung-hoon’s latest wife. The third? Maybe the fourth?

I extended my hand to greet her. A creeping panic began to set in as more heads turned our way, their curiosity piqued by the commotion.

“Hye-jin is a big fan of yours!” Uncle Sung-hoon announced, rubbing his chin as he tried to remember the title of the drama. “She always watched your shows. What was the last one? Princess... something...?” Hye-jin, standing beside him, remained silent

and looked slightly embarrassed.

Uncle Sung-hoon then glanced at the bouquet of flowers I was holding and continued, his voice rising despite his attempt at a whisper, “Oh, are you here for a special occasion?” He leaned in closer, but his booming voice made it less of a whisper and more of a loud murmur, “With your girlfriend ?!”

His high-pitched laugh followed, and I felt the weight of the situation. Eyes around us were now fixed in our direction, and murmurs of recognition started to spread.

“Is that really Ryu Ji-yong? My daughter would die to meet him!” one person exclaimed.

“Oh, I should get his autograph!” another added.

As a small crowd began to form and some people started taking photos, I tried to remain calm and polite.

Unfortunately, the evening seemed to be unraveling quickly.

Just then, I saw Yumi walk in. Her eyes widened in surprise, and although she was wearing a mask, she quickly made a beeline for the exit, clearly understanding the situation’s gravity.

The crowd around us grew larger, with some people posing for photos and others snapping away with their phones, even making video calls to show off their celebrity sighting.

A few respectful ones asked, “May I take a picture with you?” but many others were more intrusive, capturing every moment and adding to the chaos.

The scene quickly escalated into a chaotic whirlwind. As I attempted to navigate through the throng of fans, my mind raced. My initial plan for a romantic dinner with Yumi was slipping through my fingers like sand.

Uncle Sung-hoon, oblivious to the growing crowd's impact, continued his loud and enthusiastic commentary. "Ji-yong, you're always so humble about your work! I remember when you were just starting out. Look at you now!" His voice boomed, further attracting attention.

Hye-jin, still by his side, gave me an apologetic smile, clearly uncomfortable with the situation. Despite her unease, she seemed to be caught in the same wave of excitement and curiosity as everyone else.

I turned my attention back to the sea of faces.

With every flash of a camera and every shout for an autograph, the restaurant's ambiance grew more strained.

The staff, though professional, looked overwhelmed.

A few waiters attempted to manage the crowd, but their efforts were no match for the sheer number of people clamoring for a glimpse.

In the midst of this, I managed to check on my phone and saw text from Yumi, "I'll wait for you at your place?" and "I hope you'll get home safely." With a winking emoji.

With a deep breath, I decided to address the crowd. I raised my hands to get their attention, calling out, "I'm sorry, everyone. I appreciate your enthusiasm, but I need to go. Please, let's respect everyone's privacy." I tried to sound as calm and composed as possible, though my heart was racing.

With a quick apology to the remaining diners and a hurried farewell to Uncle Sung-hoon, I practically fled the restaurant. My spirits were as deflated as the wilted bouquet I carried, and as I slid into my car, I felt frustrated that the evening had spiraled far beyond my control.

By the time I pulled into my driveway, I was completely drained.

The grueling hours at the studio, coupled with the unexpected chaos at the restaurant, had left me feeling both exhausted and defeated.

I regretted dismissing my bodyguards. Although I do have them, I naively believed that their presence would attract unwanted attention.

Most of the time, I thought they were only necessary for official events with large crowds.

I saw Yumi waiting patiently by my front door, her presence a beacon of relief in the dim light.

I couldn't help but lean in and press a soft kiss to her lips, seeking comfort in that simple gesture.

"I'm so sorry, Yumi," I murmured, my voice tinged with regret.

"I really wanted tonight to be special."

She shook her head gently, her understanding gaze easing my guilt. "It's okay. We can have dinner at the restaurant together next time," she assured me, her voice soothing as we stepped into my apartment.

She set down her things on the sofa with a casual grace that only made her more

endearing.

I handed her the flowers with an apologetic shrug. The bouquet had seen better days, but it was the thought that counted. “This is for you,” I said softly, feeling a pang of disappointment as I headed toward the fridge to fetch us some drinks.

Her eyes lit up as she accepted the flowers, and she inhaled their scent with a smile. “Cosmos flowers,” she noted, her eyes twinkling with delight. Her reaction warmed my heart, and I couldn’t resist leaning in for another tender kiss.

I soon offered her a couple of soft drinks, which she accepted with a grateful nod. As she wandered around my kitchen, she seemed to be formulating a plan. Her gaze swept over the cabinets and fridge, a playful sparkle in her eyes as she silently asked, “May I?”

I gave her a hesitant nod, unsure of what she might find. She opened the cabinet, and a puff of dust seemed to escape, revealing three packets of instant noodles that looked as forlorn as I felt. Unperturbed, she moved to the fridge, where she discovered a solitary pack of eggs on the top shelf.

But her eyes sparkled once she checked the bottom part of the fridge and turned to me with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

“Who needs a five-star restaurant dinner when we have food from your grandmother?!” she exclaimed, as if she’d found a hidden treasure.

I chuckled at her enthusiasm. She sure is easy to please.

And being with her feels like home. I took a mental note to make it up to her, maybe with a private island getaway so no one could bother us.

She waved at several food containers, seeking my approval, and I gave her a nod.

She then quickly moved to heat up the food from my grandmother while I excused myself to take a shower.

Not long after, we settled into what seemed to be our new routine: savoring dinner on my patio and sharing stories about our day.

I hesitated to pop the question and ask her to be my girlfriend, deciding instead to wait and plan for a more special occasion.

A small part of me, though, felt a twinge of fear.

It wasn't about my feelings for her, but about the possibility that making things official might diminish the magic between us.

I worried about the complications of public announcements and their potential impact on both of our careers, especially hers.

I pushed aside the thought for now and focused on the present. "Yumi, is there something special you'd like to do for a night out? I mean, it's not ideal that we keep hanging out at my place or yours," I asked as I poured two generous glasses of wine.

Yumi let out a thoughtful hum before answering, "Well, I'd love to go out for dinner at my favorite restaurant or catch a movie at the cinema, but I know that's probably out of the question with you," she teased with a small smirk.

"To be honest, I don't mind hanging out here or at my place. I'm not really someone who enjoys going out much. But sometimes... I do miss picking out a dress and getting all dolled up." She took a sip of my wine as she spoke.

I nodded, “I get it. But you look amazing no matter what you wear,” I said, taking a sip of my wine. “Especially when you wear nothing.”

She playfully hit my arm before asking, “And you? What would you like to do most if we went out?”

“Hmm... me? I’m not really sure... I used to organize meetups with celebrity friends at private spots from time to time,” I replied with a wink, remembering the karaoke night where she’d looked so nervous.

“But now, I feel a bit too old for getting wasted and making small talk with acquaintances,” I said sheepishly.

“Honestly, I really miss eating udon or tteokbokki at those street stalls with plastic tents. My brother Ji-sung and I used to sneak off to this place near our school. My mom always found out and scolded us, though.” I chuckled, reminiscing about those good old days, fully aware that with my fame now, it’s something I can’t do anymore.

Yumi gave a hum of acknowledgment before shifting the conversation to the upcoming awards ceremony, where we’d both be attending as cast members of Princess of Cosmos . We were hopeful that our drama would receive plenty of accolades.

She then recounted her challenging day on set, mentioning difficulties with Ryan, concerns about their on-screen chemistry, and worries that the drama might not be well-received by the public.

I tried to reassure her, but as I listened, I couldn’t shake the feeling that she was withholding some details.

After we cleaned up, we headed to my room. She excused herself to the bathroom,

playfully waving her toothbrush as if signaling her intention to stay over tonight. I smiled, pleased to see that my instinct was right—there's so much more to Yumi than just her shy, introverted side.

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Yumi

I stretched luxuriously and yawned, trying to rouse myself while curling up tightly against Ji-yong, who was still sleeping soundly behind me, wrapped around me like a big spoon.

But as soon as I remembered I had to go to work, a sense of dread began to settle in, knowing that today meant another shooting day with Ryan Kim.

Ji-yong and I had fallen into a comfortable routine: by night, we were lovers, often staying at his place.

We'd share dinner, cozy up together on the sofa with a cup of tea while watching TV shows or playing video games, and then head to the bedroom for some extra activities before calling it a night.

Each morning, we'd wake up together, with me either wrapped in one of Ji-yong's oversized shirts or sometimes with nothing at all.

But by day, as we said our goodbyes to our respective studios—often very early in the morning—anxiety began to gnaw at me.

Working with a new film crew proved to be much tougher. The PD and his assistant were more rigid and stressed, expecting everything to match their vision precisely. For example, the director demanded over ten takes for the simple act of Ryan and me

walking and holding hands down the street.

While it's our job to strive for perfection, minor improvisations are often encouraged, especially when facing tight deadlines. But this time around, there was no room for even the smallest deviations.

The jovial atmosphere of Princess of Cosmos was replaced by a tense silence on this new set. It was a stark contrast to the harmonious environment I was accustomed to.

Ryan, in particular, was a challenging co-star. His diva-like behavior, complete with tantrums and extended absences, disrupted the entire shooting schedule.

Moreover, I couldn't shake the unsettling feeling that he was observing me intently, his lingering gaze carrying a peculiar intensity.

My short lunch break quickly became my favorite part of the day, a momentary escape into my makeup room where I could text Ji-yong for some comfort. Noticing something off, Da-eun followed me into the room.

She closed the door behind her and asked with genuine concern, "Yumi, you seem more tired than usual. Is everything okay?"

Taking a seat beside me, she added, "I also waited for you in front of your apartment this morning, but you didn't show up." Her raised eyebrows and inquisitive look made it clear she was expecting an explanation.

I hesitated, unsure if I was ready to reveal the details of my nights and what was developing between Ji-yong and me.

After all, what exactly are we? We're not officially a couple yet—no formal decision has been made.

I tried to brush off this technicality, sensing that Ji-yong had something he wanted to ask me that night at the restaurant.

However, the fan frenzy and our busy schedules had left the question unasked.

It's just a minor detail, I told myself. Besides, if we made it official, the magic might wear off. With both of us starring in other dramas and having on-screen lovers, this might not be the best time to publicly announce our relationship.

"Oh... yeah, I was out and stayed at a friend's place," I said, avoiding her penetrating gaze. The downside of having a manager who's also a close friend is that it's nearly impossible to lie to her.

"Really? Which friend?" she asked, disbelief evident and a smirk playing on her lips.

"Well... just a childhood friend you don't know.

I recently reconnected with... her, and since she lives nearby, I've been hanging out at her place.

Yesterday, I had too much to drink, so I stayed over.

"I blurted out quickly, realizing midway that I might be over the top with the details and risking blowing my cover.

She raised her eyebrows again, clearly not convinced but choosing not to press further. She handed me a small bowl of bibimbap, murmuring quietly, "Eat."

I hesitated, considering whether to bring up Ryan and his odd glances. I worried that I might be reading too much into it and possibly making a fuss over nothing, given Ryan's current presumption of innocence.

But this was Da-eun, one of my closest friends. “Hey, Da-eun,” I started, deciding to open up. “I need to be honest with you. I’m finding it really challenging to film some of these scenes.”

Da-eun nodded sympathetically. “I know, it’s not the easiest.”

“Yeah, it is strange, isn’t it? I thought it would be a walk in the park since most of the scenes are shot in a studio and don’t involve traditional costumes or horses, unlike Princess of Cosmos,” I said, poking at my rice absentmindedly.

Lowering my voice despite the closed door, I added, “Also, have you noticed anything odd about Ryan Kim?”

Da-eun leaned in to whisper, “He’s a jerk!”

I laughed softly at her upfront and honest opinion. “I found it really surprising, considering how he was on-screen. I was actually looking forward to working with him—I’ve watched his dramas and shows since I was a teenager. But it turns out it’s very difficult to act with him...”

Da-eun sighed and nodded in agreement before extending her hand to set up a small battery-powered fan.

“I know... I hope time passes quickly so we can wrap up this drama. We’re already halfway through.

..” She continued, directing the fan’s breeze at us to combat the hot and humid weather.

“Besides, we don’t have a choice. If we don’t finish this drama, we’ll face a hefty fine.”

The sudden blare of the megaphone from the PD announcing that the shoot would continue startled us.

We quickly moved outside, finding ourselves enveloped by a flurry of activity.

Makeup artists rushed to retouch our makeup, stylists checked our outfits, the audio director tested the microphones, and crew members hefted filming equipment into position.

I braced myself as the PD called out the next scene—an emergency in the hospital, where both of us needed to rush to the “hospital room” to save the patient. I sighed. Looks like it’s going to be a long and difficult day.

Da-eun gave me a sympathetic glance before giving me a pat on my shoulders. “Good luck out there. You’ve got this.”

I nodded appreciatively, giving her a quick smile before heading back to the set.

The hospital room scene was set up with a flurry of activity, faux medical equipment strewn around, and a tense atmosphere in the air.

The director, already frazzled from the day’s delays, barked out last-minute instructions, and the assistant director hurriedly adjusted lights and props.

As I got ready to film the scene, I couldn’t shake the growing tension between Ryan and me.

His previous odd looks had shifted to an icy detachment, and the stress of the shoot, combined with his erratic behavior, was starting to weigh heavily on me.

I felt the pressure of trying to keep my composure while navigating the challenges of

working with him.

When the camera finally rolled, I threw myself into the scene with all the energy I could muster, eager to finish the day.

By the time we wrapped up, I felt a wave of relief and exhaustion. I hopped into my car, already planning to pick up some take-out to enjoy with Ji-yong that evening. I decided on naengmyeon from a nearby restaurant, envisioning a relaxing evening with a breeze on Ji-yong's patio.

However, when I arrived at his place, I was met with an unexpected sight. Ji-yong was sitting on the sofa, his shoulders trembling slightly, and I could hear the faint sound of his sobs. Panic surged through me as I dropped the naengmyeon and rushed to his side.

??

Ji-yong

I woke up early that day, feeling refreshed and ready to face the day. Yumi had already left for her studio; her shooting schedule always started earlier than mine.

After a quick shower, I made a light breakfast and enjoyed a peaceful moment on my patio.

The morning sun felt warm on my skin, and a gentle breeze carried the promise of a beautiful day.

It was so relaxing, I almost felt like a cat.

In fact, I smiled to myself, thinking it might be time to get a cat, just like Yumi suggested.

She is definitely special, I thought, recalling our conversation at the karaoke place about cat. Most girls, especially those from showbiz and glamorous backgrounds, would expect at least a luxurious hotel stay or an expensive dinner at this stage.

But Yumi never suggested any of that.

Now that I think about it, she doesn't seem like the materialistic kind; she rarely wore designer brands and led a simple, low-key life, finding joy in the small things.

Just thinking about her put me in a great mood, so I sent her a good luck message with a few playful bear stickers. Then, before heading out, I reviewed my lines for the day's shoot, feeling confident about the scenes we had planned.

The drive to the set was pleasant, and I even found myself humming a tune. We managed to shoot the first few scenes without any major hiccups.

It was during a break, as I was getting ready for the next scene, when my phone started ringing nonstop. That was a bit weird. These days, it's unusual for someone to call so persistently. We usually just text, and a call like that usually means something urgent.

Seeing my mother's name on the caller ID, a wave of worry washed over me. Was something wrong?

The moment I heard her voice, trembling with emotion, my heart sank. The peaceful morning I had enjoyed was shattered by the devastating news of my grandmother's heart attack.

"She didn't make it," my mother sobbed. "Please come to the hospital as soon as you can."

I informed the film crew of the emergency and rushed to the hospital. When I arrived, I found my mother, aunt, and uncle looking devastated in the hallway. My father was there too, his face a mask of sorrow.

Still wearing my mask as a disguise, I tried to take a deep breath to control my emotions, tears welling up in my eyes. My heart pounded in my chest as I sat down outside the room, bracing myself for what I was about to see.

How could this have happened? Just the other day, she seemed so full of life. I had

promised to return her food container soon. Couldn't she have waited for me?

My brother arrived shortly after, still in his military uniform, which seemed out of place. Accompanied by his wife and my young nephew Ji-ho, we entered the room together. There, she lay, looking peaceful.

A profound sense of loss washed over me as I said my final goodbye. Soon after, the room was hushed as the white sheet was gently pulled into place.

The days following my grandmother's passing were a blur of somber tasks.

Her home, once vibrant with her presence, now felt like a hollow shell.

It was unsettling to be surrounded by her belongings, untouched and frozen in time.

The mountain of food containers, the half-drunk coffee on the table, and the dress she had prepared for Sunday mass, all left undisturbed, seemed to amplify the stark reality of her absence.

Among the stack of newspapers, I found a collection of clippings from magazines that she had saved about me. It was both touching and disconcerting. Her meticulous curation of my public life revealed a depth of pride and interest that I hadn't fully appreciated before.

Yumi was a steadfast companion during those difficult weeks. Her presence was comforting, yet she respected the need for solitude and family closeness. At the funeral, she offered her condolences as a friend and colleague, while honoring the family's need for privacy.

I'd lived a relatively charmed life, largely untouched by profound loss. Yumi, on the other hand, had weathered storms I couldn't fathom.

At the funeral, surrounded by grieving relatives, I felt a disconnect, as if observing my own life from a distance. The expected outpouring of emotion didn't come naturally; instead, I experienced a strange detachment.

Then a few days after the funeral, the tears began—unexpected and solitary, often falling at night.

Not wanting to wake Yumi, I sometimes sought refuge in the bathroom, grappling with the enormity of my loss.

Yumi would often find me there, curled into a ball with my sobs muffled by my hands.

She'd sit beside me, her presence a gentle warmth in the cold expanse.

"Your grandma seemed like a wonderful woman," she said, her voice filled with genuine warmth. "I wish I'd had the chance to meet her. I wanted to thank her for all the food."

I chuckled softly. But her words prompted a question that had been lingering. "Do you think it gets easier over time?"

She shook her head sadly. "I don't think it does. After all, grief is just love without a place to go."

Sitting on the cold bathroom floor, surrounded by sterile white tiles, I suddenly realized how much our relationship had developed since half a year ago, when I first met her.

"Do you miss your parents sometimes?" I asked.

She nodded, a melancholic look on her face. “Always...”

“Tell me about them,” I requested.

She took a deep breath. “Well... My mom was a nurse. But it’s ironic that when she got sick, even her colleagues couldn’t help her.” Her eyes moistened with tears. “I was very close to my mom, but not so much with my dad. I miss her a lot. I worry that one day I might forget her face.”

I nodded, understanding her pain. “What do you miss the most about her?”

There was a brief pause before she replied, “I miss nearly everything... Her voice, the way she called my name, her scent. I miss her cooking and even the quiet moments we shared during drives. I remember a special trip we took together to Danyang, just the two of us. It was wonderful.” A wistful smile touched her lips as she recalled those memories.

“I went on holiday just with my mom since my dad was busy with his work. He was a pilot, you see, so he was abroad quite often.” Yumi sighed and looked up at the ceiling, as if recalling the memories.

“But you know what’s really messed up about it? Sometimes, I’m afraid to tell people that my parents have passed away. I hate seeing the look in their eyes when they offer the obligatory, ‘I’m sorry for your loss,’ or things like that... as if I’m a broken person, a poor orphan.”

I held her close, trying to offer whatever comfort I could. “You’re incredibly strong,” I said, my voice rough. “You’re not broken.”

A wave of protectiveness washed over me, and I felt an intense need to shield her from my own pain. Yet, I knew grief was a solitary journey. Involving someone else

felt like an imposition.

Still, having Yumi by my side eased the burden, her presence a comforting anchor. We stayed in a bathroom some more time before she lead me into my bedroom, falling asleep in each other's arms.

??

Yumi

The days following the funeral were anything but easy. The vibrant Ji-yong I knew had been replaced by a somber shadow. Watching him navigate the public's expectations while grappling with his grief was a painful spectacle.

The most excruciating ordeal was witnessing his public facade.

Just days after his grandmother's passing, we had to attend the drama awards ceremony.

It felt so insignificant now, considering the context.

Nevertheless, our drama won two awards—Best Screenplay and Best Original Soundtrack—and Ji-yong even snagged the Most Popular Actor award.

But behind the dazzling smile and gracious acceptance speech, I could see the pain etched on his face when he thanked his friends and family.

Not being able to offer him solace in that moment, especially while we were hidden away, felt like a cruel irony.

The familiar ache of loss made me deeply aware of his pain.

I attended the funeral as a friend, accompanied by some of the Princess of Cosmos

crew.

During those lonely nights, I offered my support, sharing in his grief.

As if the emotional turmoil weren't enough, an off-screen drama also seemed to unfold during the awards ceremony.

Jun-ho, a fellow supporting actor from both *Princess of Cosmos* and *Hometown Whispers*, who was seated at the same table as us, shot a casual remark to Ji-yong: "Hyung, thanks again for that night," his voice barely above a whisper.

"And I saw you go home with... M.H. Did you get lucky?" His eyebrows danced with playful mischief as he exchanged a clandestine glance with Ji-yong.

Ji-yong froze for a few seconds before glancing at me, then shot Jun-ho a warning look, but the damage was done.

My stomach lurched. M.H.? Could it be Min-hee?

A wave of doubt washed over me as I contemplated the possibility of a hidden chapter in Ji-yong's life.

The fragile foundation of our unspoken understanding was suddenly threatened.

Unable to broach the subject given our ambiguous relationship, I retreated into silence.

After the awards ceremony, I texted Ji-yong to let him know I intended to stay at my place that night. His subsequent call, denying that anything ever happened between him and Min-hee, only deepened my uncertainty.

I thought I knew Ji-yong well enough by now.

We'd shared countless moments, filled with both laughter and tears.

But now, a troubling thought crossed my mind: was he always just a playboy, never intending to settle down?

With his looks, his physique, and his status as Most Popular Actor—confirmed by the award—why would he ever commit to a serious relationship?

For the first time, this petty thought troubled me.

Given what he was going through with his grandmother, I decided to set my concerns aside for now.

Besides, my workload was already overwhelming, and something else had happened on set with Ryan.

During one of our kissing scenes, he intentionally deepened the kiss, forcing his tongue in, even though it wasn't necessary.

I gasped in surprise, and he mistook it for a gasp of pleasure, shooting me another creepy look.

Being an introverted woman in South Korea and a newcomer actress left me in a vulnerable position. I retreated to my makeup trailer, my body slightly trembling from the unwelcome kiss.

The contrast between how Ji-yong treated me during our intimate scenes and the way Ryan Kim was treating me now was stark—like night and day.

I knew Ryan had mistreated me, yet I couldn't shake the feeling of confusion and guilt, as if I had somehow betrayed Ji-yong, even though I hadn't returned Ryan's kiss—not even for the camera.

I tried to shake the feeling and console myself before returning to the set, determined to ignore him as much as possible and not show him the power he had over me.

As the situation at work worsened, so did my personal life. Unconsciously, I started creating distance between Ji-yong and me by spending more nights at my place.

But the solitude did little to soothe my troubled mind. Sleep became elusive, replaced by a relentless replay of the past few days. The tangled web of events involving Ji-yong, Min-hee, and Ryan left me disoriented and exhausted.

The constant mental turmoil took its toll. Each morning, I forced myself to appear composed and professional on set. But behind the facade, I was crumbling.

Then it happened.

On a seemingly ordinary Tuesday, after a tense and prolonged surgical scene, I retreated to my trailer for a moment of peace. Checking the clock on my phone, I saw it was almost 9 PM at night with no sight of finishing the scene today.

As I sighed and tried to cool down, the door creaked open. Expecting Da-eun, I prepared a friendly greeting. Instead, Ryan appeared, his demeanor off, a faint scent of alcohol clinging to him. He swiftly closed the door.

I suddenly recalled that night when Ji-yong had casually entered my trailer during a break to share a game. Our relationship then was friendly and comfortable. But with Ryan, it felt entirely different—unsafe and unsettling.

Trapped in this small space with Ryan, a chilling sense of dread washed over me. “Ryan...” I tried to greet him, but my voice came out as a mere whisper. My heart pounded in my chest, fear and confusion warred within me as his predatory gaze locked onto mine.

Before I could say anything else, he stumbled toward me. The smell of alcohol grew stronger, and I could feel my breath quickening. Panic began to creep in as he closed the distance. I backed away, desperately searching for an escape route, but the confined space of the trailer offered no refuge.

“Yumi...” he slurred, his voice unsteady. “Let’s finish what we started last time, huh?” His hand reached out, grabbing my hips, and I flinched instinctively. My mind raced, desperately searching for a way out.

Surely, he wouldn’t dare, I thought, with countless crew members just outside. “Ryan, stop! What are you doing?” Desperation tinged my voice, but he continued his advance, pressing his face closer to mine.

“Oh, come on, goody-goody,” he said, a hint of arrogance in his voice. “I just want to have some fun. You know you want it too.”

“No, get off me!” My voice, sharp and panicked, startled him. I edged closer to the door, creating some distance between us.

With an irritated “tsk,” he stumbled out of my trailer. My body trembled as I tried to process what had just happened. The thought of facing him again, pretending everything was normal, was almost unbearable.

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Ji-yong

I t's been a month since grandma passed, and while the shock is slowly fading, I'm finding comfort in remembering her full and wonderful life.

But something's off with Yumi.

At first, I thought she was just worn out from our crazy work schedule.

We'd been killing ourselves with 12 to 16-hour shoots almost every day.

But lately, I noticed she had been keeping her distance.

On the rare occasions she did stay over, a shadow seemed to hang over her, and her usual warmth was noticeably missing.

I'm starting to wonder if Jun-ho's comment about Min-hee is bothering her, even though she said it wasn't. Something's definitely up, and I have no clue what it is.

I had been eagerly counting down the days until Chuseok, which was just a bit more than a month away—our only three-day break from the relentless shooting schedule. I planned to use that time for a surprise getaway with Yumi.

But just as I was about to start searching for a secluded spot, my phone erupted with calls and messages. A sinking feeling washed over me; this could only mean one

thing: bad news.

I picked up the next call. It was Mrs. Lee, my agent's second-in-command. Her voice, cold as ice, cut through the phone. Without even a hi, she asked me directly: "Ji-yong, have you seen what's circulating online?" Panic seized me. I couldn't respond immediately. Finally, I managed a shaky "No...?"

A deep sigh preceded Mrs. Lee's words, "Someone snapped a photo of you and Min-hee in your car. Just the two of you, looking pretty suspicious."

I was engulfed by panic. It had to be that night I drove Min-hee home when she was about to black-out from the drinks. The timing couldn't be worse. Yumi would find out, and it could destroy our relationship.

I was speechless. Rumors about me and my co-stars were nothing new, but an actual photo? Even if it was innocent, it was a disaster waiting to happen.

Ignoring my silence, Mrs. Lee continued, "Don't worry about anything for now. We'll coordinate with Min-hee's agency and decide on a public statement if necessary. Since you're both starring in the same drama and on-screen lovers, this could even boost the show's ratings."

I couldn't believe how the industry worked sometimes. It was all built on facades and lies, to the point where it made me feel sick.

"Just to be clear, you're not involved with Min-hee, right?" she pressed.

"No!" I replied forcefully. Mrs. Lee murmured an acknowledgment before hanging up. The phone slipped from my hand as a cold dread washed over me.

I tried to calm my racing heart. I had to think clearly. This could ruin everything. My

career, yes, but more importantly, my relationship with Yumi. She was the only constant in my chaotic world.

I replayed the night in my mind. I had been a gentleman, making sure Min-hee got home safely. There was nothing to hide, but the public wouldn't see it that way. The image they would conjure would be far from the truth.

I knew I had to talk to Yumi, explain everything. But how could I? Words felt inadequate. The fear of losing her was a suffocating weight on my chest. I had to protect her from this mess, even if it meant sacrificing my own peace of mind.

The drive to Yumi's place was a haze. My mind raced, trying to anticipate her reaction. I rang the doorbell, my heart pounding in my chest. When she finally opened the door, I was met with a Yumi I didn't recognize. Her eyes, usually sparkling with life, were dull and lifeless.

I stepped inside, closing the door behind me. "Yumi, can we talk?" My voice sounded feeble, even to my own ears.

She nodded, her gaze fixed on an unknown point in the room. There was a distance between us, a chasm I couldn't seem to bridge. I wanted to reach out to her, to hold her, but my hands felt frozen.

I began to explain about the photo, my voice trembling slightly. But I was met with a blank stare. It was as if she wasn't listening, her mind worlds away. A pang of guilt shot through me. Maybe this wasn't the right time. Maybe I should have waited.

I hesitated, searching for the right words. Then, I saw a flicker of pain in her eyes. "Yumi... is something wrong?" I asked.

Soft sobs escaped her lips, quickly escalating into racking sobs. I held her tightly,

offering what comfort I could. Helplessness washed over me. I'd come to explain, to apologize, but her pain seemed far greater.

"Yumi, talk to me," I whispered, stroking her hair gently. "Tell me what's wrong."

Her sobs gradually subsided, replaced by deep, ragged breaths. When she finally looked up at me, her eyes were red and swollen. The sight of her distress tore at my heart.

"Ji-yong," she managed to say, her voice barely a whisper. "Something happened at work. Something terrible."

My mind raced. What could have happened? "Tell me, Yumi. I'm here for you."

She took a deep breath, her voice trembling as she began to recount what had happened with Ryan. My blood ran cold as I listened to her ordeal. Anger, protectiveness, and a deep sense of shame consumed me. How could I have been so oblivious to her pain?

I held her close, offering silent comfort. Gently stroking her hair, I kissed her forehead. She needed time to process everything. A plan began to form in my mind. I would protect Yumi at all costs. Ryan would pay for his actions.

??

Yumi

The weight of the world seemed to be crushing me.

Ji-yong's arms were my only solace, but even his warmth couldn't completely shield me from the storm raging within.

I feel violated. The thought of facing Ryan on set again filled me with dread.

But quitting would mean a huge financial penalty. I was trapped.

And now, Ji-yong and Min-hee's photo scandal?

My life felt like it was crumbling around me.

The photo is explicit, showing them in his car with Min-hee's arms wrapped around his neck.

Although he has explained the situation and is here to comfort me, looking sincere, I'm unsure if I can fully trust him and risk being made a fool.

After all, look at how our relationship has developed since we started working together as co-stars.

What's to stop him from doing the same with other co-stars?

I looked him straight in the eyes, searching for the Ji-yong I know, and struggling to believe that what we've shared over these past few months—our laughs, our tears, all the moments we've spent together—could be easily replicated with someone else.

After a long silence, I decided to put that issue aside for now—one problem at a time, I told myself. “I can't quit the drama, Ji-yong,” I said softly. “The penalty is too high, and... I don't want to just walk away like that.”

Ji-yong responded, “Don't worry, I'll find a lawyer to determine the best course of action. We'll figure out a way to handle this.”

As Ji-yong assured me that he would find a way out, a flicker of hope ignited within me. But I wasn't naive enough to think there would be an easy solution.

Despite Ji-yong's reassurances and ideas about lawyers and other options, I realized he spoke from the perspective of a successful actor and a man. He couldn't fully understand the options available to me as a woman and a newcomer in the industry.

The thought of jeopardizing my rising career was terrifying. I had worked so hard to get to where I was, and this is just the beginning. Giving it all up seemed like a colossal failure.

I looked at Ji-yong, and hesitantly asked, “What if I'm ruining everything?” My voice trembling. “What if I'm being too dramatic?”

“You're not being too dramatic, Yumi,” Ji-yong reassured me, taking my hands in his. “Your career is important, but your well-being is more important. We'll figure this out together. I promise.”

I stayed in Ji-yong's embrace for a few more moments. Finally, I pulled away and I glanced up at him. “What about you, Ji-yong? What's going to happen to you? The

photo...” My voice trailed off, unable to finish the sentence.

A part of me wanted to believe Ji-yong, to trust him implicitly. But another part, a darker, more insecure part, was consumed by doubt.

“Don’t worry about me Yumi. We’ll focus on your problem first.”

I tried to hide my reaction, to appear calm and collected. But the storm raging within me was anything but calm. I loved Ji-yong, and I wanted to believe him, but the fear of being hurt again was a constant companion.

I... love him. The sudden realization hit me. Not just like, but I actually love him.

As if afraid of losing me, he moved closer, his lips seeking mine. I welcomed his kiss, deepening it with a sigh of longing.

The days that followed were a blur. I told Da-eun about what happened with Ryan, and she was furious. She said she’d inform our agency and make sure he was warned that his behavior was unacceptable and wouldn’t be tolerated again.

On one hand, I appreciated her support, but on the other, I couldn’t shake the worry that it might backfire, especially since I still had to work with Ryan for a while longer. I had a feeling he wouldn’t react well to being challenged.

It didn’t take long for my fears to be confirmed. After my agency warned him, Ryan seemed to be on mission in making my life miserable. One particularly rough day, during a break, he cornered me with a dangerous glint in his eye and accused me of coming onto him.

“You know I’m engaged, right? Stop trying to seduce me,” he sneered.

I was stunned. How could he be so shameless? Anger and humiliation bubbled up inside me. I wanted to scream the truth at him, but fear of retaliation held me back.

Instead, I managed a weak, “Are you serious? You’re the one who can’t keep your hands to yourself.” My voice was barely a whisper, but I refused to let him see how much he’d hurt me.

His face contorted into a mask of rage. “Don’t you dare blame me,” he hissed. “Everyone knows you’re after me.”

The accusation was absurd, but the damage was done. The few people who witnessed the exchange exchanged concerned glances.

I turned and walked away, my heart pounding in my chest. The tears I desperately wanted to shed were locked behind a dam of pride. I couldn’t let him see my weakness.

Ryan didn’t stop there. He complained to the PD about my difficult behavior, claiming he was uncomfortable working with me. Given his status as the lead actor and someone who is more veteran in the industry, his words carried weight.

The PD called me to his room for a talk. The room was heavy with tension, and I could feel my palms sweating. I tried to maintain a calm demeanor, but my voice trembled slightly as I greeted him.

“Yumi, please have a seat,” the PD began, his voice laced with a hint of authority. I nodded, my gaze fixed on the floor. I knew what was coming. Ryan had already poisoned the well.

“I’ve heard some... unpleasant things about your behavior on set,” he continued, his voice low and measured. “I expect professionalism from everyone, especially from

the lead actress.”

My heart sank. This was it. The beginning of the end.

“Let’s be clear,” he said bluntly. “Recasting you at this point is impossible. We’re eighty percent through filming, and the promotional materials are already out. Walking away would mean a 300 million won fine. Your only option is to resolve the issues with the others.”

“Despite being newcomers, we trusted you. We selected you during the final casting with Ryan’s approval. Don’t disappoint us.”

Tears welled up in my eyes. “Why don’t you try to hear my side of the story too,” I whispered.

He shrugged impatiently. I knew that, for him, this conversation only meant that we were losing valuable shooting time, and with that, potentially wasting more money.

“I didn’t do anything wrong. It was Ryan who came to me and...”

He cut me off, “Listen, at this point, it feels like a tit-for-tat situation. I’ve worked with Ryan for more than five years, and this is the first time I’ve heard such a complaint. So, I’m sorry, but unless you have proof, your story’s credibility is just the same as his.”

I left the PD’s office feeling utterly defeated. How could I possibly continue working in these conditions? The thought of facing Ryan again, of having to pretend that everything was normal, made my stomach churn.

Tears streamed down my face as I made my way back to the set. I tried to compose myself, but the weight of my emotions was too heavy to bear. Da-eun noticed my

distress immediately. She pulled me aside, her brow furrowed with concern.

“Yumi, what happened?” she asked gently, her hand resting on my shoulder in a comforting gesture.

I took a shaky breath, trying to find the words. “The PD... he doesn’t believe me. He thinks I’m lying about Ryan.” My voice broke, the tears threatening to fall again.

Da-eun’s face hardened, anger flashing in her eyes. “That’s ridiculous! How can he not see what’s really going on?”

I shook my head, feeling hopeless. “It’s my word against Ryan’s. And apparently, his word carries more weight.”

Da-eun sighed heavily, her frustration evident. “We can’t let him get away with this, Yumi. There has to be something we can do.”

But what could we do? Ryan was a high-profile actor, beloved by the public. I was just a newcomer, barely making a name for myself. It felt like an impossible battle.

When the day finally ended, I practically fled the set. I needed to escape from everyone there and be with Ji-yong.

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Ji-yong

The thought of Yumi enduring harassment at work was unbearable. My protective instincts kicked in, and I knew I had to act. Seeking legal counsel was the most logical step.

I started making calls, reaching out to lawyers I knew, or whose reputation was impeccable in handling such cases. The entertainment industry was a complex web, and I needed someone who understood its nuances and could navigate the legal complexities effectively.

Mr. Park picked up the phone at the third ring. He is also one of my father's friend, so the call was a mix between casual and formal consultation. After a quick small talk, I explained the situation quickly to him without divulging the names.

"So, to clarify, your girlfriend is alleging that she has experienced sexual harassment from her co-star?"

"Yes, it's a difficult situation. She's been through a lot, and I want to protect her." I murmured while pacing back and forth in my trailer during the break of shooting day.

"She needs to gather as much evidence as possible. Any witnesses, messages, or recordings could be crucial. It's also important to document everything from now on."

There was a brief pause. I knew she didn't have any evidence yet. "I understand. She might not have any proof at this stage and has been hesitant to involve others, fearing repercussions," I said.

"That's understandable," Mr. Kim replied on the other end of the line. "But it's essential to have a clear timeline of events. We also need to assess the potential risks and benefits of going public."

Going public? I thought, feeling uncertain. "I'm worried about the impact on her career. She's just starting to gain recognition."

"That's a valid concern. We need to consider all options, including mediation, negotiation, or legal action. For now, let's focus on gathering evidence and building a strong case."

Mr. Park sighed deeply before continuing, "But Ji-yong, you should know that this will be a long and difficult battle. With a high-profile celebrity involved, the public might be divided. Some might even think that your girlfriend could be using this situation to defame him."

My heart sank. "But my girlfriend is the victim here. She's up against someone more powerful—a predatory man who poses a threat to her and the industry!" I raised my voice in frustration.

"I understand, Ji-yong, but unfortunately, the law isn't always as clear-cut as that," he said with a small chuckle that only fueled my frustration. "If it were, my profession wouldn't be necessary."

With a sigh, I relented. "Fine. Thank you, Mr. Park. I'll contact you again when we have more solid evidence."

I paced restlessly in my trailer, trying to clear my head. A soft knock interrupted my thoughts. “May I?” Min-hee asked, hesitating at the doorway.

She looked uncomfortable, her eyes darting between us. “Listen, about the photo... I’m sorry,” she began.

The photo. Of course. I had seen it online, and it looked even worse out of context. The image of her straddling my lap, with her hands thrown around me, was damning. But that wasn’t what was occupying my mind today.

I shrugged, overwhelmed with too many thoughts. “It’s fine. These things happen,” I said. Then, a thought struck me. “But the photo didn’t come from you or anyone you know, did it?”

She hesitated before answering, “No, not from me, of course. I was almost unconscious, remember?” She looked puzzled. “Who could it be...” She nervously bit her nails.

Here we were, caught in a web of fabricated evidence. I had done nothing wrong, yet the photo painted a different story. Yumi, on the other hand, was a victim of harassment with no concrete proof.

“We should convince our agencies to issue a public statement denying any off-screen relationship... or whatever the photo seems to suggest,” I said, trying to make an ally of her. But she seemed startled by my suggestion.

“Are you kidding me?” she croaked, looking furious. “How could we possibly explain that situation without damaging my reputation?” She shot me an incredulous look. “Don’t you think it’s better to just ignore it? The rumors will die down soon enough.”

“Well, maybe you should have thought twice before doing something that could damage your reputation,” I replied, my tone colder than I intended.

“Look, I’ve got a lot on my mind right now, and I can’t handle everything at once.

I talked with my agent, and they’re still deciding whether to issue a statement about that photo.

I think we should. It’s not just your reputation on the line; it’s mine too.

” I gave her a frustrated look. “And let’s not forget, this has taken a toll on my relationship as well. ”

Min-hee tilted her head, clearly puzzled by my remark about my relationship. She murmured something about thinking it over before leaving my trailer, looking both confounded and somewhat guilty.

The day dragged on, hot and humid. Later that evening, after some hesitation, I decided to seek advice from my agent. After all, they had seen and solved almost everything in the showbiz industry. I headed to Mrs. Lee’s office after wrapping up. It was already 8 PM, yet her office was still lit up.

“Come in,” I heard her voice from behind the door. I opened it and stepped inside. Her office always had a cold and unwelcoming vibe.

She peeked over her laptop, looks intrigued when she saw me.

“Ji-yong, what brings you here? Is it about the photo scandal? We’ve decided not to make a joint statement with Min-hee’s agent and just leave it be,” she said, getting straight to the point.

“But I’ve received calls from companies scheduled to feature you in their next commercials.

They’re concerned about how this photo might affect your image and might reconsider their offers.

However, I must say, Min-hee’s image is the one that’s more at risk.

” She gnawed her lower lip, clearly worried about how this gossip could impact our upcoming drama.

I sighed, feeling a mix of frustration and resignation.

At least I had an answer to my first problem.

“It’s not about that... but let’s get back to it later,” I started, trying to shift the conversation.

“There’s something else I need to talk to you about.

I have a... friend. She’s a fellow celebrity, and she’s dealing with a really difficult situation on set. ”

I hesitated again, unsure how much detail I should divulge.

She raised her eyebrows, clearly not expecting this from me. “Then why didn’t your ‘friend’ go to her own agency for advice? What business do we have with this ‘friend’ of yours?”

I sighed; Mrs. Lee could sense trouble from a mile away. “Fine, actually I’ve started seeing her, and it really bothers me that she’s facing this issue at her shooting

location. She already reached out to her agency, and they've taken initial steps, but the problem persists."

Her eyes narrowed with suspicion. I could almost see the wheels turning in her head as she calculated the potential impact: Will this relationship affect Ji-yong's image and marketability? What about the drama and the brand sponsorship requests?

"Who is this person?" Mrs. Lee asked with her no-nonsense attitude. Having worked with her for the past eight years, I trusted her to act in my best interest.

"It's... Han Yumi," I finally relented.

I heard her sigh deeply and rub her temples, bracing herself for the headache.

"She's currently filming with Ryan Kim, isn't she? For a romantic drama. I can't remember the title, but I know the director."

I nodded to confirm. "Ryan is apparently not as professional as he seems. He's a predator; he harassed Yumi and..."

"Ji-yong, how serious is your relationship with Yumi?" Mrs. Lee cut me off.

"What?" I was caught off guard by the question. "Well, I'd say it's pretty serious. For starters, I have no intention of stopping seeing her."

Mrs. Lee rubbed her temples again. "Listen, Ji-yong... you do know that actors have a very short career window." She clasped her hands as if saying a silent prayer before continuing, "A sexual harassment accusation against one of the most prolific celebrities in the industry is one of the most damaging issues for a celebrity's career.

I've seen many actors and actresses who couldn't survive such rumors, and I suggest

you stay away from this. ”

Shocked by her cold response, I couldn't immediately reply. “What...?” was all I could manage to say again. I felt like a broken record.

She nodded to confirm. “You are in the prime of your career. You're young, with a lot ahead of you. Just... forget her for a while, and then you can continue seeing her later when things have died down, alright?” she added in a softer tone, as if trying to negotiate with me.

I gave her a cold look. “So there's absolutely nothing you can do, not even a suggestion? Your advice is just... stay away from her?”

“Han Yumi... I don't know how she could recover from this if it goes public. And if you choose to get involved, it would be us against Ryan's agency and his entire network. It could damage your image as well, Ji-yong. Please...”

“Then announce it to the public for all I care!” I roared. “How could it be her fault? She's the one who was harassed. Why should she be the one to pay the price for this?” Frustration surged within me. Although Mrs. Lee and I had shared many years working together, today she was being impossible.

This conversation left a bad taste in my mouth.

It felt like no one was genuinely on our side—neither Mrs. Lee nor Mr. Park, the lawyer, provided any practical solutions.

At that moment, it felt as if the world was profoundly unjust, particularly for women.

It felt like actors were just pawns and moneymakers in the showbiz industry, with little regard for us as human beings.

Sensing that I wasn't going to make any headway with her on Yumi's issue, at least for now, I decided to shift the conversation before preparing to leave.

"Handle the situation with the photo of Min-hee and me, or I will," I said, my tone firm and uncompromising.

I could see the gears turning in Mrs. Lee's mind—she knew that my position as a top revenue-generating star gave me considerable leverage.

I left Mrs. Lee's office feeling exasperated and disillusioned.

As I drove home, a whirlwind of options raced through my mind.

Should I publicly announce my relationship with Yumi to make Ryan think twice about messing with her?

Or would it be better to offer her 300 million won to walk away from the production?

While it might seem extreme, I couldn't help but take a certain satisfaction in imagining the production team's reaction—panicked and scrambling to recast Yumi, reshoot scenes, and redo edits in post-production, resulting in significant financial and time losses for them. I smirked at the thought.

But Yumi would most likely disagree, and even if she did agree, she'd probably feel perpetually indebted to me, which could further destabilize our already fragile relationship.

I tried to recall Ryan's other films and dramas. A quick online search provided a list of his works and cast members. I reviewed the names one by one and began making notes to reach out to other female celebrities who had worked with him and whom I knew personally.

I glanced at the clock—it was almost midnight. I sent a message to Yumi to see if she was already home. I needed to be there for her, I thought.

Once I received her confirmation, I made myself drive to her place.

She greeted me with a faint smile. She looked weary, her eyes shadowed by dark circles beneath them.

I quickly checked in with her, asking if anything else had happened at work that was bothering her. She shrugged and said nothing significant had occurred with Ryan; for the first time, they had different shooting schedules for different scenes.

A wave of relief washed over me. At least she was safe—for now.

“But I have to keep working with Ryan next week,” she sighed, burying herself deeper into my embrace on her bed.

“Don’t worry, Yumi. I have a plan, and I’ll personally make sure he never bothers you again,” I vowed, my jaw clenched in determination.

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Yumi

The thought frightened me a little, making me question whether we were truly on the same page.

I still couldn't completely shake the confusion surrounding his photo scandal with Min-hee.

But for now, at least, he was mine. I placed a gentle kiss on his temple before getting ready for another day of shooting.

My days felt like they were on autopilot—mornings were spent forcing myself to go to the set and doing my best while trying to stay detached, which was challenging since acting demands full emotional investment in every performance.

Today is another day of shooting with Ryan. I felt discouraged, but decided I wouldn't let him have such control over my life anymore. The next time he makes an inappropriate move, I'll make sure to document it.

As I walked down the corridor, I was met with Ryan's cold stare.

I chose to ignore him. He only seems to have two manipulation tactics: a cold and intimidating glare or aggressive and straightforward harassment.

His game is getting old, I thought to myself.

Gathering all my strength and counting the remaining days, I resolved to finish this drama.

During the much-needed break, I checked my phone and found a good luck message from Ji-yong, along with one of his doodles. This time, it was a cute cat sitting beside a steaming cup of hot beverage, making a V-sign with its paws. The speech bubble above the cat said, “Fighting!”

I smiled at the text and replied, wishing him good luck with his shooting as well. Just then, I heard some commotion coming from the courtyard.

Curious, I made my way toward the source of the noise. As I approached, I saw a group of crew members gathered around, whispering excitedly. It seemed that something interesting had happened. I pushed my way through the small crowd.

“What’s going on?” I asked one of the makeup artists standing nearby.

“Uh, someone sent you a gift,” she said, her eyes glimmering with amusement and camaraderie, as if she wanted to say, “I know your little secret!”

Pushing through, I discovered the source of the commotion and what the “gift” was: a coffee truck, emblazoned with a banner declaring the gift from Ryu Ji-yong to Yumi and the film crew, was the center of attention.

My heart pounded in my chest. A coffee truck? From Ji-yong? I was overwhelmed by a mix of warmth and surprise. It was an extravagant gesture that also felt like a territorial statement, as if Ji-yong was subtly warning Ryan that I had strong support and that he shouldn’t mess with me.

My cheeks flushed as I imagined everyone on set whispering about us.

I saw Da-eun from afar, running towards me and the commotion. “Yumi!” she called as she drew nearer.

“So, you two are together?” Da-eun whispered in my ear as she approached me. “I thought he and Min-hee...”

From her perspective, it must have been confusing. The photo scandal involving Ji-yong and Min-hee had been everywhere, and every whispered comment felt like a dagger to my heart.

I glanced at Ryan, who was watching the scene with a hint of annoyance. I smirked in satisfaction and shrugged at Da-eun, adopting a mysterious demeanor.

Over the next few days, Ji-yong’s behavior became increasingly bold. The day after the coffee truck gift, one of his bodyguard showed up on my set, leading to a brief dispute with the film crew, who refused to allow anyone not directly involved in the production to enter.

After a heated phone call between the PD and, I suspected, Ji-yong himself or his spokesperson, the PD reluctantly allowed the bodyguard to remain in the background of the set.

Ji-yong’s bodyguard stayed on set for the next few days, and Ryan occasionally shot me confused and annoyed glances, clearly irritated by the reduced influence he now had over me.

A few days later, Ji-yong made an unexpected appearance on my set, causing an even bigger stir than the bodyguard or the coffee truck had.

“Ji-yong!” I exclaimed, taken aback. He flashed his charming smile, drawing curious glances and excited whispers from the crew.

“Hi, I finished my shoot early today, so I thought I’d drop by,” he said.

I gave him a nervous smile. Is this what he meant by “I’ll personally make sure Ryan never bothers you again”?

“Well, that’s... great,” I replied, attempting to mask my worries with forced enthusiasm.

“But I’m still working, and we have many scenes to shoot today.

” I glanced over at the PD, who was watching the exchange with clear annoyance but seemed hesitant to confront Ji-yong, likely due to potential future collaborations.

I heard the PD mutter audibly, “It’s not like this set is open to just anyone who wants to visit. ”

Ji-yong nodded in acknowledgment of my busy schedule. “I just wanted to drop by and let you know that I did a bit of digging. It turns out some of Ryan’s previous female cast members also felt uncomfortable working with him.”

He leaned in, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “I have screenshots of his exchanges with his past co-stars, but I’m worried it might not be enough. The public could argue that the exchanges were fabricated.”

“So, if he bothers you again, make sure to document it. As a last resort, we could go public with the support of other witnesses,” he muttered, his voice tinged with anger. “Let’s take this bastard down.”

Ji-yong then shot a stern look at Ryan, who stood beside the PD, appearing bewildered and simmering with intensity. I could feel Ryan’s gaze on me, and it made my skin crawl.

“Oh, and Yumi?” he added before leaving, “Are you free this Sunday? I have a birthday event to attend and would love for you to come with me.”

A birthday party? This was a new level of closeness. I hesitated for a moment, then nodded. “Sure,” I replied, trying to hide my surprise.

As he turned to leave, I noticed the surprised looks and whispers among almost everyone on set, puzzled by Ji-yong’s unexpected appearance.

The PD promptly called me to his office again, rubbing his temples in frustration.

“Yumi, what is all this nonsense? The coffee truck, the bodyguard, and now Ryu Ji-yong? Do you think our set is some kind of night market where you can invite just anyone in?” His voice rose, and I was startled into silence.

I considered showing him the screenshots of the exchanges between Ryan and his previous co-stars that Ji-yong had just sent me.

The messages weren’t overly explicit, but they still contained inappropriate comments about his co-stars’ appearances, calling them “sexy” and making other suggestive remarks.

But now didn’t seem like the right time. Besides, the PD looked so annoyed with me that I doubted he wanted to hear anything I had to say.

“I’m sorry...” was all I could manage.

The PD sighed deeply. “We’re only a few weeks away from wrapping this up. Just please... can you hang in there a little bit longer?”

I met his gaze with what I hoped was a cold stare. “Sure,” I replied through clenched

teeth. “But I don’t feel safe at work, and since you’ve failed to ensure our safety, Ji-yong’s bodyguard will stay.”

Before he could respond, I quickly left his office, shutting the door behind me. My breath was uneven and quick, a mix of adrenaline and fear surging through me. I was terrified I might lose my courage and go back to apologize for being so straightforward.

But I was tired—tired of everyone asking us to pretend everything was fine and sick of Ryan getting a free pass, never being reprimanded for his behavior on set.

Once the commotion settled down, we continued the day with another scene involving coffee room chats, offering glimpses into the personal lives of my character, a medical intern, and her interactions with veteran doctors and nurses.

Ryan seemed more agitated than usual. As the cameras rolled, he intentionally brushed his hand against mine in a way that felt invasive. When I pulled away, he smirked and whispered, “Why are your boyfriend and his guard dog trailing you?” His voice dripped with sarcasm.

I looked him straight in the eye and whispered a warning, “I know what you’ve done in other dramas.

It’s only a matter of time before we have evidence, and your career will be at risk.

You’d better be careful.” For the first time, I noticed a flicker of fear in his eyes.

I felt a small sense of victory. We continued with the scenes, and after a grueling 14-hour shoot, we finally wrapped up and called it a day.

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Ji-yong

I finished the japchae with a noisy slurp, exclaiming in bliss. There's nothing like homemade food.

My mom grinned from across the table. "Slow down a bit, will you? There's plenty left, and you can even take some home later."

I finished my shoot early today, so I decided to visit my parents. With the drama nearing its end, there were fewer scenes left to film.

"This is nice," my mom said warmly. "You should visit us more often, Ji-yong! It's so lonely here now that it's just your father and me. Do you have another drama lined up soon?"

I stretched a bit before responding, "Yes, I do have some offers. But I'm thinking about taking a short break."

I heard my dad let out a short grunt. He's never been the talkative type, but since the incident a few years ago that strained our relationship, he's become even more reserved, only chiming in with a monosyllable or a grunt every now and then. I smirked at him, used to his ways by now.

Sensing the tension between us, my mom quickly retreated to the kitchen, returning with a plate of sliced watermelon, as if the fruit could somehow smooth things over.

“Ji-yong,” she began, her voice carrying the unspoken concern of my dad as she carefully poked at a piece of watermelon, “taking care of yourself is important, but you know an actor’s career is short-lived. You should be working hard while you can.”

I sighed inwardly. Not this again. It was the same old speech I’d heard from my parents and even from Mrs. Lee, my agent, just the other day.

“Don’t worry about me,” I reassured them, trying to keep my tone light.

“I’ve invested in stocks and real estate, so even if I lose my job tomorrow, I won’t need to move back in with you. ”

I almost stuck my tongue out to tease them but held back, sensing that might be too much given the tension in the air.

But parents will be parents, I suppose. They often forget that I’m a 36-year-old actor earning on average 300 to 500 million won per episode—one of South Korea’s highest-paid stars.

My mom shot me a playful glare. “You know we wouldn’t mind if you moved back in with us,” she said with a sigh.

Then her tone shifted slightly. “And what’s this I’m hearing about you and your co-star?

Yoon Min-hee, is it? That photo is so awful, I practically jumped out of my chair when I saw it online. ”

I took a deep breath, bracing myself as the conversation grew more delicate. “Yes, it was unfortunate, but honestly, nothing happened between Min-hee and me. I just took

her home because she was too drunk.”

My mom let out a small, annoyed noise, clearly irritated. I could sense that she was secretly relieved she didn’t have a daughter like Min-hee to worry about in moments like these. “You should be careful. These kinds of gossip and rumors could damage your career,” she said.

I didn’t say much in response, just offered a small acknowledgment. I wasn’t in the mood to prolong the discussion.

She continued to eat the watermelon before changing the subject.

“Oh right, for Ji-ho’s anniversary this Sunday, did you buy your present yet?

We got him this giant plush, but we’re thinking of buying another one—maybe something more educational.

What do you think?” She showed me a picture of a giant blue penguin plush wearing glasses and a helmet on her phone.

I nodded in silence, knowing we had reached the main topic of my visit. “Yeah, I bought my present too. But Mom...” I hesitated before continuing, feeling the need to give them a heads-up. “I... will not be coming alone.”

I could see my mother’s eyes widen with curiosity. “Oh, I see,” she said, nodding in understanding. “So, this... friend of yours—how long have you been together? Who is she? It’s not Min-hee, is it?” Her tone was a mix of excitement and caution.

I snickered at her enthusiasm and quick wit. No wonder she was the first woman nominated as a professor in Biochemistry at the Korea Military Academy. I understood her excitement, though, as it had been a long time since I last introduced a

‘friend’ to the family.

“No, it’s not Min-hee. But you do know her. She was my co-star from the previous drama, Princess of Cosmos —Han Yumi.”

I heard my dad clear his throat, signaling his disapproval.

My mom tapped his arm to warn him. “That’s wonderful!

” she exclaimed. “I’ve always thought she was naturally beautiful, but there’s something more to her looks—a hidden charm, I should say.

She also seems kind, and her acting is truly impressive. ”

My mom continued with excitement, “So what do her parents do?”

Ah, here goes the classic question from Korean parents, I thought. In Korea, family and family background are given a lot of importance. I knew this question would come, but it didn’t make it any easier to answer.

“Her dad was a pilot and her mom was a nurse...” I started to answer my mom’s question before getting to the main point. Isn’t it strange to talk about the past lives of deceased people? It’s as if their entire lives are reduced to just a few details once they’re gone.

My mom nodded in acknowledgement but looked a bit confused by my choice of words. “So what do they do now?”

“They passed away when Yumi was in her 20s,” I finally added.

There was a long pause.

My dad broke the silence with a sarcastic snicker and started to retreat to his room but was stopped by my mom. She whispered a short, inaudible warning to him, accompanied by a strict look, and my dad returned to the table.

I nearly laughed out loud seeing my dad, a retired Chief of Naval Operations and one of the most prominent figures in the military in the country, being completely obedient to my mom.

“I see...” My mom responded carefully, choosing her words diplomatically. “It seems like a very complicated family situation. Are you... sure about your relationship with her, dear?”

I felt frustration beginning to boil inside me. “I’m a thousand percent sure about her,” I answered firmly. “It’s not her fault that her parents passed away; she couldn’t choose that.”

Just like I couldn’t choose to be born into this family with my dad as my father , I thought silently.

“I know that,” she said. “But I just want you to be careful with your choice, especially when it comes to a partner. Sometimes, when you really like someone, you might overlook practical considerations. But love alone isn’t enough to sustain a relationship.

And being someone as famous as you is not easy.

.. there are many people who might try to take advantage. ..”

“Mom, please,” I cut in, my tone sharper than usual.

“Don’t you think I know that? Yumi is an accomplished actress herself; she doesn’t

want anything from my fame or wealth.

She... is the warmest and strongest person I've ever known.

And you better show nothing but kindness to her during Ji-ho's birthday. ”

My parents looked a bit taken aback by my stern behavior. I sighed, not wanting to pick a fight with them, but lately, it seemed like everyone was being unfair to Yumi.

“What I'm trying to say is... I want to share my family with her, to let her know she could be a part of it too,” I added gently, hoping to ease the tension. “Could you do that for me?”

My mom appeared surprised by both my serious tone and the direction I intended for my relationship with Yumi.

To my surprise, my dad snickered again, though not with his usual sarcastic tone.

“Ji-yong has made his choice,” my dad finally said, his deep voice resonating.

“We should reserve our judgment until we meet her in person. It's not wise to judge someone solely based on their family background. ”

Ah, a sensitive subject. Being an orphan himself, my father faced a difficult childhood.

Both of his parents had died during the war in 1953, when he was just a baby.

Raised by his grandparents, he eventually chose to become a soldier, a decision that I believe was deeply motivated by his personal upbringing.

My dad finally retreated to his room for real, likely unable to cope after showing so much emotion in one night. I exchanged a look with my mom.

“Alright then,” my mom finally said, breaking the silence. “We’ll meet her and see for ourselves.” I helped her with the dishes and mentioned that I should be heading out soon.

As we walked together to the door, my mom clutched my arm and handed me a container with the remaining japchae.

“I trust you’re old enough to make wise decisions, Ji-yong,” she said with a warm smile.

“Since when did our little Ji-yong become so wise and handsome?” She squeezed my cheek affectionately, ignoring my silent protest.

“You know... I’m glad you’re introducing your... girlfriend to us,” she added in a whisper. “Who knows, we might have another grandson or granddaughter soon.”

“Eomma!” I warned her. She let out a small, cheeky laugh before letting me go.

A few days passed by and we finally wrapped up the drama. As is typical on the last day of shooting, there was a mix of flowers, celebrations, and tears. Despite doing this multiple times, the final day always holds a special magic.

Min-hee and I exchanged somewhat awkward congratulations.

Along with the PD, assistant PD, and the entire crew, we toasted the drama’s completion with champagne.

After taking a final group photo and saying our goodbyes, I headed home, feeling a

brief sense of relief at the closure of another cycle of drama shooting.

We never found out who shared the questionable photo of Min-hee and me in the car with the press.

But after I pressured my agent, they reluctantly issued a joint statement, explaining that nothing happened between Min-hee and me, without further elaboration.

The rumors and speculations were still circulating online, of course, but at least it brought me some small internal peace and helped ease the tension in my real off-screen relationship with Yumi.

Yumi greeted me with a warm hug as soon as I walked through the door. “Congratulations on finishing your drama!” she said, holding me tightly. “I can’t wait to watch it.”

Grinning, I returned her hug and kissed her softly, grateful to have her waiting for me at home.

Since we’ve been practically living together these past few days, I gave her my digicode so she could come straight to my place after work.

Yumi’s warmth enveloped me, washing away the exhaustion from the shoot.

I held her close, breathing in her familiar scent.

I’m relieved to see she looks so much better now, especially after everything that happened with Ryan on set.

I definitely owe my bodyguard a huge thank you and a substantial bonus at the end of Yumi’s shoot.

“I missed you,” I murmured, my voice muffled against her shoulder.

“Me too,” she whispered back. We moved to the living room, where the dim light created a cozy atmosphere.

Yumi let out a deep sigh as she sank into the couch, resting her head on my shoulder as we sat together in silence. Eventually, she turned to me, her eyes reflecting a mixture of happiness and something else—worry? Sadness?

“I’m really happy for you, Ji-yong,” she began, her voice soft but steady. “Finishing your drama is such a big deal. But...” She paused, searching for the right words. “I feel a bit envious because I still have a few days left to shoot my drama with Ryan Kim.”

“I know,” I whispered, kissing the top of her head. “But it’s almost over. Now that I’ve finished my drama, I can be there with you every day. I’ll follow you everywhere and keep an eye on that bastard,” I said, half-joking.

A smile spread across her face, her eyes twinkling with amusement. “Thank you, but I’m not a baby, you know. And with your bodyguard and the evidence we have, I think Ryan won’t dare to bother me anymore.”

She looked up at me with a glimmer of excitement in her eyes before continuing, “How about we order some takeout and watch a movie? My treat, to celebrate the end of your drama!”

I felt a surge of affection as I looked at her, realizing how much these simple moments meant to me. Playing house with Yumi felt like the most natural and comforting thing in the world. In fact, I found myself wanting to have her here with me forever.

“Sounds perfect,” I said, my heart lightening at the thought of a relaxed evening spent together. “You know how much I love your taste in terrible movies.”

Thinking about our movie marathons we’d had in the past—filled with laughs, silly commentary, and some truly questionable films with awful special effects and costumes—brought a chuckle to my lips. I leaned in for another kiss, savoring the closeness and warmth between us.

While Yumi busied herself with ordering the takeout on her phone, I watched her with a contented smile. Her excitement was infectious, and the idea of spending the evening wrapped in comfort and her company felt perfect.

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Yumi

The weekend arrived , and with it, the daunting task of figuring out what to wear to Ji-yong's mysterious birthday party invitation.

I had no idea what to expect, so I opted for something casual yet stylish: a knee-length red satin dress with a flattering scoop neckline, long sleeves and a cinched waist.

Armed with a small gift—a sleek notebook—I arrived at the address Ji-yong had given me. It was a posh high-rise apartment in the suburbs of Seoul, about an hour's drive from my place.

Stepping inside the unit, I was immediately struck by the lively atmosphere: the room was decked out with colorful balloons and dinosaur decorations.

It took me a solid five seconds to realize that I had stumbled into a child's birthday party at his parents' place.

My heart skipped a beat as I realized Ji-yong had invited me to his nephew's second birthday party and to meet his parents—an obvious milestone in a relationship that implied things were getting serious.

But we weren't even officially together... Were we?

Ji-yong greeted me warmly and introduced me to his parents, saying, “Mom, Dad... this is Yumi.” He didn’t add any title or status to my name. Bewildered, I managed only a deep bow in return.

He then introduced me to his brother, Ji-sung, his sister-in-law, Eun-bi, and the birthday boy, the adorable two-year-old Ji-ho. They all greeted me warmly, though I sensed a hint of aloofness from his dad, which made me feel slightly out of place.

If they were questioning why Ji-yong had brought me as his plus-one, they were either hiding their curiosity out of politeness or I assumed Ji-yong had briefed them beforehand.

His nephew, Ji-ho, was brimming with excitement, darting around the room in his small, pointy birthday hat and delighting in the colorful candies, cake, and gifts.

Suddenly, my gift felt completely inadequate.

I gave Ji-yong a frustrated look, and he nodded in understanding.

“Oh, right. Yumi, thank you for the gift for Ji-ho,” he said, pulling out another present—a musical book with animal sounds—and adding it to the growing pile of gifts. He gave me a reassuring wink.

After a bit of small talk, I did my best to fit in by helping Ji-yong’s mom and sister-in-law in the kitchen with the dinner preparations, despite their insistence that I should relax as a guest. I felt compelled to help out rather than just sit idly.

We eventually enjoyed a simple yet hearty homemade meal.

The table was spread with over ten types of banchan, including fresh cucumber kimchi, potato salad, chive pancakes, japchae, and a variety of other delicious

appetizers.

The seaweed soup, a traditional must for birthdays, was added just before we dove into the main course: grilled beef ribs, or sogalbi.

Friendly exchanges took place around the dinner table, and I learned that Ji-yong came from a distinguished military family.

His father, recently retired, had served as the Chief of Naval Operations.

His brother is currently working in the Air Force, while his mother, still active, is a university professor at Korea Military Academy.

His sister-in-law is a retired Olympic gymnast. I felt small and insignificant in their company.

“Yumi, you were recently in a drama with Ji-yong, weren’t you?” his mom asked with a warm smile, clearly trying to include me in the conversation.

“We all loved Princess of Cosmos , didn’t we, dear?” she added, glancing at his dad, who responded with a subdued grunt of agreement.

Ji-yong nodded enthusiastically and added, “Yes, and Yumi has also had numerous roles in theater. She won the Best Actress award at the Performing Arts Awards two years ago, didn’t you, Yumi?”

I nodded in surprise; I hadn’t realized Ji-yong had noticed that award. We continued discussing various topics related to acting until the cake was finally brought in. Ji-ho blew out the candles with great excitement and then began opening the presents one by one.

After opening “my gift”, Ji-ho eagerly activated the cat and cow sounds and immediately began mimicking them, which made everyone at the table burst into laughter.

Soon after, it was bedtime for the birthday boy. He even gave me a hug before settling down to sleep, leaving the adults with a peaceful moment to themselves.

Ji-yong led me to his parents’ patio and closed the door behind us while the others continued chatting and enjoying dessert inside. I immediately playfully punched him in the arm. “Why didn’t you tell me you were inviting me to your nephew’s birthday party with your family?”

He rubbed his arm with a dramatic flair but looked genuinely amused. “Well, I’m sorry. But would you have come if I had told you in advance?”

“Hmm... maybe not,” I admitted. “But I would have been much more prepared!” I added with a touch of frustration.

Ji-yong laughed softly, and after a brief silence, I said, “It’s nice getting to know your family; they’re all so kind. But I feel really insignificant compared to them... and... I have the impression your dad doesn’t like me very much.”

“You’re not insignificant,” he said, then scoffed and added, “And don’t worry about my dad; it’s me he’s disappointed with.”

My eyes widened in surprise. “Disappointed in you?? Why?” I asked urgently, unable to hide my disbelief.

Didn’t he notice Ji-yong’s long list of accolades? Not long ago, he even won another award as Most Popular Actor. What kind of father would be disappointed with such achievements from his son?

Ji-yong sighed, as if I had opened a Pandora's box of discussion. "Well, it all started when I was born premature and was a frail child. I was a small boy, and he was determined to make me grow stronger and follow his path in the military."

I snorted unintentionally. There's nothing about him that is small .

Ji-yong continued, seemingly unaware of my reaction.

"When I was a teenager, my father tried to bond with me and my brother by watching a lot of historic and military films together. Saving Soldier Brian was our favorite. But that film didn't inspire me to become a soldier; I wanted to be an actor. "

"So imagine his disappointment when, after completing my mandatory military service at 21, I enrolled in drama school instead of a military academy like him and my brother Ji-sung." He said with a thoughtful smile.

"We kept it a secret from him until he eventually found out. He didn't speak to me for almost two years.

To him, pursuing acting seemed like a surefire way to end up with a difficult, unstable, and jobless future.

I understand he acted out of concern... But now, even when I proved him wrong, he still won't take me seriously. "

I listened intently as Ji-yong shared this surprisingly vulnerable side of himself, his face etched with melancholy. The image of a young Ji-yong clashing with his father over career choices was oddly endearing.

If Ji-yong had followed his father's wishes, there might never have been any romantic dramas starring him, and we wouldn't have met on set.

“Wow, so you’re basically the Korean version of Rocky, but with less punching and more acting?” I couldn’t resist teasing him, but quickly switched to more serious tone under his playful glare.

“It takes courage to pursue your dreams, especially when it goes against your family’s wishes. You’ve proven them wrong,” I said, trying to sound supportive. “And it’s often hard for a dad to say what he feels... But I can see it in his eyes; I think he is very proud of you.”

We heard a tap from inside, calling us back for dessert. Before we went in, he stopped me and asked, “Yumi, for Chuseok next week, would you like to go somewhere, just the two of us?”

I beamed and nodded happily. It would be great to finally have a few days off after the intense, back-to-back drama shooting that started last year, especially with Chuseok marking the end of my Hospital Emergency shoot.

Inside, the table was once again piled with sliced melon and strawberries.

Ji-yong’s brother, Ji-sung, was almost as reserved as their father, a stark contrast to Ji-yong’s outgoing personality.

Despite this, the brothers seemed close.

I didn’t get much chance to talk with his sister-in-law, Eun-bi, who went to check on Ji-ho.

Seeing their dad heading to the kitchen to put away the plates, I decided to join him for a chat.

“Hello, Mr. Ryu,” I said, gathering my courage. “Thank you for the invitation. I

really enjoyed the dinner.”

He seemed slightly taken aback by my approach. “Oh, it’s nothing,” he replied, preparing to head back out. I gently stopped him and added, “It must be tough to see Ji-yong often with his busy schedule.”

He gave a slight grunt of acknowledgment, still looking a bit puzzled.

“He recently won the Most Popular Actor award. Did he tell you?” I continued.

“Oh,” Mr. Ryu replied, “I saw that on TV.”

I nodded. “Yes... and last year, he won the Best Actor award.”

Mr. Ryu raised his eyebrows, curious about where I was going with this.

“But that’s not even the most amazing thing about him.

I spent six months on set with him, day and night, and he was the most caring person ever.

He’s humble, kindhearted and never hesitates to help others.

I feel incredibly lucky to have met him. ”

I continued, “He never said it directly, but I know he’s made many donations to various causes. He’s truly a generous person.”

Mr. Ryu nodded quietly, seemingly unsure of how to respond. “I’m not just saying this because I’m his... best friend. But you’ve raised Ji-yong to be a wonderful man. Thank you for that.” I concluded with a respectful bow.

There was a brief moment of silence, and I felt a tinge of awkwardness before I added, “I’m not as busy as Ji-yong, so if you’d like, I could keep you and Mrs. Ryu updated on his awards and other news from time to time,” I offered, slightly hesitant, worried I might be overstepping.

Mr. Ryu’s face softened into a small smile, and I felt a wave of relief. “That would be great,” he said before heading out for real this time.

I followed him outside and ran into Ji-yong in the hallway. He was carrying a stack of plates and looked at me with curiosity. “What did you two talk about?”

“It’s a secret,” I replied with a cheeky grin, sticking my tongue out as I made my way back to the dining room to join the others.

A few more days passed, and I finally wrapped up shooting for Hospital Emergency . I’d never felt such immense relief in my life—I was on the verge of tears from sheer joy. Da-eun hugged me tightly, clearly just as relieved that the show was finally over.

Not having to deal with Ryan every day was a huge relief, and I was proud to have stuck it out until the end. Although there would still be some promotional interviews and the chance of running into him at awards, at least we wouldn't be seeing each other for over 12 hours a day anymore.

I decided against pursuing legal action. After Ji-yong and his bodyguard visited Ryan, he backed off, and I realized I didn’t have enough evidence for legal action.

During the PD’s thank-you speech, the atmosphere felt awkward and insincere, with Ryan Kim nowhere in sight. I decided to make a quick exit, apologizing to everyone and explaining that I had other plans and would have to skip the celebratory party.

As I stepped outside, I saw Ji-yong waiting by his car with a big smile and a bouquet

of flowers.

I ran up to him and gave him the biggest hug, not caring at all about who might be watching.

He lifted me off the ground, and I giggled as he spun me around, blissfully unaware of the dozens of film crew members observing us.

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Ji-yong

“So, how is it?” Yumi twirled slightly to show off her outfit: a beige cardigan with heart-shaped buttons and a floral skirt in deep burgundy and gold.

I’d promised to pick her up in the traditional way, as was customary when a man asked a woman on a date.

Taking in her appearance, I nodded in approval.

“You look very pretty,” I said, admiring her outfit before picking up her small bag for our overnight stay.

I was a bit disappointed that our trip would be just two days instead of three, since she insisted I spend one day of the Chuseok holiday with my family.

But never mind. We could still enjoy our holidays later.

Even though offers for commercials, dramas, and films continued to line up for me (despite the photo scandal), I requested a short break of a few months before starting my next project.

My agency initially tried to talk me out of it, but I stood firm.

I wanted to spend more time with Yumi outside of our places, especially now that she

had also wrapped up her latest drama.

“So you still won’t tell me where we’re going?” Yumi asked as she settled into the car, trying to fasten her seatbelt.

I nodded toward the GPS screen. “Well... it’s going to be a long drive, about four hours. Get ready for a road trip, co-pilot.”

She laughed easily. “I’ll agree to go with you, but only if we stop frequently at rest areas.”

“Rest area snacks are the best,” I replied. “But I probably won’t be able to get out of the car to buy them,” I added, recalling the commotion I caused at the restaurant the other day.

“Don’t worry, I’ll do that for you!” she offered.

After three hours on the road, three rest stops, and way too many sotteok-sotteok and sweet potato sticks, I was starting to get frustrated—we were way behind schedule.

I’d planned a full afternoon: a scenic trail walk in Danyanggang Jando Trail, a visit to the Mancheonha Skywalk, and enjoying autumn foliage at Guinsa Temple.

But at this pace, we’d be lucky to get there before dark.

Sensing my frustration, Yumi gave my hand a light pat and continued singing along to the playlist she’d picked for the trip.

It was filled with classic Korean songs, and she’d been enthusiastically belting them out for a while, though her off-key singing made it clear that singing wasn’t her strong suit.

I shot her a playful glare but couldn't help chuckling at her infectious enthusiasm.

"You look so happy," I said with a smile.

"I am!" she exclaimed, her words punctuated by her singing. "And I've been thinking... I want to take a break from TV series and return to theater. I'm so much happier there. Plus, there's less... workplace drama." She giggled, her sarcasm evident.

"That's great for you," I said. "I fully support you."

She nodded, "Even though the pay isn't as good, I think the career span is longer. Plus, I could still produce plays or become a scriptwriter when I'm older and wrinkly."

"That will never happen," I told her, pinching her cheek playfully.

"And I suppose you'll continue to be the main star in every romantic drama," she teased. "And keep charming your co-stars and taking them home when they're too drunk."

I pressed my lips into a straight line, though a tiny smile slipped through. "Are you still upset about the photo of me and Min-hee?"

"I'm not angry," Yumi replied, her tone clearly annoyed.

I pinched her cheek playfully. "You look adorable when you're jealous."

She pouted slightly, turning her head away and making a "humph" sound.

Trying to be serious, I said, "I promise it won't happen again. I'll leave my co-

workers to fend for themselves, even if they're passed out on the street."

"Well, I suppose you could help them," she said, "but you understand how confusing the whole situation was for me, right? Can you imagine if I were in that photo with... I don't know, Ryan Kim or someone else?"

"I get it," I said, almost adding "babe" but catching myself since we hadn't decided on what to call each other yet.

"The photo looked bad, and the rumors were awful, but honestly, nothing happened with Min-hee. I... just want to be with you." I looked into her eyes and then, with my free hand, took hers in mine. "I promise."

Yumi stared at me for a moment, her pout gradually easing. Then, a small smile began to form on her lips. The tension that had been there seemed to melt away, replaced by a more relaxed atmosphere.

Not long after we were off the highway, she suddenly spotted something on the roadside and urged me to stop. "Here, here! Can you stop here?" she said urgently.

A bit puzzled by her request, I pulled the car over. "Wait here for a minute, okay?" she asked before getting out.

A few minutes later, she returned to the car and said, "You can get out now!"

I scrunched up my nose in confusion but turned off the car as she had asked. I put on my mask instinctively, even though it seemed like there were no other people around. Before long, I saw what had her so excited: a roadside tent selling udon, tteokbokki, and odeng—a classic childhood treat.

Despite knowing we'd definitely be late for the schedule I'd planned, a smile spread

across my face. She had remembered that I wanted to visit a street-food stall, but it's usually too crowded in Seoul for me to do so without being recognized.

"I asked the ajumma, and she said she knows you from TV," Yumi explained. "But she promised to shoo away any other customers. So, in other words, I've turned this place into a private VIP spot just for you." With a proud smile, she gestured dramatically, inviting me into the tent.

"Please, order whatever you want! It's my treat!

" she said again, making me snicker with her excitement.

We ended up ordering way too much comfort food.

The steam from the stove mingled with the crisp autumn air as we enjoyed the spicy tteokbokki, hot udon, and odeng skewers.

It felt just like the old days with Ji-sung during our college and high school years.

"I remember my mom and sometimes my grandmother would get so upset when they found out Ji-sung and I snuck out to eat these treats. We'd come home from school so full that we'd end up skipping their homemade dinners," I told Yumi between bites of odeng.

"Your childhood sounds like so much fun," she replied. "I always wanted a brother or a sister."

I nodded in agreement. "I can't imagine growing up without Ji-sung. He was always there to stand up for me against my dad or school bullies," I recalled.

We continued eating in silence, reminiscing about the past. After settling the bill and

giving the ahjumma my signed autograph and photo as she had requested, we headed back to the car.

With it being too late to fit in all the activities I'd planned, I decided to head straight to the guest house.

We could relax there and perhaps enjoy a dip in the private spa.

Anyway, there might be too many people at the activities I planned, and I'm not looking forward to another fan fiasco like the last time at the restaurant.

After a few more minutes of driving, we ended up arguing about which turn to take.

The road was steep and poorly marked, with the GPS proving to be misleading.

As darkness settled in and the absence of other vehicles became noticeable, we found ourselves somewhat off-track, surrounded by thick forest on both sides of the road.

"I think we should turn left after the bridge instead of going straight," Yumi said, peering at the now unclear GPS.

"No, I'm pretty sure we should keep going straight. I came this way a long time ago with my family, and I remember this bridge," I insisted.

She looked skeptical but recognized the typical stubbornness in a man's need to be right in situations like this.

We drove a bit further but soon encountered a dead end, with what appeared to be a pond or river blocking the road. As I attempted to reverse, the car suddenly came to a halt.

“Oh, come on, what now?!” Frustration began to build. I noticed the car battery signal blinking rapidly. Despite my lack of knowledge about car issues, I tried to open the hatch and take a look.

There was no smoke, which seemed like a good sign. However, aside from that, I had no clue how to get the car running again.

I glanced at my phone; it was nearly 9 PM. There was no way to call Sangwook to come fetch us from a place like this.

I climbed back into the driver’s seat, deliberately avoiding Yumi’s smug expression. She looked like she was relishing the moment and planning to tease me endlessly, but I wasn’t going to let her get to me. I shot her a quick look before turning my attention back to the steering wheel.

“So, I haven’t told you yet, but here’s the surprise,” I said with a hint of defiance. “We’re actually going camping here.”

She let out a disapproving “tsk-tsk,” as if holding back a “I told you so.”

“I actually noticed on the GPS that there were more houses and main roads if we had turned left,” she said, unable to resist teasing me. “But it’s okay,” she added, gazing at me playfully. “I forgive you. You’re just too handsome; I think it’s driving me crazy.”

I playfully growled, “Come here,” as I shifted my seat to make room and reclined it halfway before pulling her onto my lap.

She giggled and squirmed a bit but didn’t resist much. Soon, she was settled on top of me. The closeness in the small space of the car sent thrills down my spine. I could smell her scent and feel her delicate, tiny frame pressed against me.

She looked deeply into my eyes, and without much thought, I muttered, “I love you, Yumi.” I said it sincerely. “But you know that already, right?”

After a brief pause, she smiled. “It took you long enough,” she said, gently cupping my face and giving me a soft kiss on the lips. Her fingers lightly traced my jawline, sending a shiver down my spine.

“I love you too, Ji-yong,” she whispered.

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:42 am

The gentle kisses soon grew more passionate, bordering on something raw and instinctual. Our tongues intertwined as we explored each other. Our breaths grew heavy as I slid my hand through the small opening in her cardigan, gently caressing her.

She moaned softly, clearly craving more. I watched her, lost in her desire, feeling a somewhat perverted satisfaction knowing exactly how to fulfill that longing. Her cardigan, adorned with heart-shaped buttons that were easily undone, was a perfect match for our urgent need.

In the confined space, I bypassed dealing with her bra and lifted it instead, showering her nipples with kisses and gentle nibbles.

“Yes...” she nodded and sighed, urging me on.

I smirked at her impatience, continuing with slow kisses and nibbles, traveling from her breasts back to her neck, making sure not to miss a single patch of skin.

Since she was wearing a skirt, it was easy for me to slip one hand under her waist, and she let out a quiet breath.

I began to caress her there, in the sensitive part of her core.

She moved with me, guiding my touch to where she felt the most pleasure, before shifting against my growing arousal.

A gasp escaped my lips, feeling her warmth and moisture even through our clothes.

Her delicate fingers began to trace the zipper of my pants, slowly unzipping it to explore and caress where I felt the most pleasure. I sighed deeply, lost in a haze of sensation as I surrendered completely to the waves of pleasure she evoked.

“Yumi...” I breathed out, a plea in my voice.

As if we shared an unspoken understanding, she positioned herself above me, and I felt her warmth enveloping me.

She let out a quiet exclamation when our bodies finally met, moving slowly down to bring us fully together.

She continued her deliberate, unhurried movements, driving me to the edge of sanity.

I let her take the lead for a few moments, indulging her as she took inches of me, before gently shifting our position and pinned her against the seat.

Although our movements were still restricted by the tight space, I quickened my pace with deep and rapid thrusts, driven by our mutual need.

I could see she was nearing her release as her breath became ragged and her mouth fell open in a silent scream.

Each gasp and shudder from her sent waves of pleasure through me, amplifying the sensations until I was completely immersed in the moment.

My own breaths came in quick, shallow bursts as the pressure built.

The tight space and the shared intimacy heightened everything, and I found myself overwhelmed by the raw, unfiltered pleasure of our connection.

The way her body responded to me, the warmth and softness, left me breathless and consumed by the experience.

But suddenly, I paused and withdrew, causing her to look at me in surprise, as if I had betrayed her. I responded with a playful smile, deciding it was time to teach her a lesson in patience.

Gently, I started to build up the sensation from the beginning, being careful not to overexcite her with just my fingers. I added another finger while my thumb continued to caress her favorite spots. She whimpered, as if pleading for me to bring her to the release she desired.

But not yet. I wanted to explore every bit of pleasure our bodies could experience tonight. After all, we had all night to savor it.

I continued to shower kisses on her nipples and her lips while my hands explored her core. The confined space made it difficult to do everything I wanted, especially tasting her. I made my peace with it, knowing there would be plenty of time for us to explore further later.

Still partially clothed, the dew forming on the car windows heightened the excitement even more. After the incident with Min-hee the other day, I decided to add an extra layer of dark-tinted windows to my car to ensure my privacy.

“Ji-yong, please...” she begged, her fingers turning white as she clung to the top of the seat, lost in the flood of pleasure.

Her urgent look ignited my own desires. I felt like I was on the edge of a precipice, teetering between control and surrender.

I shifted, replacing my fingers with myself while still caressing her down there with

my hand, feeling her grip tighten around me as I guided us both to a shared release.

As the waves of our shared release began to subside, a profound sense of exhaustion mixed with satisfaction settled over me.

I pulled back slightly, my breath coming in ragged gasps as I glanced at Yumi.

Her eyes, still closed in the aftermath of pleasure, reflected a mixture of vulnerability and contentment.

Her breathing was still uneven, but there was a serene smile on her lips.

I began to feel the effects of the cramped space with a cramp in my leg. "Ow!" I exclaimed, quickly putting my clothes back on.

I exited the car and moved to the rear, where there was more room.

I cracked the window open just a bit to let in a hint of fresh autumn air and invited her to join me.

I flipped the backseat and spread out a duvet, creating a cozier space in the back.

Soon, we were nestled together in the makeshift bed, wrapped in a warm embrace.

I wrapped my arms around her, drawing her closer, and we settled into a comfortable silence, savoring the closeness and the calm after the intensity.

"Yumi," I said softly, brushing my thumb over her cheek. "You okay? I'm really sorry we ended up here. I wanted to take you to Danyang."

She opened her eyes and met my gaze with a warm smile. "Mm-hmm," she

murmured. “This, right now, with you, is the happiest I’ve been in my life.”

My heart swelled with happiness. I gently kissed her forehead and whispered, “Me too. Being with you is everything I could have hoped for.”

Source Creation Date: July 31, 2025, 2:42 am

“W hoa, I can’t believe this,” Yumi exclaimed, her eyes glued to the TV. She tucked her legs under herself on the sofa, cozy in her loose pajamas and with a cup of tea in hand.

Ji-yong froze mid-step, his eyes widening in shock as he listened to the evening news.

“The famous actor Ryan Kim, who holds dual citizenship, is now facing extradition from Canada to South Korea. This comes after an investigation into allegations of sexual harassment and non-consensual relations with a minor,” the broadcaster announced solemnly on TV.

Beside it, a photo frame of Yumi and Ji-yong taken on the set of Princess of Cosmos stood next to a few mini-figurines. Since Yumi moved into Ji-yong’s place, he finally relented, allowing her to decorate parts of the apartment and add some color.

As the broadcaster announced more details about Ryan Kim’s case, Yumi and Ji-yong exchanged glances.

“Did you...?” Yumi began, her voice trailing off as she looked at Ji-yong. He shook his head in response, confirming her unspoken question.

Two years had passed since Yumi last saw Ryan Kim. After wrapping up their drama Hospital Emergency , she still had to see him for a few promotional activities, during which she remained completely professional.

Despite the drama’s tumultuous background, Hospital Emergency received excellent reviews and became one of the top ten most-watched dramas worldwide.

However, Yumi was unsure how to react to this success, as seeing the scenes on TV with Ryan Kim only reminded her of the daily hardships and threats she faced while working with him on set.

With Ji-yong by her side for all the follow-up tasks and staying in the background, Ryan didn't dare to make a move. Looking back, it was a truly unsettling time.

Ji-yong and Yumi managed to keep their relationship private until about a year ago, when an Asian paparazzo caught them on vacation in Greece. With their secret out, they had no choice but to make a long-overdue public announcement.

Fortunately, the announcement didn't create much of a stir, as the timing was less precarious. Ji-yong was occupied with filming an action movie rather than a romantic drama, and Yumi had returned to theater production, stepping away from the spotlight of screens and cameras.

"He really is a piece of shit," Ji-yong cursed, unable to hold himself, as the broadcaster continued with the news about Ryan.

"Not only did he mess things up two years ago with you, but now he's ruining tonight too." Ji-yong sighed, revealing a large box with a bow on top that he had been holding.

Yumi got up from the sofa, her excitement tinged with a bit of concern. She patted Ji-yong's arm to reassure him. "Don't worry... nothing can ruin tonight," she said with a wide smile. "Is this... an early Christmas gift for me?" Unable to contain her excitement, she jumped up and down a little.

Ji-yong nodded with a soft smile as the box shifted slightly, making a faint sound. Yumi's eyes lit up with excitement as she eagerly guessed what might be inside.

"Is this... what I think it is?" she asked, her voice full of anticipation. Ji-yong handed

her the box, and she carefully opened it.

Inside, she found a tiny tabby kitten with a dark chocolate coat, meowing and looking a bit frightened. Overcome with joy, Yumi let out an ecstatic squeal only bats could hear, her excitement barely contained.

“I was going to wait until Christmas to give you this,” Ji-yong said, his voice slightly hurried. “But since the shelter’s closed for the holidays, I had to pick up the kitten earlier than planned. Do you like him? We can come up with a name together.”

Yumi was so absorbed in gently cradling and petting the kitten that she didn’t respond right away. Her eyes were shimmering with happy tears, and she could only nod.

She noticed that the kitten had a loose bow around its neck, which prompted her to carefully remove it. Underneath was a beautiful ring with a pear-shaped diamond.

Yumi’s eyes widened in surprise as she saw the ring. She glanced up at Ji-yong, not quite believing what she was seeing.

Ji-yong took a deep breath, his voice filled with emotion. “Yumi, I love you so much and want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

He gazed at her for a moment before adding, “Will you marry me?”

Without hesitation, Yumi gently set the kitten down and leaped into Ji-yong’s arms, her legs wrapped around his waist and her face beaming with joy. “A thousand times yes,” she said through her tears, her voice muffled against his shoulder, overflowing with emotion.