

Mall Bratz: A Wedding Song

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Chapter 1

“Suck it in, Little Star. I’m not paying for a resizing in a few months, and I know we’ll have no problem getting that extra pudge off by then. Who knew my little girl was such a stress eater?”

Grace Rim, a woman anyone would be hard pressed to find in anything other than a perfectly polished state, actually had a few hairs fall out of place, as she stuck a knee into her child’s back, and pulled the strings of a heavily boned white corset as tight as she could without splitting the poor twenty-five-year-old in half.

“But she’s, like, even skinnier than she was in high school, Mrs. R.” said a perky little blond, her long hair an explosion of curls, sitting in a nearby chair, sipping champagne. “Maybe she didn’t gain any weight, but you lost some?”

“Wha...” Even Grace found herself pulled into Emery’s world for just a moment, as she pondered the question, before shoving it out of her head. “How in the world does that make any sense... you know what, nevermind.”

If the immigrant mother’s eyebrow could have detached from her face, it may very well have torn a hole in the roof of the upscale bridal boutique in that quiet borough of sunny California.

“Song, are you sure Emily couldn’t come for a visit before the wedding? She’d probably be much more useful, I’m sure.”

“Mummy, please be nice. Emery is only trying to be helpful. Besides, she’s my maid of honor, not Emily. Miss Perfect couldn’t get any time away from her fancy new job anyway, even if I wanted her to... and I’ve only gained five pounds!”

Grace’s only child, Song Kelly Rim, stood atop a tailor’s riser, dressed only in lacy white lingerie, and an evil victorian torture device, as he thought of the shapewear. It wasn’t the first time having this conversation with his mother, and he knew it wouldn’t be the last.

“That’s five pounds too many, Little Star. If you’re going to be running things one day, you have to remember, beauty is our business. Not to mention your wedding photos will be hanging up in the shops. Can you think of a better advertisement for our services than my own beautiful daughter, shining brightly on the happiest day of her life?”

The matriarch recalled her own mother pinching her sides, and calling her a cow before her own traditional Korean wedding. Back then, she wore hanbok, so she was able to get away with a little stress eating, but her Little Star, in a pristine white, western-style gown, wouldn’t have the luxury.

“I know I can’t, Mrs. R” Emery chimed in. As the Rims continued to bicker, having grown bored, the ditzy girl’s mind drifted back to her teenage years, and the antics of her two best friends.

Back when Emery was eighteen-years-old, the chipper blond was known as Emer, and along with his best friends, Song and Emmanuel, the trio of hoodlums were a force to be reckoned with... at least as far as their would-be ring-leader was concerned.

In her life before being Song's bimbo maid of honor, Emer Ottensen was Song's charisma on tap, in their bargain basement criminal enterprise. Selling prescription medication was far from the most scandalous of crimes committed in a high school on a regular basis, but Song knew people could always use a little reassurance, and nobody in their right mind would have ever thought Emer was a cop. He was just too genuine, and far too stupid.



While Song saw Emer as the perfect salesman, Emmanuel Brooks was his muscle. The stoic street tough had a reputation as a bruiser, and his presence alone served a purpose. It was easy for the privileged teen to write the silent giant off as just another moron. Perception and reality are two very different things however. Not only was Manny a straight A student, but he

was far from goliath in stature. It was only over Song's diminutive five-foot five-inch frame that he towered over.

It was almost as though fate itself had thrust the boys into each other's lives, since all three met as legal adults, still in their junior year of high school. Song had to restart eleventh grade after getting expelled from his prep school for selling drugs. Emmanuel was pulled from middle school due to some struggles at home, after his father went to prison, and his mother dealt with a one-sided divorce that was somehow still incredibly messy. Less dramatically, Emer just failed all of his finals, but his consequences were the same.

Fresh out of junior year, the trio decided to waste a summer afternoon at the mall where one of Song's family salons, the flagship Rim Beauty, was located. Boys will be boys as they say, but these three decided to be the creepy boys by sneaking into the dressing room of The Hanger, a mid-tier clothing and accessory store. Subtlety had never been Emer's strong suit, so, needless to say, almost as soon as he peaked his long blond locks through the curtain, the young Casanova was met with a slap to his face for his efforts. Song wasn't even so lucky as to catch a glimpse of the female form before the trio were left to the mercy of the store manager, Bianca.

Bianca had dealt with peeping toms before, so she knew a thing or two about using punishment to create empathy. As she laid out her plan to her captive audience, that was part of her ambition. The other part was staving off the soulcrushing boredom that came with a keyholding position in the dying brick and mortar retail space by creating a few new human Barbie dolls to play with.

When presented with their choices, the boys could either suffer the redhead's machinations, or try their luck with law enforcement, and according to the woman, one of the girls Emer saw in her unmentionables was underage. While that might not have been entirely true, it proved a sufficient threat, and soon enough, the aspiring photographer's plan was underway.

The first thing Bianca did was take Emer and Song to the nearby salon, one owned by Song's family, but she wouldn't learn that fact until much later. There, the blond with the nineteenth century name, and the child of Korean immigrants were subject to all the painting, primping and polishing that came with a visit to the upscale spa.

Caught between the demands of his new warden, and the fear of his antics finding their way to his mother, the heir of Rim Beauty was uncharacteristically quiet, and compliant. Normally he'd metaphorically wave his genitals around whenever he set foot on the property, but for reasons they couldn't understand, he quietly allowed the staff to have their way with him. Not wanting to look a gift horse in the mouth, they were all only too happy to give the little prince exactly what he was asking for, and turn him into a little princess his mother would be proud of. Eun, the second-in-command at that location, a former victim of Song's chauvinism, gleefully counted her blessings, as she tore the wax strips from his body, and every little hair from his eyebrows.

Emer was fascinated by the changes taking place, as a kind of classic beauty was sculpted from his charming good looks. His new curls looked so perfect, it was like the little himbo turned bimbo taking shape in the mirror wouldn't dream of being caught dead without them.

Several hours later, two teen beauty queens could be seen leaving Rim, to meet their compatriot, who also had received his own makeover, though one that hardly seemed fair by comparison.

Being the lookout, the only boy not actually caught in the dressing room, Bianca took pity on Emmanuel. In a brief conversation she learned of his troubles at home, as well as his frustrations with how he was perceived by the world. The soft spot growing in her heart for him was enough to offer the boy a job at her store. Supposedly it was part of the punishment, but in reality, it was obvious the kid needed some money for some new clothes.

What was, in fact, part of his punishment was that now he had to play the role of boyfriend to his two best friends once they were dolled up. After setting eyes on the unwilling heartbreakers for the first time, that really didn't seem like much of a punishment either.

After their first photo shoot, Bianca met with the new girls' parents as she dropped them off one by one. She could tell that Emery, as the blond had been dubbed, was well-meaning, if only a little selfish, while capable of charming the wings off of a fly. The girl Bianca planned to mold her creation into was going to be a coquette. She didn't see the need to upset the Ottensen house too much, so after introducing herself to the step-mother, Rose, she weaved a tale of a young boy, possibly girl, exploring her gender for the summer, one the new matriarch of the blended family would support unquestionably.

For Song, Bianca thought that if the tiny boy was any older, there might have been no hope of redemption, but she was optimistic she could course correct before he became just another douche with a sports car, polluting the quiet California streets with the sheer volume of his smugness. When it came time to speak with his mother, no fiction, nor subterfuge was necessary. One honest conversation with Grace Rim later, and Song and Emery suddenly had summer jobs at Rim beauty, and Bianca was assured that Mrs. Rim's new daughter would meet the young woman the following day, at the appointed time, with bells on.

The next few months went by in a whirlwind. Song and Emery both had their figures drastically enhanced by a revolutionary cosmetic procedure, patented by Song's father. Emery was given a job at a makeup counter, along with a crash course in aesthetics by the department lead, Mary, the very same girl who gave Emery her first makeover. Song was left with the humiliating job of shampoo girl, the lowest rung on the ladder, basically a janitor, just not in name. Worst of all, he was directly supervised by Eun, a woman he'd once taken out on a date, only to end the night with blackmail. The girl was getting her paperwork in order to apply for permanent residency, and Song used the threat of deportation as a way to get what he wanted from her before tossing her aside. Needless to say, she was ecstatic to have the new girl, a boy she wanted to suffer more than anyone, in the shop, and worked her to the bone.

Even in his off time, Song's mother refused to give him a moment's rest. After that first day, the cold, cutthroat business woman who usually kept her delinquent child at arm's length was suddenly like his shadow any time he was at home. His evenings were a non-stop barrage of elocution lessons, deportment lessons, cooking lessons, and any other skill Grace felt her daughter needed improvement on. With a little effort Song's natural alto voice was easily molded into a picturesque soprano, as the two sang karaoke almost every night. Grace might have been a timeless beauty, but her love of k-pop was unmatched. Before Song knew it, he was talking, and moving like a proper little princess without even thinking about it. Suddenly, he couldn't even remember how to force the deeper voice he'd fabricated years before, in an attempt to be taken more seriously by his peers. Worst of all, Grace was now behaving as though he'd always been her daughter, refusing to acknowledge any other reality, and the attention she offered felt good, despite himself.

While Song was being forged under the fire and unrelenting pressure of his mother's ambitions, Emery seemed to slip right into the role with minimal effort. At first, it was strange to see the skinny blond with the giant knockers, dressed prettily in the flounciest of dresses and skirts, stomp around like a linebacker. One conversation about foot pain with her step mom later, and she was floating with the grace of a ballet dancer. The way she spoke seemed to soften a little more every day, and she quickly absorbed the feminine vocabulary of everyone around her. Seemingly overnight, Emery had found herself, and it was obvious to the rest of the world, she was now the pretty girl she was always meant to be - pretty crass, pretty dumb, but pretty adorable, and just plain pretty.

One thing Emery didn't like about her new situation, equally as much as Song, was their new shared boyfriend, and the expectations that went along with that relationship. For Emmanuel, he knew the new girls were essentially being held at gunpoint, but after spending time with them in their new packaging it was easy to forget. Emery seemed unfazed by it all. Her beauty and charm had him eating out of the palm of her hand. Song was a different story though.

With all the rough edges sanded down, there was no trace left of the wanna-be gang leader - the arrogant prick Emmanuel only tolerated because he didn't believe he was worthy of better friends. Jae, as he insisted he be called, always talked down to Manny, belittling him at every opportunity, all while claiming they were friends. The boy obviously thought he was much smarter than his tall accomplice, and that smugness dripped from every word.

Song, after the makeover, was quiet at first. It was disconcerting. The smug teen somehow defined the word demure. Over time though, that wall came down, and what remained was a girl who was a little bitchy, and a little spoiled, but had her own kind of sweetness that Emmanuel adored. It was worth it to endure the verbal onslaught of her mother going on about how poor he was every time he picked her up for a date.

At least that's how it seemed on the surface. Underneath, Song Rim was a simmering cauldron of rage, plotting his revenge. Bianca expected certain behavior from her Barbie dolls, and part of

that was servicing Ken. Nobody was holding their heads under the guillotine but things went smoother for the feminized boys if they complied. While Emery made the best of it, taking the time to teach Manny how to return the favor, Song never even thought to. He was too busy panicking that if he didn't keep his unwanted boyfriend happy, he'd be stuck as a girl forever. Worst of all, just like the validation he felt from his mother, the constant praise and fawning from said boy was becoming equally as addictive.

It was around this time that Song realized his mother had had him on female hormones since the ordeal started, and that the artificial breasts that were fading away were quickly being supplanted by his own growing in. Assessing his life, he had to acknowledge it hadn't all been bad. His relationship with Eun at work was improving. His standing in the company was rising, and his mother was visibly proud of him in a way she'd never been before. He even paid for his nailtech certification himself. Things with his father were strained, but that wasn't any different from before.

Most of it was easy to brush aside, as he told himself when he returned to boyhood these things could stay true. The only part he couldn't reconcile was his growing need for Emmanuel's affection, and approval. With a newfound sense of urgency, Song made a plan, conscripted his bimbo blond bestie, and started to set things into motion.

One night, cleaning Emmanuel's apartment in maid dresses at Bianca's insistence, the two feminized teens put their plan into action, drugging the former street tough, and then setting to task. The two applied all their newfound skills with earnestness, and in short order, the new beauty, with supermodel height, was being carted over to Rim, where Eun awaited. A short while later, and the newly christened Emily was waking up to find his easy to manage short brown hair had been replaced with long feminine locks accented with blond highlights, and streaks in front, as well as two new feminine mounds of his own rising under the tight skin on his chest.

Song and Emery had set up a date for the new girl, and after a little struggle to get him there, they dropped him off for the evening. Later on, for reasons Song couldn't fathom, Emily stated that she didn't want to go back, and was going to keep being Emily for the foreseeable future, but whatever the case, the scheming boy with breasts was happy to be rid of the unwanted romance. Emery herself was happy too, gleeful she played the perfect matchmaker, seemingly having already forgotten exactly why they did what they did in the first place.

The next day, when the trio had their daily meeting with Bianca, the fiery young woman was furious that they broke her toy. All she could do in retaliation was humiliate them with a few more punishments, but her fun was ruined.

Emery didn't really mind. Most importantly, her newly single status freed her up to start dating Mary, and the two had been together ever since, exploring their growing relationship, and sexuality together. It was love - real love. From that day onward, the ditzzy blond kept living her

best life with the woman of her dreams, working at Rim, and being the best big sister she could to her little baby brother.

The blond girl smiled, as she thought about her little brother's toothless grin when he was still small. Now he was almost ten years old, and nowhere near as cute, but her affection for the sprout hadn't diminished in the slightest.

"Hey... hey, girl!" Grace shouted, snapping her fingers in the face of the spaced-out blond, but to no avail. She turned to face her daughter, once again asking, "Are you sure Emily wouldn't be better suited, Little Star? I know she has a big important job, but you're her best friend. I can't imagine she wouldn't have time for you... even though I do see her on the TV almost every day."

"Please, Mummy, that's enough. Besides, she's not that important. A teleprompter does her job for her."

Song rolled his eyes, thinking back. Jealousy burned in the pit of his stomach, as he stood, and gazed at his reflection in the three angled mirrors. Emery seemed to have gotten her happily ever after, but Song was also sure the loveable idiot might find eternal bliss in a fidget spinner. Emily had achieved a level of success and clout Song knew was meant for himself. Out of the three, he was the only one who seemed to be completely miserable. He held the bundle of white fabric over his protruding bosom, while his mother subtly called him fat once again, and all he could do was ask himself, 'How the fuck did I end up here?'

Chapter 2

What happened during the summer before Song's senior year had drastically altered the course of his entire life, leading him to attend the public school as Song Kelly Rim. Over that year he settled into the daily routine of obeying Bianca, and being the perfect daughter for his mother. Around the end of his high school career, the boy turned girl had just received their latest makeover at the shop. An hour of trying to convince his mother his senior pictures were fine was enough to exhaust anybody, but right after, he was to see a young boy his mother had arranged a meeting with.

Junsu Yun was Song's date to his senior prom, but they didn't have much time for conversation. The only moments the two had any privacy, Junsu was too distracted to say anything because Song had his dick in his mouth. It was towards the end Song's punishment from Bianca, and the quota had to be filled.

Standing on the corner, waiting for his date, Song felt the chill of the early spring evening air on his shoulders. Just one year earlier, the very idea of leaving so much skin exposed would have had the feminized boy refusing to leave the house. As a boy, the privileged teen kept himself covered from head to toe usually. He wouldn't be caught dead in shorts, lest someone might see

that underneath all those expensive garments, a string-bean was hidden underneath, one that hardly seemed capable of supporting his own one-hundred fifteen pounds.

Since his conscription into the ranks of the fairer sex, the once prudish boy was forced to adapt. Ironically, it was the slender frame he so loathed that in his current form gained him all the attention he felt he deserved before. It felt good to be noticed, especially without having to practically cause a scene in a checkout line because the cashier thought he was the previous customer's child, and thus ignored him.

It felt good to be noticed without having to try. It felt good to be seen as an adult, albeit a young one, rather than a mouthy brat. When he realized that those positive feelings were caused by slinky dresses draped over his ample bosom, and curvy hips, he wondered which was worse.

For the date, Song was dressed in a form-fitting wiggle dress, a rose print on a fine mesh, over a sewn-in black slip. The rose colored spike-heeled mules were a testament to the grace, and poise his mother had drilled into his head ever since that fateful day. Eun, the woman Song had once tormented, who'd found forgiveness for the wayward teen, and had grown into something of a big sister, spent hours crafting the intricate updo he wore as the crowning glory of his look. It was the perfect accompaniment to the gold jewelry Song's father had purchased for his nineteenth birthday.

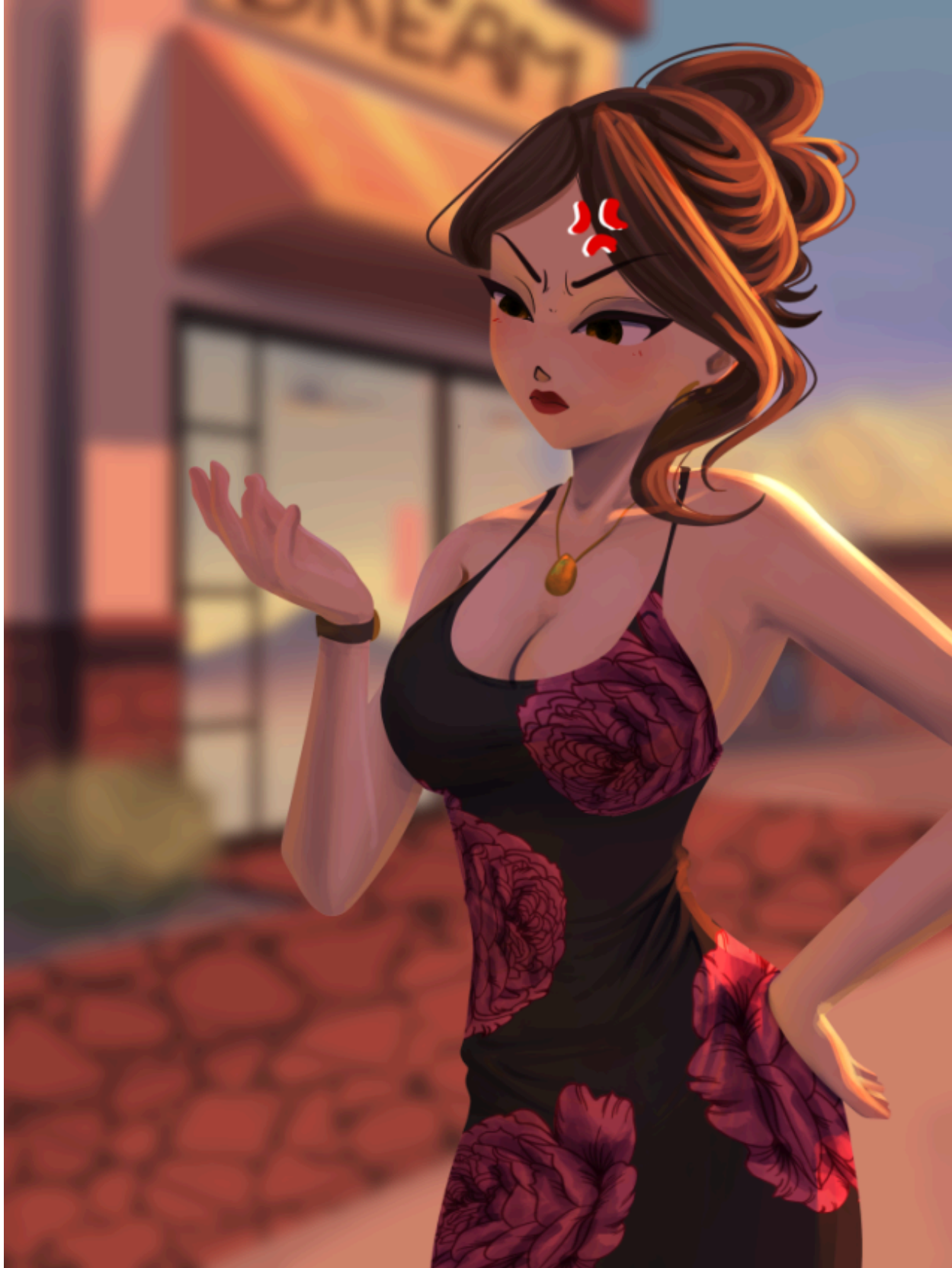
The typically distant father loved his new daughter, but he always struggled to connect with her. One might think that was because of the transition, but in all actuality it had always been a problem. Both Song and his father were bilingual, yet somehow they always seemed to be always speaking different languages. When the old man bought a pair of chunky gold hoops, it seemed like the kind of gift a father buys after asking the saleswoman what was trendy. When Song removed the last piece from the package, he saw it was so much more than that. On the matching necklace, tucked away in the bottom of the box, Jii Rim engraved a message.

"Song, my precious daughter, through all your ups and downs, know I have always loved you more than anything in the world. No matter who you grow into, I will for the rest of my life. - Love, your adoring father."

Song noticed above that, his father had them inscribe a cursive "8", a symbol of good luck in Korea, along with "X"s and "O"s for kisses, and hugs. As he held the gift tightly in his hands, Song didn't say a word. He stood up, and walked over to his father with a tear running down his cheek. He sat in his dad's lap, and wrapped his arms around the man's neck, before planting a grateful kiss on the man's cheek, leaving a big lipstick print.

Of course, immediately after, the two pulled apart quickly, never once making eye-contact, and never mentioning it again. Regardless, they were pieces of jewelry Song had a special fondness for, and were always reserved for the most special of occasions.

What made this occasion so special was the fact that Song drove himself, in his own BMW. The car had been something of a carrot, one dangled in front of him for years, just out of reach. Agreeing to another date with his mother's top choice was just the latest act demonstrating the former criminal's compliance, and his desire to put his family first. As far as the feminized teen was concerned, the boy himself didn't matter, at least not until he arrived.



Junsu's first strike came after making Song wait for ten minutes outside. He didn't even apologize for his late arrival. The second strike was being more concerned with the meal than the beautiful creature sitting across from him.

'What an ass?!' Song thought, as he watched his prom date devour his wings, sauce smeared all over his face. 'I put all this effort into looking nice for this prick, and he hasn't even complimented my outfit once. I'm a ten for god's sake! This five should be kissing my toes for allowing him the privilege of sharing space with me.'

As Song's salad sat untouched, and the silence seemed to develop enough mass that it had its own gravity, strike three was mere moments away.

"So, about prom..." the boy began, causing Song to shift in his seat.

"Yes?" Song, desperate for anything to quell his boredom, sat up straight, and met eyes with the beardless neckbeard. He flashed a well-practiced flirty smile, and waited with baited breath.

"Do you wanna... do that... again... here... in the bathroom?"

Song craned his head around the dining room, and took in the gaudy neon decorations plastered all over the wall. 'Say what you will about Brooks, but when he took me out, at least he had the decency to treat me like a lady, and take me to an actual restaurant where the breadsticks weren't microwaved... and he was a poor.'

Right then, Song stood from the table, collected his purse, picked up his glass of water, and then splashed it into the lascivious boy's face.

He coldly said, "Lose my number, asshole." and then stormed out of the building without looking back. As he unlocked his car, and got behind the wheel, Song slammed his hands into the leather, shouting, "God dammit, that prick! I mean I tried... I really fucking tried! I was even going to..." He didn't want to hear himself finish that thought so he put the vehicle in drive, and sped off.

After arriving home, Song felt his luck was at least consistent. His desire to lie down outweighing everything else, he tried to sneak up the stairs to his room, but unfortunately, his mother happened to be descending at the same time. Her attention was on the book in her hand, as he tried to rush past her.

"You're home early, Little Star." Grace said, right when he thought he'd gotten away with it. "Did you have fun? He was so much better than that redneck boy you used to date, wasn't he?"

Song pinched the bridge of his nose for a moment, before turning around. "Mummy, you do want me to be with someone who treats me well, right?"

“Of course, honey.” Grace gushed. “The man you marry will need to treat you like the princess you are, or they’re not worthy. Was Junsu not a perfect gentleman?”

“Anything but... Listen, mummy... It’s okay if I don’t go out with him again, right?”

Grace’s expression dropped, and her voice lost control, her rage getting away from her. “Of course not! Did he hurt you?! I don’t care who his father is, I’ll kill him!”

“Calm down, Mummy, please. He wasn’t pure evil or anything. I just had a terrible time. Trust me, he knows he blew it. I wasn’t really into him anyway, you know?”

“Okay, Song, I’ll leave the boy alone. Don’t worry, the next boy will be a better match, I’m sure.”

The overbearing mother wrapped her arms around her baby, pulling his face into her bosom, leaving Song to give a muffled response. “What about girls, mummy? I like girls, you know?”

Grace released the teen, and once his eyes met hers again, he could see her struggling not to crack up. A grin plastered from ear to ear, the woman chuckled, “Don’t be silly, Little Star. You think I don’t know what my daughter gets up to in her free time. I’ve seen you swiping on the Timber, and the Grinders, and the Okie dokie Cupid, when we sit together in the living room after dinner. I notice when you sneak out at night to meet those boys too. You know, you’re never going to find a good match there. There’s some apps for Korean girls trying to meet Korean boys you should try. I’ll admit I peaked to see what there was on offer. There’s some muscly boys on there, just how I know you like them.”

“Mummy, Jesus!” Song shrieked, his soft soprano voice suddenly shrill like the wails of the banshee. “OMG, this is so embarrassing!”

With that he turned, and practically ran up the stairs, stumbling out of the mules he wore to dinner, leaving them behind. His cheeks burned the same shade of red as his mother’s lipstick, as he slammed the door behind him, feeling less like a man than ever before.

“I do like girls!” he shouted back through the closed door, collapsing onto the bed, and searching his memory for any recent validation for the lost gender he craved. Song slipped the dress over his head, exposing his jet black, lacy bra and panty set. He fell backwards onto his fluffy white down comforter, and stared up and the sheer, pink draperies on his canopy bed. “What the fuck is wrong with me?”

An hour passed, and boredom overtook misery. Song retrieved his phone from his purse, and his first impulse was to open the very same apps they’d just been discussing. A few swipes left, and he realized that he was only proving his mother’s point, so he quickly shut off the device, and threw it on the floor.

Almost immediately it was retrieved, but this time Song's frantic mind was constructing something that resembled a plan. The nineteen-year-old was as frustratingly horny as ever, but this time he had something to prove. Unwilling to stomach yet another string of rejections, rather than opening the dating apps, he visited the dark web, a site he'd heard tales of in his previous hooligan days.

On a certain website, one that resembled craigslist in all but purpose, Song searched through the personals until he found a girl who suited his fancy. Blond, check. Big breasts, check. Fluffy curly hair, check. Aside from a few tattoos, if he was in a place where he was capable of being honest with himself, Song might have realized that he'd basically chosen Emery with a vagina. Scanning down the page, his eyes landed on the thing that separated personal ads on this site from others - a price tag.

It took a moment of deliberation, but the desperate youth managed to dial the phone number without dying of shame. The sultry voice on the other end answered, "Hello?"

"Hi." he began, only then realizing the pitch, and resonance of his voice after hearing it out loud. It was a struggle, and one he wasn't very successful at, but Song tried his best to force his voice back down into his chest, like he used to in the days before falling into the store manager's clutches. He tried once again. "Hello there, beautiful. Are you taking, umm... appointments?"

Song didn't know what to call the meeting, and it made it clear to both him, and the call girl that he was out of his depth. The girl's first impulse was to hang up the phone. She assumed it was a child playing a prank, but it was a slow night, and she was bored.

"Yeah, honey. I've got all the time in the world. Were you wanting to meet this evening?"

"Umm... yeah... I... yeah..." The only reason Song didn't hang up then was it seemed more shameful than to not see it through.

A consummate professional, the sex-worker knew that if this was a legitimate inquiry, she was going to have to hold the person's hand through the process.

"Well, I only do in-calls, and you've got to pay in advance. No offense, baby, but I've had too many no-shows lately. Three-fifty for the hour, non-negotiable."

"That's fine. Money isn't an issue. Umm, what's an in-call?"

"It means you have to come see me. I work out of my residence. Don't worry, I don't live in the projects, or anything. My space is clean, and comfortable. If you need to check my references, I'm highly rated on T.E.R."

'T.E.R?' Song wondered, but he didn't dare give that thought voice. He could already tell he was on thin ice with the girl. "No, that's fine. Do I, like, venmo you?"

“Sure, that works for me. Just make sure you say it’s for a massage. When we hang up, I’ll send a link, and once I get the money, I’ll send my address. What time did you want to come by?”

Song’s eyes landed on the white cuckoo clock hanging from his wall, and saw it wasn’t even nine yet. “Is eleven a good time for you?”

“That’s perfect. I’ll be here. My name is Sugar, by way. I look forward to meeting you.” Her mood clearly improved, as she began to believe the call might actually be real.

A few minutes after they hung up, she sent the request link like she said, and in a matter of minutes the money was in her account. What surprised the woman was that it seemed to be coming from the cutest little Asian-American girl she’d ever laid eyes on. The professional could only hope she wasn’t helping some asshole boyfriend stick his fingers in her proverbial piggy bank.

Once Song got off the phone, the first thing he did was hit the internet. Ironically, it was advice typically reserved for transgender men he sought. A cursory google search told him that when trying to conceal his breasts, if he didn’t want any pain he should use a binder instead of trying to tape them down, but two-day shipping was two days too long. Eventually, he came upon an article that walked him through the basics, using medical tape.

Once the two offending orbs were restrained, the curvy-bodied boy found it hard to breathe, and the pressure radiating through the flesh of his chest was a kind of discomfort he’d never imagined. As he walked to the bathroom mirror, the well-postured youth could hardly stand up straight. It was a far cry from the upright form his mother had drilled into him over the previous year.

After thoroughly washing his face, Song pulled his hair up, trying once again for a man-bun, just the same as he had the first day after his transformation. It was twice as futile of an effort this go-around. He then tried to stand taller, and leaned in to get a good look at every angle of his face.

“God, I look like shit.” he said out loud, half whining. He debated with himself for a moment, never once taking his eyes off the dark circles under his eyes. “Well... maybe a little concealer...”

After that it was a little blush to add some color to his cheeks, and then a little eyebrow pencil to fill in the gaps. Next came a little mascara just so his lashes didn’t seem too pale in comparison to his eyebrows.

Song glared at his reflection, and thought to himself, ‘I’m a coat of lipstick away from being pageant ready.’ As the pain radiated through his tender flesh once again, he rolled his eyes, and groaned. In the mirror, he could see his own turmoil, as he wrestled with what he already knew

he was going to do. He undid the bandage, and let his breasts spill out, much to his relief. "Fuck it."

At ten fifty-nine, Sugar had already had her make-up on for thirty minutes. She was freshly washed, the bed she used for work in her spare bedroom had fresh sheets, and she even had time to sneak a quick cigarette on the balcony of her second-story walk-up and then adequately scrub the smell out of her finger tips. By the time she brushed her teeth, the escort wondered if the guy she spoke with would even show, not that it mattered anymore since she'd already been paid. Her doubts were answered when a knock rang on her door at precisely eleven pm.

Sugar stood from the couch, then checked her reflection in the mirror, making sure her negligee strategically covered her lingerie just enough to leave at least one mystery for her new client to solve. She forced a well-rehearsed seductive glimmer to her eyes, and a playful smirk to her lips. Years of experience had sculpted a professional - a woman at the top of her craft. All those years of experience couldn't have prepared her for what happened next though, when she swung the door open to welcome her guest.

"Well hello there, big bo... thbbbt!..."

The young woman could hardly speak. While her befuddlement was painted all over her face, one could hardly blame her. Never in a million years did she expect to find that pretty, demure Korean girl from the photo on the other side of the door, her eyes lined, and her lips fire engine red, wearing a short trench coat with garters peeking out underneath, firmly affixed to the kind of fishnets bought in a sex shop.

"This was a mistake." the girl mumbled, but before he could turn to walk away, Sugar reached out and caught him by the arm.

"I'm sorry, honey. That wasn't very professional of me. You just caught me by surprise is all. I mean, I was expecting... well I don't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't anybody as pretty as you."

Song's cheeks burned crimson to the sound of the young woman's praise. He didn't want to enjoy being called "pretty" but enjoy it, he did. Sugar gently slipped her fingers through Song's, and then led him through the threshold, locking the door behind her. A short trip later, and the two were sitting on the edge of Sugar's work bed.

"So..." Sugar began, breaking the awkward silence. "Do you, like, know what you want to do? I mean, normally when guys come in here, we just get to it, but something tells me you've got something specific in mind."

Song struggled to meet the gaze of his hired help. His eyes stayed firmly locked on the tip of the pointed toe of his black pump, while he bounced his crossed leg. "... umm..."

“You can tell me, honey. Don’t worry, I don’t bite, unless you want me to.”

The sex-worker rested a hand on Song’s knee, while the other found its way under his chin, turning his head to face her. As the feminized teen gazed into her baby-blues, he saw the kind of compassionate care typically plied by hospice workers. He also saw the kind of lust usually reserved for Emery and her favorite food, tacos. It was easy for him to chalk it up to her professionalism, but that was exactly what he paid for.

“I want to top you.”

What Song didn’t realize was that Sugar had expected her night to go one way, and it went in a shockingly different direction. When she laid eyes on the pretty, petite teen on her doorstep for the first time, she began to think that this night might be one of those most rare of occasions where she actually enjoyed her labor.

“Absolutely. I’ve got a strap-on in the nightstand. It’s totally clean, but we can put a condom on it if you prefer.”

“No, I mean, like, I want to top you... myself.” Song nervously stood from the bed, and undid the belt of his trench coat, letting it fall to the floor to reveal that the garterbelt peeking out underneath, was the only thing the coat was hiding, aside from Song’s naked form. He quietly muttered, “It’s going to take a lot of work, but I want to try... I have to try...”

As Song’s voice trailed off, Sugar took a moment to pick her jaw up off the floor. The one thing she didn’t expect to see after meeting her guest was a penis, even as small as it was. After mentally patting herself on the back for not blowing another raspberry, the seasoned pro slowly leaned Song back onto the bed, along with herself, and gently pressed her lips to his.

“I thought no kissing.” he asked, half petrified, but his mind could help but drift back to the last girl he kissed, Emery, though by this point it seemed like a lifetime ago.

“I mean, that’s movie stuff. Some girls have their own rules. My old roommate, Candy, never kissed. I’m GFE though, honey. Why do you think I’m so expensive?”

“G F E?” Song said the letters like they were a language from centuries past.

“Girlfriend experience...” The busty blond ran her finger through Song’s hair, slipping a loose strand behind his ear. “For the next hour, I’m your girlfriend. Now, I’m an excellent girlfriend. I love to take care of my partner’s needs. What do you need, beautiful?”

“I guess I need to get hard first?”

It was more a question than an answer, but it was enough for Sugar to go on. In short order Song was leaning back against the headboard, and the woman was slowly kissing her way from

her new client's neck all the way down their stomach, while taking their sex in her well-manicured fingers. Song moaned with each kiss, but her manual stimulation didn't really seem to be doing anything.

It was rare for Sugar to actually care about a client's happiness beyond what was necessary, but on this occasion she was trying her hardest. When Song first saw the woman's manicure, an expert in the field himself, he was impressed by the craft, but he couldn't understand why there were only eight sharp talons, extended an inch-and-a-half past the tips, all painted a bright yellow. Though the two remaining, her ring and middle fingers, wore the same color polish, both were trimmed as short as possible and filed down to a rounded end.

'Maybe she's a bowler?' Song wondered. His question was answered when those two fingers slid inside of him, and began to gently massage his prostate. Sugar might have been a bowler, but those digits clearly served a different purpose.

"Is that good?"

Song couldn't answer the question, but his little member answered for him, as it swelled in the sex-worker's hands, far more than it had in nearly a year. Quickly, the woman removed a condom from her nightstand, opened the package, and began rolling the prophylactic down the narrow shaft.

If Sugar had heard one, she'd heard them all. At least once a week, some guy would come in complaining that the condom didn't fit. She could slip one over her head, and blow it up with her nose, as a party trick, so she knew those excuses were bullshit. What she never expected was that one might be too large. By the time Song was fully inside, with the first thrust, it was probably going to slide right off inside of her. It was also quickly becoming apparent that that probably wasn't going to happen, because as soon as she stopped stimulating it for just a moment, the chubby melted away back into nothing.

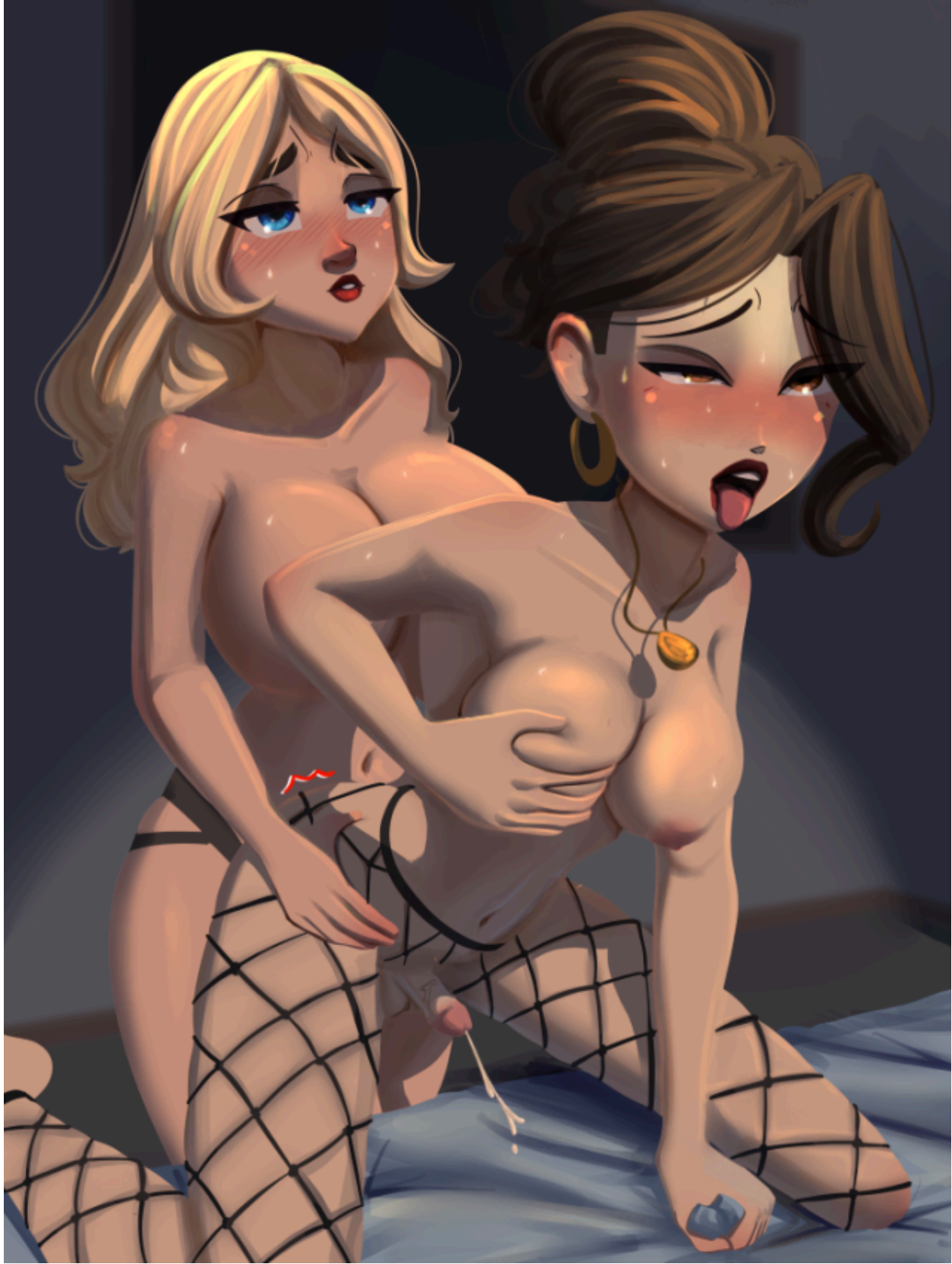
Tears began to well in Song's eyes, as he whined, "I just wanted to cum."

"Don't worry, honey, I can still help you with that." Sugar wrapped her arms around her new client, and held him tightly for a moment, while asking the question, "You can still bottom, right?"

Song didn't answer. He could only weakly nod his head in response, as he resigned himself to lying back on the bed, and letting the woman have her way with him. At that point, he was like a person possessed, and the only way to get the demons out was ejaculating.

Quickly, Sugar went to her nightstand once again, and found her double-sided, vibrating strap-on. A little dab of lube was all that was required as she went to slowly insert her prosthesis into her client. The way she seemed to slip inside effortlessly caught her by surprise, given how averse Song seemed to it originally.

As he felt himself fill up, a moan escaped Song's lips while the sensation of relief washed over him. In his time receiving, Song had had sex only two ways. One was lying on his back, and waiting for the guy to finish. The other was riding on top until he'd had his fill. The fact that there might be a third option never even occurred to the feminized lad.



The way Sugar cradled Song like a baby, before fully standing, supporting his weight with her arms, and on her strap-on, made the teen swoon in spite of himself. When she collapsed back onto the bed, sitting upright, with her feet still on the floor, Song quivered with pleasure. Locked in her embrace, he planted both feet on the bed, and wrapped his arms around the woman's neck. Leaning back the two looked each other in the eyes, as they grinded, and gyrated in rhythm. For the first time in his life, Song was realizing sex might actually be better if it was a collaborative effort.

The two moved their bodies in unison, their breasts pressing firmly into each other. That same tender sensation from earlier when he tried to bind was back, only now it was an orgasmic thrill, rushing through his flesh, hurting just enough to feel good. Song kissed Sugar firmly on the lips, his tongue sliding past to explore her. In response Sugar grabbed him by the hair, yanking him back, and gently biting into his neck. It was clear that if she wanted to, she could have had her way with him, but she was holding back, not wanting to damage the little flower. Their pleasure built and crescendoed until finally, just as he'd set out to do, Song climaxed, spilling his thin seed between their bare stomachs.

Afterwards, Sugar collapsed back onto the bed, bringing Song with her, as she kept the strap-on inside the both of them. Her new client straddled her waist, and rested their head on her chest, while her bosom rose and fell with each breath. The hour was over ten minutes earlier, but unlike most any other client, Sugar wasn't in a hurry to push Song out the door.

Eventually, when she realized she was about to fall asleep, she jolted up, and asked, "Do you have to get home?"

"I really should." Song answered, while a sheet of dried semen peeled off as he sat up straight.

After sliding off of the rigid cock, a new experience as all the other dicks he'd had inside him went soft once they orgasmed, Song donned the trench coat, slipped his discarded shoes back on, and then slowly walked towards the door.

Right behind him, Sugar hurriedly followed, catching him just before his fingers reached the doorknob. "You know... I actually had a really good time tonight. Maybe you'd want to do it again sometime, in a less... formal... situation."

"I'm sorry, I don't follow. What are you saying?"

The young woman blushed, grinning coyly to the feminized teen, and running her fingers through their hair one more time. "I'm saying we should go out on a date. You're exactly the kind of girl I'd love to have on my arm for a night out, so I can show you off to my friends. Not to mention I think we had some pretty good chemistry there. If you're worried the power dynamic would be weird, I can just refund your money. I mean, I normally see guys for work anyway, just because I'm not really into most of them. I've never dated a trans girl before, but you're making me think I shouldn't have had that door closed so tightly. You're the kind of lady I should be the

one spoiling anyway. I mean, you clearly deserve to be treated like a queen. Got any plans Friday?"

Song heard the woman gush his praises, and his heart fluttered. She was giving him everything he thought he should have gotten from his terrible date. It should have been the highlight of his year, the first time he had sex with a woman since his whole ordeal began. Just as quickly though, he realized that even when he actually got to fuck a girl, he was still the bottom. For the foreseeable future, no matter what, he was always going to be the bottom. Not just in the bedroom, but this girl wanted to make him her arm candy. Even in a relationship with a woman, every aspect of his life still screamed female. To everyone, everywhere, he was always going to be seen as the girl he was never supposed to be. There was no escape.

Song looked Sugar in the eye, smiled the fake customer service smile he used for work, simply said, "No thank you." and then practically ran out of the door.

Sugar's first impulse was to chase after the girl, but the light glistening in the tears Song was doing everything to keep from streaming told her not to.

Once he took a seat in his BMW, and started the engine, overcome with emotion, Song let out a blood-curdling scream, while tears poured down his face, destroying his make-up. His excess of feeling expelled, he was able to sit up straight, dry his tears, and look himself right in the eye in the rearview mirror.

Right then, he made a proclamation, "That's it, I guess. I'm just never going to have sex again."

Chapter 3

Most high school students would have had college applications out by the end of their junior year, but for Song Jae Rim, being expelled from a private academy his parents were more concerned with getting the delinquent through high school. Now that Song had graduated, the subject of college kept coming up, far more than Song wanted to hear about it.

"Have you thought about where you want to finish your education? What about those personal essays you were supposed to write?"

For a short time after graduation, this line of interrogation was a daily occurrence, coming from both parents. It was the only subject on which the Rim's seemed to maintain a perfectly unified front. For Jii Rim, Song's father, it was getting harder and harder to see any remnants of his son in the pretty little girl sitting at the end of the dinner table. Even worse, all that girl had to do was bat her eyelashes, say, "Daddy, please," and then he was putty in her hands. Song hardly left home anymore, but the new television they asked for had been delivered that morning.

It was the subject of his child's education that turned Jii from an absentee, workaholic parent to father of the year. "Those essays are important, Gongju. A good one gets you into school. A great one gets you a free ride."

Song blushed. He still hadn't gotten used to being called "princess" by his father. When Emery's dad would do the same, the former hoodlum would groan at the cheesy, over-the-top display. The first time he heard it from his old man, suddenly it wasn't so ridiculous, as his heart threatened to swell like the grinch's, and burst through his chest.

"Appa, please, we can afford to pay for school... whenever I do go back. We should leave those scholarships for people who actually need them." While Song may have had a point, his motivations were far more selfish than his words might lead one to believe.

"It's not about having to pay. It's about being able to say they wanted you so badly that they gave you their greatest product for free. Anyway, Harabeoji, and Halmeoni, would have killed me if I didn't graduate university. They nearly killed me for going into industry, instead of trying to open my own medical practice."

"But now they shut the fuck up, because we're rich."

"Language, young lady!" Grace gently swatted her daughter on the back of the head for using the expletive, before explaining, "No, your grandparents already knew he would be a success."

It wasn't uncommon for the woman to revise history. After all, if you asked her, Song had always been the pretty little Asian-American princess her father spoiled, and that whole criminal thing was just a bad dream.

By this point, Grace had walked her reluctant daughter through a dozen iterations of the paper. While Song's applications went in late, many acceptance letters arrived in short order, especially given the potential for a huge donation from the Rim family. Most all had room for him starting in the spring semester, but all of those letters still found their way onto a pile on Song's desk, never to be looked at again.

"It's not fair." Song whined, crossing his arms under his ample breasts, and pouting. "Eun is just now finishing her degree, and she already runs our busiest store. Like, how is that fair?"

"It's not fair. Life isn't fair. If life was fair, she'd be a Rim, just like you, but she's not. There's an expectation you have to meet, Little Star. It's not up for negotiation."

What the overbearing mother couldn't understand was why her baby seemed more interested in getting his certifications. He'd only recently gotten enough hours apprenticing to apply to take his practical exam, and then Song Kelly Rim would be the newest hairstylist at Rim Beauty. Hair and nails made Song a double threat, one capable of supervising nearly any department in the store with expertise. The only drawback was that he quickly learned why his big sister, Eun,

hated doing hair so much. Giving a mom a quick bob was easy money, but hours and hours of bonding extensions, one at a time, didn't scale the same, and god was it tedious.

Song couldn't understand the reasoning. Grace wanted him to get a business degree, but to what end he couldn't fathom. It wouldn't serve any purpose in the day to day operations, and back in his mother's good graces, he knew he wouldn't need the degree to inherit the business either. Grace choked down her feelings on the matter, grateful that Song was voluntarily taking the time to learn anything at all, a staunch change from his past self. That didn't stop her from dropping at least five comments everyday.

In an instant, the manipulative mother flipped a switch somewhere in her brain, and started using passive-aggression as the next tool in her kit. "I guess if you don't want to go to college like your friend, Emery, you can just be a burn-out like her too. The world needs burn-outs I guess. Otherwise who's gonna clean our toilets?" Nevermind that in commissions alone, Emery almost made more than most anybody else in the store, a fact Song knew Grace was extremely familiar with. It was the only reason the girl who broke the paper towel dispenser in the employee bathroom at least once a week still had a job.

The needling was common, but nothing the junior Rim couldn't handle. If anything, Song was just grateful she wasn't trying to set him up on a date daily anymore. It wasn't that she didn't want to, but every time she tried to plan something, Song had a valid reason. He was covering shifts any time one came open. He was studying for his practical, cutting and styling a dozen mannequin heads a month. For all Grace's complaints, not one was towards her child's work ethic.

Song, having written off his love life, decided the best use of his time would be to learn anything and everything he could about the business, so that when it was his, he'd never be without an answer. This became his sole focus. All of his free time was spent dedicated to mastering his craft. The only person who he ever spoke to outside of the shop was Emery, and that was usually on their breaks.

One day, Song decided to kidnap the blond, so they could take an extra long lunch. The Rim heiress needed some advice, so he dragged her along to a sex shop just down the road. The Asian-American youth had sworn off sex, but that didn't mean he no longer had carnal needs. He just found himself in a situation where an expensive piece of plastic was far more reliable than any man, woman, or nonbinary person.

"Why don't you try this one?" Emery asked, holding up a battery powered prostate massager. I keep this one in the night stand for when Mary goes out with her friends, and I'm bored. I call it Little Mary."

"Well now I definitely can't buy that one, or I'll be thinking of your girlfriend every time I try to masturbate, and I don't think any of us want that."

Emery tilted her head slightly to the side, a small smile on her face as she let Song snatch the device from their bestie's hand, before shoving it back onto a shelf, before searching for some simpler options.

“Oh right... you've got to come to my birthday party, Song! You promised! I know you don't want to, but if you don't, I'll cry every time I see you. It's, like, the first party in our new apartment.” The bubbly blond was jumping up and down, and her C-cups bounced with every hop.

Song picked up a toy that seemed to suit his liking, and walked up to get in line, while Emery followed behind, her eyes continuing to beg, even after her mouth stopped. “Party's aren't really my thing... I guess people aren't really my thing, Emery. I love you, but...”

Emery wrapped her arms around Song from behind, and gave a firm squeeze. “I love you too, so you have to. Pleeeeeeeease! I'm not the only one who wants you to come. Emily keeps asking about you. Her and Theo will be there. C'mon, pleeeeeeease!”

Song held his face in his hands for a moment, until finally relenting, anything to make the girl stop. “Fine! I'm coming! But just for a little bit. Don't get mad if I don't stick around... Emily is going to be there?” Song sighed, feeling the arms around him, the warmth of Emery, a slight smile gracing his lips before he pulled away.

The ditzzy girl nodded her head up and down, excited to get her way as she often did. Song thought back to the last time he heard from the third boy turned girl. Emily messaged him on his own birthday, and she was the only one who did that he wasn't related to, which was even more impressive given he didn't tell anyone it was coming up. Song didn't reply.

Emery would have but she got her days mixed up. For her, birthdays were a week-long affair, and she began this one with a card, and a gift certificate to a taco shop, the implication being that they'd be enjoying that present together. The Rims wanted to take their daughter out for a nice dinner, but Song was insistent they'd rather just eat at home. A quiet birthday was the most perfect gift he could ask for, but then “Brooks” had to go and ruin it by giving the feminized youth something new to obsess over.

After getting the message, a simple “Happy Birthday, Song!” the diminutive nailtech spent the next several hours scouring Emily's tiktok, and her facebook page. In every photo, and every video she was surrounded by people, her sorority sisters mostly if their t-shirts were any indication. The girl seemed to be incredibly popular. In every one she was smiling the kind of toothy smile that would've looked like it was badly glued onto Emmanuel Brooks' face. Her boyfriend was charming, tall, athletic, and incredibly attractive. Turning Emmanuel into a girl was supposed to be a punishment, but Emily Brooks had everything. As far as Song was concerned, her life was a gift, and he loathed her all the more for it.

“I mean, the boy is chiselled out of fucking marble! He's just too fucking hot! How is this fair!?” Song shouted the question to nobody, as he sat alone in his room, ignoring the head he was

supposed to be giving bangs. It took a moment, but hearing his own words, he also felt the need to clarify to nobody, "...if you're into that sort of thing."

Needless to say, Emery's party was an awkward affair. The guestlist included Emery's family, Mary's cousins, nieces and nephews so close in age they were basically cousins, Emily, Theo, and then twenty or so of the girls from the shop. Song was one of the latest to arrive, only offering a small wave to the mass of people before finding a chair in the corner, and planting his butt there. He surprised by the steady stream of people he had never met that swung in just to wish the over excited and over-sugared blond a happy birthday.

When Emily tried to wave him over, Song pretended he didn't see her. In reality, he hardly ever took his eyes off of her. When she giggled her cute giggle, in her raspy voice, he was upset. When she made a point to call each and every person who talked to her by names he could never remember, he was mad. When she sat in her boyfriend's lap, looked deeply into his eyes, and then kissed him like nobody else was in the room, he was absolutely livid. The frustrated teen didn't even bother saying goodbye. Instead he snuck out the door while Emery was opening her presents, hoping she liked the new flat iron he bought her.

Work, sleep, work, sleep, work, train, work, sleep. This cycle went on through to the next June. Suddenly Song was twenty, he had his cosmetology license, and he was running out of skills to acquire. Every new certificate hung on the wall, to his mother, lacked the impact of its predecessor. The Rim matriarch had only one document she wanted to see, and it was a college degree.

Recently, Grace was back on a k-pop kick, and with his sudden influx of free time, that meant night after night of karaoke in the Rim house. After sweating through yet another feminine rendition of a BTS medley, Song collapsed onto the couch next to his mother, and tried to hand her the microphone, but unlike most of their karaoke sessions, Grace's mind was clearly elsewhere.

"What's wrong, Mummy?"

Startled from her far off gaze, Song's mother smiled at her child, and brought up a subject she'd been putting off. "Listen, Little Star, you've been working so hard, and I'm so proud of you. Even if you weren't my daughter I'd still be grooming you to run your own store. You're talented, and beautiful, and I'm so grateful to be your mother..."

"But?" Song could feel the ellipsis hanging in the air.

"But your father and I are worried about you. You don't have a social life... at all... A girl your age shouldn't be spending all her free time with her parents. You should be out, having fun, making mistakes. Heaven knows you made plenty in the past. If you don't meet anybody, how are you ever going to find a husband? I know you want to marry for love, but you have to

interact with people for that to happen. As much as I want you to, you can't spend the rest of your life at home with your mother."

Song paused for a moment, wondering if his mother had actually just told him to make mistakes, or if he was having a stroke. "I'm fine, Mummy, really. I mean, what do you want me to do?"

"I'm glad you asked. I actually set up a profile for you on Korean Cupid, and there's a few boys on here I think you'll want to take a look at. I know I do."

As Grace reached for her phone, Song was busy trying to figure out how to close the can of worms he absolutely did not mean to open. Almost as though sent from the heavens themselves, the frantic twenty-year-old's phone suddenly chimed, and he couldn't unlock it fast enough. Opening it up, he found a message from the last person he expected to hear from.

Brooks: Hey Song, I just got home for the summer, and I was wondering if you wanted to get together tonight... catch up maybe...?

Next to the feminized youth, he could see his mother swiping through pictures and pictures of abs and men holding fish. Caught between a rock and a hard place, he decided that it was worth rolling the dice on the unknown evil.

Song: Fine. Come over now. Don't make me wait.

"Sorry, Mummy, but my friend is back from college, and she wants to come by. I have to go get ready."

Grace had hoped to play matchmaker, but her Little Star was talking about seeing another human being on her own accord, so she thought it best not to look a gift horse in the mouth. She kissed her daughter on the forehead, before letting her run off to paint her face.

A short time later, the doorbell rang out across the Rim house. Song scurried down the stairs in bare feet, desperate to get to the door before his mother. He swung open the giant hardwood portal to find a co-ed dressed in a pair of short overalls, over an off-the-shoulder white t-shirt, simple white sneakers, and a dark green canvas bag slung over her shoulder.

"Brooks," Song looked the young beauty up and down, calling her by her last name, just like he had when her pronouns were he/him. His eyes were immediately drawn to the long purple shoulder-length locks spilling down her back, decorated with a failed attempt at a magenta balayage. The young stylist appreciated the brush work, but as far as he was concerned, a blind person could tell Emily used a boxed dye.



“Hello, gorgeous!”

It was the same phrase Emmanuel Brooks used to greet his girlfriend, every time he'd see her, but this time it hit differently. The way the girl bolted through the door, wrapping her arms so tightly around her feminized ex that she was almost choking him, before planting a big wet kiss on both of his cheeks, was so disarming it immediately tore down the wall Song had spent the last hour meticulously constructing. He'd known this person for years, shared intimate moments with them, but this new encounter was like being introduced to a complete stranger, though one who already seemed to be quite fond of him.

Before, Song would've shoved the girl off of him, but a year of celibacy had left him starved of touch. Without thinking about it, he slowly embraced her in return, breathing in the fragrance of what he assumed was a cheap body spray. He was only snapped from his reverie when his knuckle brushed up against the stiff product taming her natural curls.

“Who's your friend, Little Star?” Grace asked, as she entered the foyer, causing the two to separate just as quickly.

“Umm, we've met before, Mrs. Rim.” Emily said, extending a hand, and bracing herself to be called “white trash”. “Nice to see you again.”

Grace shook the offered hand, looking the tall girl up and down like she was trying to remember a tv show she used to watch as a child. “Of course, of course. Do you girls have big plans?”

“Mom, this is Emily,” Song interjected, knowing full well the woman had no idea who her friend was, “we used to, uh, go to school together. We're just going to go up to my room and talk.”

Song grabbed the girl's hand, but before he could pull her along, Grace had already gone into full inquisition mode.”

“Song was telling me you're home from college?”

“Yes, ma'am.” Emily answered, the smile on her face telling Song just how amusing she found this interaction. “The sorority houses get cleaned over summer break, so I'm staying at my mother's until school starts back.”

“...and where do you go?”

“Central.”

While Grace saw that school on a lower tier than most, at that point, anything was better than nothing, and her Little Star was doing nothing with her education. “Oh, that's nice. Maybe you can convince this one to finally go. I keep telling her, she'll be an old lady in night school if she's not careful.”

“Mummy!” Song whined, once again trying to yank his friend away, but once again Grace was too quick.

“Why don’t you girls go out tonight. It’s so nice out, and…”

“Mummy, please!” The look of desperation on Song’s face said it all.

Grace rolled her eyes, while simultaneously reaching for her wallet. “Listen, Emily, my Little Star has needed a social life for a while now. Take this money, and talk her into actually leaving this house… my treat. You guys can go meet some boys, have some fun dancing. Just be safe, okay.”

The Rim Beauty proprietor slipped two twenties from her fold, and stuffed it into the violet-haired girl’s palm.

Emily looked at the cash awkwardly, finally saying, “Mrs. Rim, I can’t accept…”

“Nonsense.” the woman cut her off. “I insist. Now, run along, you two. Song, I really like this one. She can construct a full sentence. Why haven’t you brought her around before?”

“Mummy!” Song’s cheeks burned a shade of crimson so deep, he almost looked drunk.

“Okay, okay.” the helicopter mother said, throwing her hands in the air defensively, as she walked back toward her office. “I know when I’m not wanted. You two have fun tonight.”

“Bye, Mrs. Rim! Nice seeing you again!” Emily shouted after her, before facing Song with wide-eyed bewilderment, and a shit-eating grin. She whispered, “What the fuck was that?” snickering under her breath.

“Who knows?” Song answered, desperate to change the subject, before tugging his friend along. Hearing the girl’s giggle as they ascended the stairway, he couldn’t help but notice how effortless Emily sounded when she spoke, a far cry from where they began in Song’s vocal crash course, just before the girl’s first date.

Up in Song’s room, Emily collapsed backwards onto the canopy bed, and practically melted into the soft mattress. “Oh my god, this thing is so comfortable. How have I never been in here before?”

“Because my mom would’ve castrated you.”

“I probably should’ve then. It would save me about ten-thousand dollars. At least orchies are cheaper than vaginoplasty, so maybe I’ll actually be able to afford one one day.”

Song had only ever heard those words from his mother. The idea of actually wanting the procedures seemed like the most absurd thing to him. The feminized youth struggled to reconcile the bruiser that was once a member of his little gang, with the sexy hipster sprawled out on top of his comforter. Sure, they hadn't seen each other in years, but even so the change seemed incredibly sudden. One thing he was certain of was that what was supposed to be Manny's punishment was anything but.

Song stood at his full-length mirror, checking his outfit out of habit. He wore a see-through button down, composed almost entirely of lace, with black accents decorating the two breast pockets, and the ruffled collar. Under that was a simple white cami to protect his modesty. That was all on top of a simple black knee-length skirt.

He glared at his jet black hair, disappointed it had lost all the height he'd teased into it that morning, leaving limp strands to dangle around his face.

"God, you're too damn pretty. It's not fair." Emily said, pulling herself upright, and sitting on the edge of the bed, looking at Song's face through their reflection in the mirror. "You know, most girls like us would kill to be as tiny as you. I mean, you've got the whole package. It's hard not to feel like a lumbering giant." While Emily was much more confident in who she was, there were still moments of dysphoria, like comparing herself to just how petite Song was.

"Girls like us..." Song muttered, turning to face the girl gushing praises he didn't want to hear. "Trust me, you're anything but lumbering."

Song wasn't blowing smoke. The way Emily's hips swayed as she walked up the stairs were practically begging him to grab them. The girl was a beauty, there was no argument otherwise. The only thing he really hated was her hair.

"For real though, we should go out." Emily squealed, jumping up and grabbing Song by both hands. "Your mom's buying. Why not?"

"Because I'm not trying to go out trolling for dick tonight, Brooks... Emily... Besides, what about Theodore?"

"Use his government name, why don'tcha." Emily chuckled. "Anyway, we broke up a few weeks before finals."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that." Truthfully he wasn't. A part of him wriggled with glee, knowing the perfect picture he'd seen on the internet wasn't the whole story. Suddenly the terrible dye job made so much sense. Strangely, Song also felt bad about feeling good about someone else's misery. Guilt was a feeling he was only just getting to know. "What happened?"

"Umm, we grew apart... It was mutual anyway." Emily rolled her eyes, tired of repeating this same explanation for who knows how many times. "Anyway, no boy talk tonight. Boys suck. I'm

with you. Let's have a girl's night! I'll call Emery. No fully-functional dicks allowed. Pleeeseeee!!!!"

"Oh god, I've got another one doing it now." It was the same tactic Emery used to get her way, and it seemed to be just as effective. It was at that moment that Song realized that they hadn't stopped holding hands. He pulled himself away, returning to his reflection in the mirror before finally agreeing to the outing. "Fine, we can go, but let me fix my hair first, and get some shoes on."

Song brushed his hair back into a low ponytail, then fastened it in place with a big, floppy, black, velvet bow, and pinning the flyaways with the trusty star pin. He retrieved the white pumps he wore to work that day, then replaced his large pearl studs back into his ears. A quick reapplication of red lipstick finished the job, and he collected his black handbag to head out the door. Instantly the Rim heir's momentum was derailed when Emily plopped down onto the stool in front of his vanity.

"Do me next!"

"Do what?"

"Fix my hair, silly. I can't go out with you looking all perfect, while I've got this crunchy mess on my head."

Song rolled his eyes, irked that this person had the gall to plow right back into his life, and then ask him to work for free. "Fine, but let's hurry. I don't want to be out too late."

Starting with a wide paddle brush, Song began working at the ends of Emily's hair, brushing out all of the dried product, and blending the untamed curls. Running his fingers through the strands, he could feel all the suffering endured by the poor hair. In an attempt to mitigate the damage, he sprayed it all down with a leave-in conditioner, and continued to brush it through.

"You know, box dyes aren't really the best for your hair. If you come down to the shop after work one day, we're running a special right now on keratin hair treatments. It could really help repair the texture."

"C'mon, Song, you know I can't afford that. Besides, I won't be working at The Hangar for much longer anyway."

"Is that crazy bitch gonna fire you?" Song hoped the evil witch who set him and his friends down the path they now walked had maybe been hit by a car or something. He didn't wish her dead, but he definitely wanted her to suffer.

“What... no! Don’t be silly. Bianca is my friend. She kept telling me that place was a trap, and that I should get out while I still can. Anyway, I got offered a job working the desk at the hotel where my mom works. You remember? The Ahuva Bahyeet?”

“Right, well... my booth is mine to do with as I please. I just have to pay for product.”

“Oh, well... Hell yeah! Thanks! You know...”

As Emily continued to drone on about her new workplace, Song continued to practice his craft. When Emily’s hair started to feel as soft again, he touched a little hair wax to his finger tips, and ran them through the purple strands. After that, he retrieved a styling brush from his vanity, and began brushing through the curls against the palm of his hand, until they blended together in a smooth wave.

Parting it down the middle, he took each section, and tied a hair-tie around them, just behind the ears at the base of the neck. A little more brushing, and a lot of hairspray, and then Emily had two symmetrical pigtails dangling over her shoulder, each one filled with smooth curls. The last embellishment was two strands of white ribbon, tied in little bows over the elastics. It was cute, and didn’t look anywhere near as fried as when the girl arrived. All that was left was to pick apart the curls so they looked like an explosion of volume.

“Oh my god, that’s too cute!” Emily gushed, bouncing the pigtails in the palms of her hands. “I absolutely adore it. You’re going to have to teach me. You really do need to join our sorority though, for real for real. Like, we could use a girl with your skill set. Not to mention, you wouldn’t have to live here anymore.”

“What’s wrong with...?” Song didn’t need to finish the question. He knew the answer, and it was downstairs in her office, searching Korean dating apps for her child who explicitly asked her not to. His mother didn’t even seem to have a glimmer of an idea how intrusive the act of creating a dating profile for someone else really was. “Okay, we’re all ready now. Call Emery, and let’s get going. I’m driving.”

Emily grabbed her canvas bag, and threw it over her shoulder. “That’s fine with me, because I took an Uber.”

*

“...and that’s how I puked in Chappel Roan’s shoe.” Emily said, after downing a shot of cherry flavored vodka. She had been regaling her two friends with a story from a music festival she dragged Theo along to the previous year. “I mean, he could tall white guy his way into anywhere, and the portapotty line was so fucking long. I mean, I thought I was in the bathroom, but whoops.”

“That’s so crazy!” Emery shouted over the bar noise, before taking a shot herself. “Me and Mary really like her music. Did you get her autograph, Milly?”

‘Mary and I...’ Song thought, not bothering to voice the correction, knowing it was a lost cause.

“Umm...no... We got kicked out, Emery.”

“Oh, that makes sense, I guess.”

The trio were now seated at a booth inside the very same restaurant Emily had her first, and coerced, date with Theo. They also had the very same lax ID policy, and the twenty-year-olds were taking full advantage. A pitcher sat half-empty in the center of the table, surrounded by a half-dozen empty shot glasses.

In Song’s intoxicated mind, he was having trouble believing that Emily was the very same person he was forced to date just a few years earlier. Manny was more afraid of being arrested than anything. From the stories, Song could infer that Emily was guilty of breaking and entering at least three times in the previous year alone. Manny thought he was just another ugly person, blending in the background. Emily knew she was hot, made clear by the way she winked to every boy who thought he was sneakily catching a glance at the table full of hotties. Manny hardly ever spoke. Emily seemed to never shut the fuck up. Even how Brooks spoke had changed, with phrases like “too cute” and the word “silly” a normal part of their vocabulary. It wasn’t just what they said, but how they said it. Manny hardly ever spoke up. He just didn’t have that much charisma, whereas Song could feel the energy - the emotion behind almost every word Emily uttered.

The strangest part, one Song couldn’t quantify, was the sheer magnetism of the girl’s personality. She was just plain cool. She effortlessly had the clout that Emery stumbled into, and Song craved. Song didn’t know why, but they desperately needed her like them.

“I went to that Blackpink show last year... with my mom...” Before he finished the sentence, Song realized it wasn’t quite the boast he’d hoped.

“Cool, I love them!” Emily replied earnestly. Song’s insecure thoughts tried to find some bitchy subtext in her words, but the girl’s face couldn’t tell a lie. She never could.

That’s when he decided to try to say something nice. “I mean, I wouldn’t have chosen that specific shade of purple... or any shade of purple for that matter... wait, I mean it looks good but... maybe something a little more earthy... more rich... less uh... crayola... I mean vivid...”

Gleeful joy washed over Emily’s face, as she slipped her fingers through her stammering friend’s, and looked them right in the eye. “You try to hide it... I mean, you do, but I was... yeah. I love it when you’re nice like this.” Emily verbally stumbled as she tried to make her point, the shots having done their job.

“Nice?” Song spat. It wasn’t an insult, but he was unused to being described that way, so it somehow felt like one.

“You heard me.” Emily shot back with another wink. Her time with the sorority had made playful teasing and flirting the norm, even between friends. “Like, you try to pretend that you’re this heartless porcelain doll, but I know that underneath it all, Song Kelly Rim is...” The tipsy co-ed searched around the bar, like she was about to spill classified information, before leaning in close, and whispering, “...a nice person.”

“No, you shut-up!” Song shouted back. Normally he’d be lapping up the praise from anybody, but something about when Emily did it made their heart flutter. Retrieving his compact mirror from his handbag, Song felt his cheeks burn, and wondered how much foundation it would take to keep everyone else from noticing.

That’s when a guy who’d been staring at them most of the night, egged on by his friends, finally got up, and approached the booth.

“Hey,” the guy said, in the laziest of introductions. As he swayed back and forth, standing at the edge of the table, his eyes darted from girl to girl, seemingly trying to decide where he stood the best chance. Why he thought that was Song, with the pure disgust in his eyes, made sense to absolutely nobody. He let his beer soaked fingers gently stroke the top of her hand, and asked, “What’s your name?”

“Ew, no thank you.” Song answered, yanking his hand away, refusing to make eye-contact with the sweaty drunk.

“Hey, don’t be so cruel, little lady.” the guy replied, now stroking his cheek, as Song turned away, trying his best to maintain his dignity, while his own inebriated mind considered biting the fingers lingering near his face. Not giving in to the impulse only made it more of a surprise when the guy’s face suddenly smashed into the table right in front of him.

As Song turned back, he saw the guy being held in place, with Emily’s knee pressed firmly into his spine, and her arms woven through his, seemingly trying to touch his elbow to the back of his head, all while the man’s friends bellowed, “Ohhhh!!” from across the room like they were watching a UFC fight, laughing hysterically.



“I believe she said no thank you.” Emily stated calmly. “Now, I’m gonna let you go, you’re going to apologize to her, buy us another pitcher of beer, and then get the fuck out, or I’m going break a nail knocking your teeth out, before I ask Rosie to call the cops to come and collect you. Yes?”

“Fuck y...” The guy couldn’t even finish his insult before Emily pulled the hold tighter, his shoulder a hair’s breadth from dislocating.

“We can try this one more time, and then I’m just gonna rip the fucking thing out. Yes?”

“Okay, fine, whatever, just let me go, please.”

“Pretty please?” Emery suggested, caught up in the spectacle.

“Pretty please... with sugar on top... whatever. Please don’t break my fucking arm!”

“Okay, fine.” Emily relented, and let the guy go.

For a moment it looked like he was about to take a swing, but even in her sneakers Emily stood five-foot-eleven-inches. Her stern expression stopped the man in his tracks. He turned to Song,

muttering, "I'm sorry" and then ran back to his friends, all ready to give him more shit than he'd ever gotten in his life, just in time from Rosie, the bartender, to bring a fresh pitcher, and the crowd to lose interest and return to their conversations.

"Shit yeah!" Emery threw a few punches in the air that were more likely to break her own fingers than damage anyone else. "Are you still teaching that class, Milly?"

"Women's self defense," Emily answered, "every Thursday on the Zeta house lawn at six. We're starting another class in the fall. It's not just for students, you know? You two should come."

"Sure!" Emery agreed. "Then I might be able to actually beat Mary in a tickle fight."

Brooks had been the enforcer, with a reputation for getting into one fight and moving on to another, even if he hadn't picked either. This display fit right into Song's expectations, but it all felt so different. Song wasn't used to feeling like a damsel in distress. The kind of fear they experienced when approached by a strange man was nothing new, but when that man was drunk it was a different level of terror. They certainly didn't feel like a man themselves at that moment. Funny enough, as they swooned at their hero, Emily, coming to their rescue, they didn't much care either. They were too busy trying to quell the fluttering in their chest, and fight back another blushing fit.

"Still though," Emily continued, "I think you should come to Central, and pledge Zeta, Song. It's not just about your education, but also participating in a community. Plus, aren't you sick and tired of being stuck under Grace's roof. I know you love your mom, but she can be a bit... well... suffocating."

"I know she is." Song admitted, the alcohol coursing through their veins allowing that moment of vulnerability. "But, I don't think it would work out. People just don't like me. I'm not so delusional that I don't know that."

"I like you." Emily replied, giving Song's hand a gentle squeeze.

His face now the color of his lipstick, Song locked eyes with his ex for a moment, before gently pulling his hand away, quickly asking, "Why aren't you bugging Emery to go to college, and join your sorority. She'd probably fit right in."

Emily looked over to their friend, lost in her place mat with her crayons, trying to get through a maze, and only finding dead ends. It was clearly a tic-tac-toe board. She looked to Song with a raised eyebrow, and no explanation was necessary.

A couple of hours later, Emily drove the trio home, dropping off Emery first before heading to Song's. Song, far too drunk to drive, slumped over in their passenger seat, and occasionally stole glances to the person who seemed so familiar, yet they hardly recognized. After arriving,

Emily called for an Uber, and went to hug Song goodbye. The two wound up standing in the drive-way, wrapped in each other's arms until the car arrived.

One long slow goodbye later, Song was stumbling through the doorway, where his mother was waiting for him, her phone in hand.

"Did you have fun tonight, Little Star?" Grace asked, but she didn't wait for an answer. "I guess you didn't meet any boys tonight, but that's okay. I've got some good matches pulled up, and we can check them out together. What do you say?"

Song didn't answer. He knew there was only one thing he could do to derail the freight train that was his mother. Without fanfare, Song just looked at the woman, and said, "Mummy, I think I'm ready to go to college."

Chapter 4.

"Girls, girls, please keep side discussions to a minimum. If we want to get through this list tonight, we're going to have to focus." Stacy shouted over the rumbling mass of young coeds, stuffed into the kitchen of Zeta house, on the campus of Central College. The new chapter president had no desire to watch the sun come up that early Sunday morning. She banged her gavel on the hardwood table. "We've got five to go, ladies. Let's pretend we're adults, at least until the underclassmen figure out we're just as much of a mess as they are. Now, next on the docket, we have a Song Kelly Rim. Emily, I believe you're sponsoring the potential new member. The floor is yours."

"Thank you Madam President." Emily replied, standing from her chair.

"Ooo, so formal!" shouted a girl sitting closer to the door.

"Sucking up to the new boss already, Brooks?" another joked.

"Bitch, shut up." Emily shot back, the grin on her face, not matching her tone in the slightest. "Anyway, I think Song would be a wonderful addition to our sorority. She's smart, so our collective GPA will go up. She's a licensed cosmetologist, so hair consultations are right around the corner, and if you ask nicely, she'll probably help in any way she can, while also probably bitching the whole time, but that's part of her charm."

"Is she the one who fixed that mess you had?" Brittany, the treasurer, asked. Her and Stacy being the girls to sponsor Emily's pledge, she felt a little more entitled than the others to poke the sophomore girl in a potentially sore spot. The girl had clearly grown, since the night they met, while she was out on her first date with Theo. The shy teen wallflower had blossomed, and her big sisters were proud.

Emily swung her head, her wild, fried, purple curls only that morning being tamed into sleek, silky, shiny, chestnut waves, with subtle highlights, spilling down over her shoulders, clearly showing off. “Oh, you mean this?” she teased. “That’s just the kind of privilege that comes with having a girl like Song in your life. Not to mention, it’s pretty white in here. Believe me, I know this sorority cares about diversity, but two dozen white girls only adding six more isn’t a good look. Song’s great. You should all feel guilty if you don’t pick her. For real though, I love this bitch, and I genuinely believe she’ll bring a lot to the table. She’s just a little moody, but aren’t we all sometimes? If I’m being honest, she might figure out a way to stage a coup, and become our first freshman president, but that’s a risk I’m willing to take.”

The playful Zeta poked her tongue out at the leadership table, made a cartoonish salute, and then took her seat. The room erupted in laughter, while Stacy started banging her gavel once more, but she was cackling louder than anybody in the room.

“Okay, thank you Emily.” she shouted over the quieting room. “All in favor.”

“AYE!”

There was little room for misinterpretation, but the president continued, glued to the chains of procedure. “All opposed?”

“Ney!” Emily shouted, glad for the chance to make a scene of losing the vote, much to the amusement of everyone there.

“The ayes have it.” Stacy said, swatting the gavel once again for good measure. “Emily, I’m assigning you as her big. Make sure she knows she’s expected to attend all rush week activities, and we’ll be happy to welcome our new member.”

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For the first few weeks of the semester, Song took some time off work before reducing his hours to only Sundays. Freshman orientation wasn’t just an assembly in an auditorium, but an all-consuming thing he was immersed in from the moment he woke, to when his pretty little head hit his down pillow. Learning the map of the campus, a place where everything a student could need was at the furthest across the road, yet a twenty minute drive through winding narrow streets was an adjustment. Most freshmen stayed in dorms, but Song knew he’d be pledging Zeta house, so rather than waste the effort, he decided to commute from his parents house for the first couple of weeks.

Song’s parking space, coming in at a whopping four-hundred dollars a semester, was in the lowest priority area, a small side street on the edge of campus, two miles from the student union, and three from his first class Monday morning. After his first day, walking the distance in his Chanel pumps, suddenly moving twice in a month didn’t feel like such a burden, but it was too late to choose that option.

A few days after attending the interest meeting, Song got a text from Emily, telling him to meet on the Zeta house porch. Song arrived first, taking a seat on one of the many ancient couches, all in clashing prints, lining the front of the giant, three-story Victorian building, only to stand right back up, as the thing felt somehow sticky, and stiff at the same time.

“Is this a fucking frat house?” he groaned, checking a paper map once more, and finding no comfort in the answer.

“Hey there, gorgeous!” Emily shouted, wrapping her arms around Song from behind, after sneaking up behind him.

“Please tell me the inside isn’t this gross.” Song said, still unable to take his eyes off the seat, for fear that a rogue tribe of mutant dust bunnies might try to abscond from their borders, and colonize his pristine black skirt.

“Of course not, silly. Every year, at the bonfire we hold around finals, we burn most of these, but then people start throwing shit out from the previous year, and a lot of them find their way up here. Trust me, you’ll be glad stinky drunks pass out here after parties, instead of in our living room.”

Inside, Song was relieved to see Emily wasn’t lying. While the house was cluttered, and none of the furniture matched, every corner was spotless, down to the smallest detail.”

“The chore wheel is sacred. Just to warn you, if you violate the chore wheel, we’ll toss you in a volcano... but for real, you’ll never live it down. Stacy still gets shit about going on vacation her freshman year without getting somebody to cover her communal laundry week, and she’s the president. That mistake will haunt her in her grave. If you leave dishes in the sink, those dishes end up in your bed, until you wash them. If you don’t spray the shower after you use it, you’re banned for a week, and you have to use the weird little servant’s tub in the basement, from like the eighteen-hundreds or something. Seriously, just be clean, and nobody will shame you for life. Seems fair enough.” It was clear the leggy chestnut-haired girl had given this speech enough for one lifetime already.

“Bitch, who are you talking to?” Song said, an eyebrow raised. “Anyway, I take this as I’ve been accepted.”

“Of course. I told you they’d love you. I mean one girl voted no, but fortunately for you, everybody else voted against me.” Emily gave Song a mischievous wink, while he tried to make sense of the absurd statement.

It took a moment, but after realizing she was teasing him, he decided to rib her back a little. “You know, I got one of those bid things from the Kappas... in the mail, no less. It was printed on some of the nicest card stock I’ve ever seen. Smelled like strawberries too.”

“It’s true,” Emily said with a chuckle, “they’ve got lots of money to blow because of all the rich ass legacy girls in there. I’m not surprised. Any sorority can bid on any girl who attended the interest meeting. If you want to spend the next four years stuck in an endless tea-party with fourteen copies of your mother, that’s your prerogative. Your outfits will certainly match, but something tells me you might kill someone with a sugar spoon before the semester is over.”

The image of a dozen Grace Rim’s seated around a banquette table, chanting “One of us, one of us…” flooded Song’s mind, and suddenly the joke wasn’t so funny anymore.

Song continued, pushing past the nausea that accompanied his daydream, “What all do I still need to do?”

“Officially you’re not a member until the end of rush week, after all the initiation activities, but that’s just a formality really. You can go ahead and move in this weekend though. The only expectation is that you attend all pledge events. Failure to do so is the big no no here, but if you’re, like, dying or something, nobody will be mad about it. Just try, I guess.”

Emily continued leading Song around the house, giving the dime tour, while explaining the rules. “Don’t go into another girl’s room when she’s not home, don’t leave laundry in the machine, and don’t bother trying to make sense of the multi-purpose room. It’s chaos in there, but to try to organize it is to only invite more. Finally, the TV in the living room is first come first serve, but don’t, like, be a bitch about it. Any questions? I’m your big. That’s what I’m here for.”

“Where will I be sleeping?”

“Well, the underclassmen all share rooms, so you’ll have a roommate, but I’m betting you two will get along.” Emily stopped her slow stroll through the hallway in front of a closed door, swinging it open to reveal a room with two beds, one on each side. While one was empty, the other was unmade, covered in crumpled, baby blue, satin sheets. A dresser overstuffed with countless thrift-store t-shirts, and granny panties spilling out onto the floor, sat against the wall. A budget chromebook sat on a desk off in the corner, while the wall behind the bed had dozens and dozens of pictures taped to it.

Song approached the wall to see the glossy photos, noticing that Emily was in almost every picture, along with a bunch of other girls he didn’t know. Eventually his eyes found a selfie Emery had taken of her and her two besties on their girls night out that summer. “You’re going to be my roommate?”

Emily threw her arms around Song, squishing the smaller of the two’s face into her bosom, while she jumped up and down, clearly very proud of herself for not spoiling the surprise. “Jenn dropped out over the break, and I told the girls I didn’t mind bunking with a freshman. When they accepted your bid, I begged Brittany to put you in here.”

Song blushed, as he felt the soft flesh of Emily's cleavage on his cheek, as it peeked out above her cami top. "I don't know who those people are, Emily... but, I suppose there are worse people to cohabit with," he said, teasing the tall girl, while noting to himself, 'but we're also going to have to have a serious discussion about Brooks being a slob.' as he eyed the mass of clothing crumpled up in front of the girl's empty laundry basket.

"Hey, are you hungry?" Emily suddenly asked, gripping her new roomie by the shoulders, and looking them right in the eye. "They got a pretty good pizza place in the student union."

"Uh...sure..." Song replied, hoping Emily didn't notice the rosy tint through his makeup. "I'll drive."

"It would take us longer to walk to your car than to just go there. It's like a five minute walk."

"Well then, I'll get us an Uber... my treat." Song pulled out his phone, and started swiping. "See, it says there's a driver just half a mile away."

"Yeah, but that's on campus, Song. The streets are basically glorified sidewalks. A good rule of thumb to remember is that when driving across campus, you might as well multiply the distance by ten... Twenty just before the breaks. It's way easier to just walk."

"Nonsense." Song replied, unfettered. "I'm sure it can't be that bad." The chime went off on the app, and Song looked back down to his phone. "Okay, it says Terrance will be here in twenty-nine minutes."

*

That Sunday, Jii and Grace Rim stood outside Zeta house, needlessly supervising the movers no other girl's parents had bothered to hire. While the matriarch was sad to see her Little Star leave the nest, she was proud the girl was finally growing up. Meanwhile, the father had been quietly having a meltdown, since Song made their intentions clear.

The anxious man decided right then was his only chance to make one last desperate plea. "Ttal, I'm so proud of you for going back to school, but you don't have to leave home to do it. Don't you want to stay with us? The drive isn't that far. Not to mention, uh... our tv is bigger... yeah...?"

It was right then Song could clearly see how their relationship with their father had changed, and in it they no longer felt much like the boy the old man expected to follow in his footsteps.

At first, after Song's enforced transition, Jii was mostly kept in the dark. The only explanation his wife offered was that it was necessary, and then the man who only literally wore the pants in his family, was forced to reluctantly agree, but his discomfort was obvious to all. Slowly but surely

though, Song's grades improved, they were doing well at work, and they seemed to have actually started taking an interest in bettering their lives.

Sometime through Song's senior year of high school, Jii's child brought home the first straight-A report card he'd seen since they were in middle school. The man had always been more comfortable with metrics than emotions. A lifelong scientist, things he couldn't quantify made him nervous. Suddenly there was a new result showing up in the experiment that was his progeny, and he liked what he saw.

The next day, when Song arrived home from school, waiting on the bar in the kitchen, sat a stuffed white tiger, wearing a red bandana, and little red mittens over its paws for some reason. It wasn't the kind of thing Song would have paid any mind to before, but the card sitting in the creature's lap, written in his father's hand, that read, "Ttal, I'm so proud of you. You've blossomed into a fine young lady." touched him in a place the former hooligan had long thought dead.

Grace rarely spoke Korean anymore. It wasn't useful for the face of a beauty brand in the US. She loved her native land enough, but the sting of being seen as second class by default as she grew up never left her either. Her love of old Hollywood molded the woman into the person she became and that culture was clearly what she preferred.

Speaking Korean was always something shared between Song and his father. It was like their secret language, even though millions of other people spoke it halfway around the world. It was how Song felt connected to his roots, and without it he would never have been able to speak to his grandparents over video chat. That simple thing, held the connection between a parent and child who otherwise couldn't have been any different.

Song's father had been keeping his son at arm's length since his feminine ordeal had begun, but when he saw the word "daughter" or "ttal" at the top of the note, written with such love, his cold heart melted, and suddenly the man whose approval he craved more than anything else, was truly back in his life, not just sharing the same house. From then on, Song loved to see the old man smile, and nothing did that more than sitting on his Appa's knee, and greeting him with a big kiss on the cheek.

Now, just as his daughter was ready to leave home for the first time, Jii was worried. He'd read about the troubles transgender girls faced - the discrimination, and the dangers. Fears of his little girl falling victim to an assault, or some other hate crime flooded his mind every night when he tried to close his eyes before bed. He wanted to protect her more than anything, and he couldn't do that when she was gone.

Grace rested a hand on her husband's shoulder, and leaned over to whisper in his ear, "Daddy, Song needs to do this. She has to grow up sometime. Don't worry, she'll be okay. Emily will watch her for us, and she knows we're only a phone call away. It's time to let go."

Song could see the terror in their father's eyes, and while they knew they needed to take this step, they only wanted to heal the man's pain. Quickly, they retrieved the stuffed tiger from their purse, and held it between the two of them.

In the squeakiest voice they could manage, Song bounced the stuffed creature up and down to match their words, "Don't worry, Appa. I'll look out for her. You can count on Mr. Mittens."

"Yeah, Appa. I'll be okay. I promise I'll call home once a week, and if I need you for anything I won't hesitate to ask. I'll be safe, I swear."

"Okay, okay, fine. I'm outvoted three to one. I know when I'm beaten." the man said reluctantly, nodding his head slowly. The Rims said their goodbyes, before the parents slowly walked off down the sidewalk, while Song made the little plushie wave them goodbye.



Stuffing the tiger back into his purse, the newest Zeta walked back to the porch, where Emily was sitting on one of the dirty loveseats waiting, with the biggest shit-eating grin Song had ever seen.

“Not a word, Brooks.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” the girl shot back, “I’ll just ask Mr. Mittens about it later.”

“He would never.” her bestie replied. “He’s no traitor.”

Chapter 5

That evening, just as things were winding down, Song sat at his regency vanity, counting up to a hundred with each stroke of the hair brush to keep their dark hair silky smooth. In the mirror, he saw his new roommate, Emily, returning from the shower in the reflection. Song’s eyes were immediately drawn to the glittering pieces of plastic resting on the bridge of her nose.

“What the fuck are those?!” he nearly shouted, giggling, as the charming girl glared at him through what was almost thick enough to be two cat-eyed telescopes on her face.

Emily rolled her eyes, as she continued to pat at her damp hair with a towel. “They’re glasses, dork. When my mom got that promotion a few years ago, it came with killer insurance, so she finally took me to the eye doctor around the same time we were getting my hormones sorted out. Turns out I’ve needed them for years. It’s become very apparent to me that the reason I used to get in so many fights is because people thought I was glaring at them all the time. I was just squinting. Oh yeah, that reminds me. Your mom texted me, and told me to tell you to take your pills.”

Song groaned, having already done so. “Jesus, I’ve been gone for, like, a day, and I still feel like she’s hovering over me. Anyway, why haven’t I seen them before?” Before their friend could answer the question, a glossed over detail sunk in. “Wait... since when does she have your number? And why didn’t she just text me?!”

Holding up three fingers Emily pointed to each of them in turn. “Recently, I don’t know, and you do know contacts are a thing, right?” For a moment she sounded like she was talking to Emery.

Song put down the brush, and walked over to the taller girl, looking her right in the eye. “You look so much like...” He squinted and leaned in closer. “...your mom.”

“Look who’s talking, tiny Grace!” the girl replied, poking out her tongue. She looked at Song, and noticed the girl was standing the same height as usual, but was wearing pajamas. One glance downward and she could see her standing on her polished red tippy toes, her bare heels floating a solid three inches above the ground. Pointing to her feet, she said, “Girl, we need to buy you some flats if you hate sneakers that much. That’s not healthy.”

"I'm fine." Song grumbled, glaring at the girl. It wasn't like he hadn't noticed the phenomenon, but his mother only wore heels, so he just assumed it would work itself out. Little did he know, at home, his mother was getting ready for bed, walking the exact same way.

"You're fine?" Emily asked again, an eyebrow raised above her frames.

"Yeah, of course."

Emily set her hands on Song's shoulders, and pushed down gently. The Korean-American felt their heels touch the floor, and the tendons in their calves were suddenly pulled as tight as the string of a crossbow. "Fucking ow ow ow owie ow!" they shrieked as they collapsed back onto their bed. "What the fuck was...!"

Song never got the chance to finish shouting, because Emily was already using her strong fingers to deeply massage the muscles in Song's leg, and quickly, they were putty in her hands. Slowly she worked her way up and down, giving the feet a little attention as well. As she worked, she continued to chastise her friend. "Tomorrow we're going to get you some cute flats, and by we I mean I'm going to take you, and you're going to buy them. Seriously, gorgeous, you're not perpetually broke like me, so why don't you go see a doctor?"

"Okay fine, but new rule," Song groaned, "you're not allowed to stop doing what you're doing... like ever." Emily's fingers were like a drug. Song didn't want her to stop, but he also needed to feel like he was in control, and that seemed like the best way to do it in his impaired state. As the new Zeta allowed himself to be pampered, for the first time in years, he found himself thinking things might not be so bad after all.

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That Thursday afternoon, by the time he finished his last class for the day, Song's newfound optimism was dashed against the rocks of an unrelenting rush week schedule. For the last ten minutes of statistics, Song was staring at the clock, calculating the percentage chance that his mother might kill him if he went home, and how much that might be mitigated by his father trying to be the punching bag instead. Afterward, he returned to his new bedroom, and began to dress for the event of the day. The girls were holding a carwash to raise money for the local animal shelter.

Song first dressed in a red halterneck bikini top, with a matching, retro, form-fitting, shorts-style bottom. Looking his body up and down in the mirror, his slender frame begged to be appreciated. In that moment, his thoughts drifted back to his time at the prep-school when the senior girls held a similar event. He thought about the nasty things he wanted to do to them when his horny fourteen-year-old brain saw them, spilling out of the stretchy fabric as they leaned on the hood of his mom's car.

After snapping back to the present, Song quickly dug into his dresser, retrieving a pair of denim short shorts, and a white cropped t-shirt. The vain youth's gaze only drifted back to the mirror a few times before donning the outfit that left a small strip of skin beneath peeking out between the garments. It was modest enough for the anxious boy turned girl to regain enough confidence for his mind to convince his feet to carry him out the door. The flats Emily helped him choose were sitting by the bed, but as he stepped into the shoes, Song realized wearing them around the house while stretching his tendons back out was one thing. It was another to trek halfway across the campus. Feeling a little spiteful, Song slipped into a pair of tan strappy shoes, with a four-inch cork heel, and a one-inch cork platform, collected his purse, and then bolted out the door.

In an old, cracked black-top parking lot, Stacy made a quick speech, the girls all said their hellos, and several of them took the time to compliment Song on his outfit, his hair, his makeup - pretty much anything and everything. The prideful youth's head swelled with pride, as he lapped up the praise. As far as he was concerned, he'd landed in a group that could clearly see his value. Being assigned to hold a sign up by the road, and flag down potential customers told him he was the best face the sorority wanted to put forward, but his ego had gotten so far away from him, that he'd have found a reason why any job he was assigned was the most important.

Everything seemed to be going smoothly, until it was time for a break. A quick drink of Gatorade by the donation table, and he was ready to return to his post, but that's when Emily, shamelessly dressed in a watermelon print two-piece with a little wrap over the bottoms, grabbed his attention, and told him it was time for everyone to rotate. Before he could complain, the little was handed soap, a sponge, and a bucket, and was told to join his big washing cars.

When he looked at her, whined, "But I'm still dry." Emily shot him in the chest with the hose. Suddenly the t-shirt might as well have been made of the kind of glass that frequently kills birds, and his red bikini, and rock hard frozen nipples were visible for all to see.



As the girl giggled, and got to hosing down the next car, Song had to bite his tongue, and keep working, as he attempted to save all his rage for later. Almost as soon as the opportunity presented itself, Song slapped Emily with a sponge directly on the ass, unintentionally instigating a full on water battle, where everybody lost, leaving them soaked with car soap in their hair.

That night in their room though, just after he took his shoes off, he was going to give the girl a piece of his mind, but Emily was massaging the knots out of his calves before he could open his mouth. His words tried to shoo her away, though his body was weak to resist.

The tall girl pushed the barefoot Song over back onto the bed with ease, as there was nothing under his heels to balance on. "You think a pretty little thing like you could stop me? Now, I know no means no, but if I don't do this you're going to wind up with all kinds of bone and muscle issues when you're older. Those tiny feet won't be so cute when your mangled toes come to a point, you know?"

For just a short while, Song moaned in relief. He forgot what he was even mad about until he was in his nightgown in bed, and Emily was already asleep. As he glared at the long-legged beauty sleeping in the bed across the room, the slighted Song struggled to close his eyes, as the events of the previous few days streamed through his unyielding mind like a cheesy eighties movie montage.

First his mind drifted back to when the girls were spending time with disadvantaged seniors in a public nursing home. This outing, every girl was assigned a kindly little crone, or a harmless withered old man to entertain, be that reading to them, playing a game, or just chatting. Song was sent to the room of a Mr. Roberts. The wrinkled little man seemed harmless, sitting in his wheelchair, staring out the window. Song took a seat at the table, next to the man.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Roberts." the Zeta pledge said sweetly. "My name is Song, and I'm here to spend some time with you today. Do you have anything special you'd like to do? We could play some checkers, or maybe I could take you for a walk on the grounds. Would you like that?"

"I used to know a girl that looked like you, back in the war." the old man croaked. "She used to suck my dick for a meal ration. How much would it cost me for you?" After seeing the girl's expression fall, the old man who was no gentleman quickly tried to explain. "No, don't take offense. It's a compliment. Did you say your name is Song? Heh, like a Songbird. Can you sing me a song, little bird?"

The rest of that afternoon, Song scrolled through his phone, while the old man continued staring out the window, lucky the sorority girl donating her time didn't push him right out of it.

Next, his thoughts dwelled on a more mischievous event for the pledges. The girls of Zeta house were all gathered in the living room, where Brittany stood at the front, explaining the rules of an annual tradition in the campus' Greek system.

“Okay, so the Epsilons used to do a panty raid every year around this time, and we got tired of being left out of all the fun somewhere around the millennium. Now, it’s a competition. They come for our panties, but we’re going after their boxers. They got us last year, and it’s time for some payback.”

“Right right,” Stacy continued. “We’ll be splitting into two teams. Most of us are going to be coming up with a plan of attack, while the others are staying on defense. Ladies on defense, keep an eye out. You probably don’t know all the epsilons yet, so be careful. If you see some boys sneaking around outside, don’t accuse them willy-nilly. You have to be sure. If they are an epsilon, they have to tell you, but if you ask someone and they’re not, that’s a two point penalty. Now, I know you might be thinking, we can just cheat then, but Zetas have integrity, isn’t that right, ladies?!”

The room erupted into cheers, and whistles. After it quieted down, it was Song who stepped forward with the first question. “Is the strategy to send all the freshman girls then?”

“Exactly, pledge Song.” Stacy praised, sticking to the formalities, though nobody else was. It just came with the presidency. “Since you seem to have a good head on your shoulders, you’ll be leading the assault team. It’ll be your job to figure out a way to sneak past the boys, this year. The rest of us will stand guard, and you can text us if you need support.”

“Eww, you sound like a joystick jock.” Britney teased. “You’ve got to stop playing Fortnite with your boyfriend.”

As the gaggle of freshman girls made their way the few blocks down to Epsilon house, only two girls seemed to want to talk. Everyone else was naturally on edge, but Felicia, and Gwen, the two knowing each other since long before attending Central college, droned on and on to their de facto leader, while Song, as unwilling to show any weakness as ever, hurried to formulate a plan in his mind.

“Why don’t we just buy some at the store?” Felicia asked. “You’ve got a car, don’t you, Song?”

“We can’t buy them, bitch.” Gwen answered for the distracted Korean pledge. “Zetas have integrity and stuff.”

“Hush!” Song said, suddenly stopping in his tracks, and turning back to face the group, with a proud grin. “Okay, so boys are, like, objectively stupid, right?” The small group all nodded in agreement. “Well, if we were to just blow them all, they’d just give us whatever we wanted and let us go on our way.”

“I mean, I don’t know if my boyfriend would be okay with that.” Gwen said, while the rest of the girls erupted into laughter.

“Oh my god, Song, you’re a hoot.” Felicia managed to get out. “You didn’t strike me as a comedian when we first met. What a surprise. You’re smart, pretty, and funny, so, like, why exactly are you single?”

“A joke?” Gwen still didn’t follow, but she giggled anyway, caught up in the commotion.

“Yeah... a joke.” Song said, gritting his teeth, and hoping that the nervous sweat he hoped could be passed off as a product of the warm summer night. ‘God, that bitch Bianca has ruined me. She screwed me up so bad, I almost prostituted myself for some guy’s underwear.’

Awkwardly laughing along with everybody else, Song frantically began stitching his original idea into something more palatable. “What I’m saying is, we just bribe them with the promise of something, and then don’t keep our end of the bargain. We get in. We get out. We win.”

“What’s the something?” Gwen asked.

A quick trip across the way to that same stucco shopping center, Song swiped the platinum card his dad slipped into his purse on move-in day, for two large pepperoni pizzas, and once more at Rosie’s bar for two cases of the cheapest, grossest iced beer to-go.

After that, the young women all made their way back to the frat house, where the diminutive queen bee brazenly knocked on the door. Two boys answered, their bloodshot eyes, and the pungent skunky aroma making it very clear what they were up to.

Strutting through the front door, Song’s spike-heeled sandals click-clacked on the uneven hardwood floor of the foyer, where he stuffed the offerings into the dumbfounded frat boys’ hands. He offered a simple explanation. “We know you know why we’re here, but if you keep your mouths shut, let us go upstairs and have our way for like twenty minutes, then when we leave, I promise you’ll be adequately rewarded.”

One boy was already sitting in front of the television, eating the pizza before Song even finished his speech. The other just nodded, while he licked his lips, not so subtly fantasizing about the tiny Korean girl barking orders.

Up the stairs, the girls all picked a room, and started stuffing boxers into garbage bags. Meanwhile, Song sent out a text, telling the rest of the Zetas to meet them in the backyard of the frat house, where it bumped up along a campus’ nature trail. That way they could make an easy escape. A short time after that, the freshman Zetas were tossing bag after bag out to the rest.

“So I guess we gotta go back downstairs, and deal with those guys?” Gwen asked, making a handjob motion. “Seriously, I don’t think Peter would be cool with that.

“Don’t be silly.” Felicia answered, chastising her old friend. “Obviously we’re going to sneak out. I think if we go out that window, we can walk down the porch cover, and it’s only like six feet down. Right, Song?”

“Yeah, of course.” Song answered, as though that was the plan all along. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

One by one, the Zetas fled the scene, some taking the small jump with ease, some dangling at full arm’s length before dropping, before hurrying into the cover of the woods. The last to leave, while painting it as a noble sacrifice, Song stood on top of the roof, where only Emily remained waiting for him.

“Girl, just jump. I catch you.” the tall girl slurred, not nearly as quiet as she probably thought.

“Are you drunk?” Song hissed back at her.

“Well, you guys were, like, gone for, like... one hours. Hey, is that Theo’s room? Is that cum stain still on the wall? He said the campus staff were gonna be piiiissssed when they saw it, after he moved out, but he was graduating, so...”

“Bitch, how the fuck should I know? I’ve never been here before.” The anxious ringleader’s feet wobbled on his impractical heels, as he tried to find the courage to take the leap, but continued to come up short. “Okay, look... Just wait... I’ll be down in a minute, okay?”

After crawling back through the window, ten minutes later, Song walked around to the back of the house, with two more pairs of boxers dangling from his french manicure. “Okay, job’s done. Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

As the two ran off, reminiscent of their teenage years fleeing the scene of the crime, the drunken Emily noticed Song’s lipstick smeared all the way from her chin to her nose. “You know, I really love that shade on you?”

“Bitch, not another word.” Song growled. He had to sneak into their own house, when they arrived back to repair the damage to his makeup before anyone else might have noticed, hoping anyone who did would be too hung over to remember in the morning.

‘I don’t know why this bitch wants to humiliate me so badly. I mean, didn’t I throw her a bone at that bake sale?’ Song thought as he continued to watch the lanky Zeta sleep.

Song’s mind drifted back to a part of the week that didn’t seem so bad in hindsight. The girls were holding a bake sale, and Song was slinging brownies like crazy. As a nailtech, customers didn’t really value his opinion. They came in either knowing what they wanted, nail art, extensions, gels, etc, or they were picking from a catalog. Since moving to the styling chair, suddenly sales were a huge part of the game.

Quickly, Song learned that rich women, particularly rich white women, could be especially adventurous with their hair. As his reputation grew, and the secret of Grace's talented daughter got out, if a client came into the shop for a trim, they might very well have left with highlights, a deep conditioning treatment, and a blowout as well. Applying the same skills that boosted his commissions made selling cookies to horny college boys child's play.

When two of the newer Epsilons swung by to support their sister sorority, Song's big whispered into his ear, "Damn, he's hot." as she eyed the blond six-foot-three giant up and down.

Feeling extremely charitable, Song jumped up from his seat, and approached the two boys, sizing up the giant Emily gawked at, and then the other, only a mere six feet with a fresh buzz cut and dark stubble.

"Hiya, fellas!" he greeted, turning on the flirty charm. "Wanna buy some chocolate chip cookies? We've also got brownies, not the fun kind, but they're still deliciously gooey." As he uttered the words, Song moved their hand up to gently swipe a few fingers under his glossy lips, giving the impression of wiping away a small mess. He knew the devious seeds he'd planted in the boys' minds. "Are you two, Epsilons?"

The answer was evidenced by the greek letters on their t-shirts, but that didn't stop the one with the buzz cut from piping in. "Yeah, we're sophomores. I'm Trent. This is my buddy, Trevor."

Song gingerly shook their hands, snatching it away just before Trent could give it a kiss. Ignoring the extremely lustful one, Song turned his attention to the other. "So, Trevor... These cookies are normally three bucks a piece, but right now, this one time only, I'm offering a special where I'll give you three for ten, but you have to give me your number for my friend over there."

The smooth salesperson gestured behind him, where Emily was blushing furiously, trying and failing to hide her face behind a magazine, while she peaked over.

"Well, that sounds like a great deal, Miss." Trevor said, reaching for his wallet, dropping a bill on the table, and then jotting his number down on a loose flyer.

"I don't think that math works out, bro." Trent said, getting a knuckle to his nuts for his trouble.

As far as Song was concerned, he'd done Emily the greatest favor in the world. He couldn't make sense of why she seemed to want to torture him so badly through this hell week.

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The morning after, Song awoke, hardly getting any sleep after his ruminations. His lessons were the last thing on his mind, as the feminized youth dwelled on the final official event. The girls of

Zeta house were to have a slumber party, giving everyone a chance to get to know each other without having to worry about waking up early for classes.

At the party, the girls all dressed in shortie pajamas, including Song. He borrowed a set from Emily, after she convinced him his fluffy pink nightgown might be a little over the top, not to mention it might get ruined once the real shenanigans were under way.

“Who wants to play Don’t Choke?”

“What’s that...?” Song dreaded the answer. While Emily, as well as the entirety of leadership, made it clear the sorority didn’t do any hard hazing, in the untrusting youth’s mind, that was just another test. ‘I didn’t come this far just to get squeezed out right at the end.’

“We all put on different colors of lipstick, and then try to go as deep as we can on one of those ridiculous fetish dildos. I’ve got, like, a twelve-inch pink one.” Stacy reached into a nearby bag, and pulled the monstrous thing out, waving it around like a lightsaber. “A little bit of lewd fun. Just don’t choke.”

“Unless you’re into that.” Britney joked. “I know my boyfriend is.”

The sorority president offered the phallus to Song as though it was a simple ice cream cone, which he took and glared at like his greatest enemy. Song caught sight of Emily sitting across the room, watching him hold it, with a mix of horror and amusement. He cursed the witch. Twenty-four hours earlier, Song was thinking about dropping out of the sorority. Now he was determined to not give the bitch the satisfaction.

Song opened wide and dove in with gusto, determined to prove he was more Zeta than the treacherous Emily. He was determined to prove he was the best in the sorority, period. He was determined to win, and win at all costs.

After suctioning to the mirror for leverage, Song wrapped his lipstick-covered lips around the silicone. After going all the way down, he sat on the floor with bloodshot eyes, a runny nose, and a river of drool running down his chin, as the dildo rested not just in his mouth, but down his throat. It reminded him very much of the punishment Bianca had given him and Emery, the day after Emily had been crafted - the double-sided dildo they each had to take in till they were able to kiss, all while they were on their knees, hands bound behind their backs. Today, no one was forcing him, or at least that was the story, but he knew when expectations weren’t met it’d be an excuse to kick him out. Instead, as he proved he wouldn’t back down, the rest of the sorority, with their jaws on the floor, burst into astonished applause.



For the next hour, the giant phallus was passed around the room like a bong, where a girl would slather on too much lipstick, and then give it their all. Most made it a respectable six-inches. For Emily, the magic number was eight. By the time it got to President Stacy, the chapter's leader was only able to get four inches in, before she nearly puked on the floor.

"I hope Jason doesn't find out you're doing him dirty like that, boss." Emily jeered, dropping the girl's boyfriend's name, and getting a pillow thrown back at her for it.

"Color me impressed, Song." Gwen gushed. "You've got to teach me how to do that. It'll drive my boyfriend wild. I mean, where do you even put it?"

While everyone had their fun, it didn't escape Song's notice that nobody else managed to kiss the monstrosity's plastic balls. Nobody even tried. He'd humiliated and debased himself yet again, and desperate for somebody to blame, his ire landed on Emily. While the rest of the girls assumed Song's tears were from the struggle, he found himself in a place where once again he felt truly broken.

The next morning, the girls of Zeta house had one final bit of gentle hazing before rush was over. All the pledges had to clean up after the party. That night, after the pinning ceremony to welcome all the new members, the Zetas were hosting the Epsilons for a mixer, so everything had to be spotless for one of the more tame affairs of the year.

It was a simple enough task to swallow, but the added indignity of doing so in a sexy french maid's outfit was the only challenge the senior girls felt like adding. While most found it quite amusing, posting pictures of themselves on their social media, one particular new member stood in the bathroom fuming.

If someone were to live in a world of science fiction, with light speed engines, and quantum fluctuations, they might think Song was caught in a time loop. The red-faced pledge would gaze at his reflection in the mirror above the sink, shout, "She can't be fucking serious!" pace back and forth for a few moments, then finally walk back up to the mirror and start the process all over again. This went on for a little while, until eventually Song recognized the futility of complaining to no one, and he decided to confront what he believed to be the source of his problems head on.

Song stormed into the bedroom he was supposed to be cleaning, where Emily was laying in her bed, her feet propped up on her footboard, while she thumbed through the greatest periodical for true journalism in our time, Teen Vogue.

"Is this your idea of a joke?!" the emotional youth shouted, while waving his arms wildly at the paper-thin costume.

"Maybe," Emily replied with a smirk, "I just don't know what the punchline is."

Song glared at his big, as hot tears streamed down his cheeks, when suddenly he spitefully cracked the chopstick thin feather duster in half over his knee. "Was that your plan, Brooks? Did you just come back into my life just so you could torture me one more time? Is my humiliation the revenge you dreamed of?!"

The girl went to comfort her friend, her heart breaking as she witnessed a once-in-a-lifetime kind of meltdown, and felt completely powerless to stop it. "Song, I don't know what you're..."

Before Emily could finish her sentence, the distraught boy turned girl swatted her hand away, freezing the traumatized girl in her tracks. "Don't play dumb! This whole situation has that red-headed bitch's fingerprints all over it! Tricking me out like a little slut at the car wash! Sending me to that nursing home so that perverted old piece of shit could dehumanize me! Tricking me into making everyone think I'm some kind of a slut! And now you've got me here, cleaning up after you in a stupid little maid dress again!"

Song was hyperventilating so hard his knees buckled, and he collapsed. Fortunately Emily was right there to catch him, cradling his head before it made a sudden, and firm impact with the floor. That's when Song tried to sit up quickly, and claw himself backwards, away from the girl trying her best to help. What he didn't have time to realize was that the cheap fabric of the skirt had caught the heel of his black pump, and once he straightened his legs out, that skirt tore clean, tangled around Song's foot, leaving his silky black thong, and matching garters for his roommate to see in all their glory.

"Of course this cheap piece of shit ripped! Why didn't you spring for something of quality, like last time..." Song's gaze moved to the distance, as more distress washed over him. "Holy shit, I just realized that fucking fetish costume I had to clean your stupid apartment in is still under my bed. I never got rid of it. Now that I'm out of the house, my mother is definitely going to snoop and find it. Oh god!"

Song wailed so hard his throat cracked, and he felt a hole tear open in the middle of his chest. All the despair in the world occupied the space where his heart used to be. Without thinking, he grasped for comfort in the only place within arms reach. He threw his arms around Emily's waist, and laid out on the floor, while she sat with her legs crossed in front of him.

No stranger to a freakout, Emily let Song get the worst of it out of her system. She thought the girl had gone through so much, and it was clear she didn't know who to trust. All the big-hearted youth could do was run her fingers through Song's hair, and live with the streaks of mascara smeared across her favorite top. Twenty minutes passed, while the high school friends sat together in the quiet. When Song couldn't cry any more, and could only heave quivering breaths, Emily broke the silence.

"Have you calmed down enough to listen?"

Song pulled himself upright, wiping the snot from his nose, and nodding his head.

“Okay good. Please listen, and let me finish, okay? I know you can get worked up, and it’s easy for you to only get a partial picture.” The tall girl brushed a few tears of her own from her cheek, before continuing. “First of all, Bianca is brunette again... and honestly, I think she’s mostly forgotten you existed. I mean, you’ve done everything she wanted, so she’s moved on to new toys. You’re basically the girl she was trying to create already. I mean, what more could she do?”

“I’m not a girl!” Song squealed, before slumping back over, already depleting the little energy he’d managed to build back up. “...I’m just a sexless punchline...”

Emily lifted the wilted mess that was her friend back up from the floor, and sat with them in a warm embrace, gently running a fingernail up and down their spine. “You are not... You’re just you. You are who you are, Song. Nobody can tell you what that is. It’s for you to decide. I can tell you, I know when I’ve seen you at your happiest. Look, there’s a lot more power in being a girl than you might think.”

The calmer of the two, leaned back, looking her little in the eyes, before continuing. “To be clear, the carwash is a little sexy, sure, that’s the point, but you didn’t do anything anybody else didn’t have to do. Second, I didn’t have anything to do with the assignments for that nursing home, that was Maggie.”

Song whimpered, “Who is Maggie?”

“The girl up on the third floor, who handles all the outings... rents the busses... she’s got braces...”

The human puddle of tears clearly didn’t have a clue who his friend was talking about.

Emily rolled her eyes, and chuckled, “Jesus, Song, you’ve really got to start learning people’s names. Anyway, also, do you genuinely think I could trick your paranoid ass into doing anything?”

“But what about the maid dress?”

Emily grinned the kind of grin where she remembered something funny, but knew telling the story wouldn’t suffice. Instead she grabbed her phone, opened her photos, and scrolled down to the previous year to find what she was looking for. She looked down at the glowing screen, smirked once more, and after cradling it to her bosom for a moment, turned it to face Song so they could see.

What Song saw was a picture of Emily, wearing the exact same cheap maid’s dress, her face beat red, as she looked back over her shoulder with the most horrified expression the young Rlm had ever seen on her face. Behind her, on the other side of the shot, Stacy, the chapter

president in all her glory, was yanking up the back of Emily's skirt to reveal the most polka dot covered pair of granny-panties anyone could imagine, while her other hand was coming down to swat the girls plump cheeks for what could easily be inferred wasn't the fist swing.

"Song, it's not about humiliating you specifically." Emily released her phone, leaving Song to keep staring, and a smile to slowly sneak into the corners of their lips. "It's about humiliating all the girls, just a little bit, so you can all have that shared experience together, and you guys can bond over it, like we did, and the girls before me as well. It's okay to be a little cringe sometimes, especially when you're doing it with your friends."

"I still don't understand why you bothered reaching out to me." Song said, finally able to get a full sentence out, as he handed Emily her phone back.

Emily raised an eyebrow, before playfully jabbing Song in the shoulder. "Look, you might find this hard to believe, but I care for you. I have always cared for you. Even when you were being a little prick all the time, I always knew that you were a person who I could empathize with. You knew what true loneliness felt like.

"Pledging Zeta was the best thing that ever happened to me. I didn't learn how to not be lonely. I learned that I was never as alone as I thought I was. I learned I had a lot more agency over my life than I ever thought possible. I learned that I am worthy. I wouldn't have invited you if I didn't think it could do the same for you.

"I know you're pretty, I know you're smart, I know you've got a lot of love in your heart you're just now learning how to share. The rest of it is up to you, but you have to actually try, Song. No more refusing to ask for help. No more stuffing your feelings down, and pretending they're not real. No more assuming the worst... and for the love of god, please start learning the girls' names. Everyone knows yours already, and it's not because they think you suck. People already like you fine. You're the freshman queen bee... Also, let's be real, Grace has probably known that thing was under your bed since the day you got it."

Song found himself giggling despite himself. "Yeah, I guess you're right. I'm sorry I don't know how to be normal."

"Hush." Emily said, pulling herself up from the floor, and digging into her school bag to retrieve a stack of pink post-its. "I'm only going to give you one assignment as your big, but you have to promise to keep an open mind, and really try."

"Okay, fine. What is it?"

The tall girl scribbled a long sentence down on the pad, taking her time to make sure it was legible. "Read this for me, please."

Song took the little scrap, and read it in his mind first, looking back to Emily like she just handed him a bag full of snails. "You're kidding me, right?"

"I am not!" the girl shot back with faux appall. "I'll have you know, a very wise, if perhaps objectively insane woman taught me this, and it changed my life." Emily thought it best not to let Song know that this particular nugget of wisdom was gifted by Bianca, when she was early in her transition. "Read it... seriously..."

Song rolled his eyes, before relenting. "Okay, fine. I am a beautiful woman. I am kind, I am smart, I am worthy, and I deserve happiness." The words flowed at the speed of Niagara falls. "There, you happy?"

"No," Emily snatched the post-it from Song's hands, and then stuck it onto his vanity mirror. "Look at yourself, and say it like you mean it."

Song groaned, and pulled himself from the floor, walking over to the antique piece, and taking a seat. "Okay, okay, I'll do it. Stop looking at me like that." First he wiped the mascara streaks from his cheek, and looked deep into his own red puffy eyes. "I am a beautiful woman. I am kind, I am smart, I am worthy, and I deserve happiness."

While inwardly scoffing at the first part, for some reason, on this go around, the last part hit him in the feelings. Song often felt he deserved many things, but happiness was never one of them. While he wouldn't say it out loud, a little bit of the weight left his shoulders, and the hole in his chest closed just a little.

"See? Better right?" The shift in Song's expression did not escape Emily's notice. She beamed proudly, like a mother watching her baby take its first steps. "Every morning, recite this before you put on your makeup. Do it until you believe it... for me... please?" Emily made the request, actually wanting Song to do it for themselves.

"Okay... I'll try..." For a moment Song felt like a fool. The care in his roommate's eyes couldn't be missed. How could he have ever let himself think differently? If anybody in the world gave a shit about him, it was her. It wasn't new. It was Emily, in a far more masculine package, Emmanuel, Song's ex-boyfriend, who brought Song a bouquet of flowers that made him feel more seen than he ever had before. Maybe she was right. Maybe he could forge that kind of connection with others. He had it with Emery. Now he had it with Emily. Growing and maintaining human connection suddenly didn't seem so impossible.

"Good, now fix your face. I'm gonna change shirts, and find you a black skirt to match that get-up, and then we can go downstairs to report on the excellent job you did, cleaning the room.

"Don't think this means I'm going to be your maid forever, messy girl." Song half joked, his breath once again calm.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Emily replied, sidling in between Song and her overstuffed dresser, blocking it from the newest Zeta girl's view, conspicuously whistling. "Maybe I can text Grace, and see if she'll bring that maid outfit over, since you hate that other one so much."

"And just like that, you've turned into a bitch again."

Song shot daggers at the giggling sophomore, while she blew her red-faced friend a kiss.

"You know you love me."

Chapter 6

"Not that I'm complaining, but are you sure you want to do this?" Song asked their favorite client.

It had been almost three years since Song and Emily reconnected, made apparent by the striking change in Emily's hair. Between then, and this moment, there had been several shades of brunette, one stint as a redhead, a return to the purple balayage, though this time Song made sure nothing got fried when they stripped the pigment from her hair first. There was even an ill advised attempt at silver, which in Song's opinion, only served to make her look like an old lady from a distance.

Presently, Emily's curly locks hung down to her plump bottom, and were painted vibrant shades of pastels - pink blue and white, the colors of the trans pride flag. A year after a certain republican senator was elected, the new Zeta chapter president suddenly felt like the world was her oyster. She felt like the future was an open book, even switching her major to poly-sci so she could work on progressive campaigns after graduation, to help accelerate the change she wanted to see in the world.

While Song didn't much care for the girl's new look, though they were the one to create it. It wasn't that it didn't suit her, but the expert cosmetologist had always preferred their bestie in darker shades, the way they complimented her skin tone. When Emily approached them about switching things up again, Song had to fight the urge not to throw her in the car, and drive her to the salon right then.

"I'm sure." Emily replied. "I mean, I guess I'm graduating in two weeks, and after that I'm gonna have to start looking for work. The hotel doesn't give a shit about stuff like hair color and piercings, but I'm thinking a future congressperson might. I mean, natural colors, but, like, I just want it to still have some character, you know?"

"Oh, it'll have character." the stylist replied, with a wink into the mirror. "I already know exactly what I'm going to do."

For most of freshman year, Song kept his nose down, studied diligently, and only attended parties the Zetas threw themselves. Emily would regularly pester her roommate to join her for some outing, but nothing could get him to budge. Eventually though, totally immersed in a house full of young women, the heir turned heiress slowly let his walls down.

When Felicia first approached Song about putting some streaks in her hair, his first impulse was to tell her to shove it, but he promised Emily that he'd actually start trying to make friends, so he said, "Sure." instead only quietly resenting the fellow first year for asking him to work for free.

The end result had every other Zeta jealous, and suddenly the expert stylist was getting requests left and right. Every single one praised his talent relentlessly, and then without even realizing it, the thing Song never wanted to do in the first place became a point of pride. As far as he was concerned, the other girls all recognized his obvious skill, and that made him the final word on what was style in the sorority house.

A couple of things got moved from the shop - an extra pair of shears here, a bonnet dryer there, but that quickly snowballed into Song swiping Appa's credit card to order a fairly expensive used styling chair for the residence. When all was said and done, he had set up a micro salon in the basement, even converting the creepy servant's tub into a makeshift washbasin.

Before he knew it, it wasn't just Emily begging him to come out dancing, but practically every single girl there. Song could only say no so many times, so one night he caved. After that, little Miss Song was a mainstay at the bar, and when he walked through the door, he was greeted like a character in a sitcom.

By sophomore year, things were going smoothly, and Song had the popularity he always desired. He didn't even have to trick, or coerce anyone into giving it to him. Suddenly getting up in the morning, and getting dressed stopped feeling like a chore. Studying was still important, but he began to recognize there was more to life than success when suddenly there was more to his own life than ever before.

Emily could have moved into her own room when she became a junior, but she knew Song hated change, and if anything the little spoiled princess might take it as a betrayal if she wound up stuck with a freshman of her own. When she would arrive home to find Song fixing her makeup, reciting that same post-it note, barely hanging on by the last speck of glue, her heart swelled with pride at the confident young woman taking shape before her.

For Song's part, there were things about being a girl that were nice. Starved of willing human contact for most of his teenage years, it was nice the way girls would casually touch each other, when boys just didn't. Hugs were a comfort that he originally thought could only come from his mother. Cuddling on the couch with five other coeds, watching Love Island, was the best way to spend time doing nothing as far as he was concerned. Still, cuddling with Emily was different. As the two would lie in bed together, staring at the ceiling and discussing the meaning of life, after Emery came for a visit with some new contraption to get high with, his stomach would flutter.

Though he struggled to make sense of it, he rarely let go until somebody was about to piss their panties.



Over time, questions of gender, and anxieties over a lost manhood drifted away. Without realizing it, one day Song stopped thinking of themselves as a boy or a girl. They were a Zeta, and that was enough.

Thanksgiving that year, Emily's mother had a new boyfriend, and the two decided to take a little vacation together, leaving her daughter to spend the holiday at the Rims'. Song nervously rang the doorbell, their arms laden with suitcases, as though they didn't still have a bedroom at the residence. Really, they were just procrastinating, nervous how Grace was going to respond when she saw her daughter's new look.

"Hi, Mummy." they greeted, as the matriarch swung open the door.

"Your hair..." was all she said at first.

By this point, Song's hair had grown long past their breasts, and Emily managed to talk them into trying something new and bold. The roots stayed the same deep shade of black as always, but about halfway down it slowly transitioned to a rich midnight blue.

"Don't you love it, Mrs. Rim?" Emily asked, breaking the silence. "All the girls are doing stuff like this nowadays, but your daughter really makes it look great, doesn't she?"

Grace eyed her guest up and down, taking in all five-foot-ten-inches of the girl, and her own style, painted a vibrant lavender at the time, and a smile spread across her face. "Of course she does. She takes after me, doesn't she?" Her daughter's hairstyle, while unconventional, reminded her of a k-pop idol.

"Come in, girls, come in. We're so happy to have you. Little Star, why are you knocking like a stranger? This is still your home too. Daddy is down in the basement, working on his train set. Why don't you go give him a kiss?"

That night, much to Grace's dismay, the kids had plans to meet up with Emery and Mary. The fact that they were all twenty-one, and somehow nobody had to work the next day, meant the crew was going out to a proper cocktail lounge, instead of drinking in the same dive that had to know by then that they weren't technically old enough before that point. Everyone was going all out, dressing to the nines. When they saw a photo Emery snapped in a text, herself painted immaculately wearing a slinky, cowl-necked, gold lame halter dress, barely covering her bottom, along with Mary sitting behind her at their vanity, wearing a matching silver number, swatting at her partner to stop taking pictures with her face half done, Song knew the stakes had been raised.

After getting ready, they ran down to the kitchen barefoot, carrying their shoes, a task made all the easier by Emily's relentless physical therapy, where they poured a quick glass of juice before brushing their teeth. With the bottom tipped up, Song caught sight of their mother from the corner of their eye, taking in the young coed with a giant teased bun on top of their dramatic

evening makeup, and giant gold hoops. Grace saw her daughter wearing the tightest, shortest piece of strapless blue lycra that could reasonably be called a dress, toting the kind of hot pink platform heels that one might find on a stripper pole. Song braced themselves for the biggest chewing out they'd have gotten in years. When Emily walked in right after, wearing a two-piece ensemble, not much different from Song's dress, but pink, with nothing covering between her bosom, and the top of the skirt, the silent fifty-something finally broke her silence.

"I hate that you're not staying home for karaoke, but you two look great! Very trendy!"

"Thanks, Mrs. Rim." Emily said, smiling a big toothy smile.

It was then that Song realized that their best friend also served another role, their get out of jail free card.

"You both look like you could be in TWICE." Grace pulled out her phone, and started snapping pictures of the girls.

"Inside what twice?" Emily wore a puzzled expression.

"They're a k-pop group." Song explained, rolling their eyes. "Don't ask."

After Grace had her fill, though it took a minute with the two-dozen poses she insisted on for her two-hundred photos, now clogging the proud mother's instagram feed, they were finally able to make it out the door. While the night was pleasant enough, the girls learned that if you don't really like piano music that much then piano bars kind of suck.

A couple of nights before it was time to head back to school, Grace managed to wrangle the two girls into the bonus room, where the karaoke machine awaited. With a little prodding, Emily went first, nervously croaking her way through a rendition of Bonnie Tyler's "Total Eclipse of the Heart." When Song told her she did great, she knew the girl was lying, but it was refreshing to see her lie to spare someone's feelings for a change, instead of duping them into compliance.

Song took the mic next, cueing up Judy Garland's "Somewhere Over the Rainbow." Grace looked on like an expectant stage mother, while Emily was surprised by the choice. As the orchestral strings played the intro, she vaguely remembered hearing singing through the door after she brought Song flowers one day. Still, it couldn't have prepared her for the dynamic performance, worthy of any stage, that her roommate gave to an audience of just two. She was so moved, tears began to well in her eyes.

"Isn't she talented?" Grace beamed, as the music faded out.

"I'll say..." Emily could hardly say anything else for a moment, as she tried to regain her composure. Eventually, she stood up, and grabbed Song by the shoulders, looking down right into her eyes. "Why do you make a big deal out of not singing at karaoke night, when you've got

a set of pipes so big, I'm not sure where you keep them in that tiny body of yours? That was one of the most beautiful things I've ever heard in my life."

Song blushed, averting their gaze. "You're just being nice."

"She is not." Grace answered for the girl, before taking the microphone, and picking something from the catalogue, leaving the two to find their seats, Song's cheeks glowed red, as they struggled not to smile, while Emily stared at them with pure awe.

As the intro to Blackpink's "BOOMBAYAH" started playing over the speakers, the girls turned their attention to their elder, and when she parted her lips to do opening rap, Emily realized that there were far more embarrassing ways for a parent to live vicariously through her child than when her forty-year-old mom dressed her like a fashion doll, and then raided her daughter's wardrobe for herself.

By the next year, Song and Emily couldn't have been closer. The senior Zeta even got her friend to start going out on double dates with her, her guy of the week, and whatever single dude friend he had laying around. A boon of having a chill roommate was Emily's sexlife suddenly reached new heights, even if her lovelife paled in comparison. When the rechargeable battery in Song's vibrator finally gave up the ghost, it was convenient that at the dinner table, there was a spare cock, attached to some rando, that nobody was using.

For the first few times after breaking their self-imposed vow a celibacy, Song would sneak a guy up to the room, throw a pair of hose on the doorknob, and then try to be as quiet as possible until the big, but usually not so big, "O" came, then the guy would be lucky not to get rushed out of the window for his troubles. If the guy left through the front door, it was only after Song made sure he was fully and properly dressed, his hair combed, and any errant lipstick marks were washed off. It was the first time any of the Zeta house residents had ever seen someone so desperate to avoid a walk-of-shame by proxy.

Like a perfect storm, one night out, both roommates had managed to meet somebody at the club. Purely random guys were always a dice roll. With dating apps, it was easy to just put all the necessary information out there, and save the worry of being murdered for another day. On a night out, with a total stranger, it was almost necessary to make a check list, just to keep yourself safe.

They had to tell them they were trans before lips ever made contact, or there was a chance the guy might start swinging, and ask questions later. They then had to make it clear that there were only two holes available, instead of the usual three, just so there wouldn't be more to discuss when things started getting hot and heavy.

When Song was still living as a boy, they didn't think much about trans people. They were just another freakshow category on porn sites, that he'd go out of his way to not even glance towards, lest he accidentally turn himself gay. Though the future power-bottom still didn't

internally identify as transgender, no matter how many years they'd been wearing skirts, they now couldn't understand why anybody had a problem with it. If a person was attracted to someone, that's all that mattered. If they were single, available, and mutually interested, talking yourself out of it meant you were less secure about yourself than anything. Over time they learned to empathize with an entire community, and it wasn't just because the person they'd grown most fond of belonged to it.

After a bit of familiar bickering, and Song completely refusing to play paper rock scissors because Emily always won for some reason, at an impasse, they decided that moving the party to their room, and getting a few more drinks in everyone might lubricate what would otherwise be an awkward social situation. The next couple of hours, listening to Emily's old record collection, while the guys told stories that had to at least be slight exaggerations to make themselves look good, the two young men seemed to get comfortable enough with each other, at least enough that when Emily's guy started nuzzling her neck, and guiding her to lie back down onto her bed, the other guy followed suit, and the lights were switched off.

In the shadows cast by the streetlight shining through the half-shuttered blinds, Song gazed up to the man admiring their visage, Todd or Tedd..., they couldn't remember, not that it mattered. In the time that they'd been the pretty one being pursued, rather than the pursuer, they learned that most guys will fuck a trans girl, but usually just the once. A lot of them just saw them as sex objects, and those guys were called chasers, bouncing from one to the next with little regard for the girls' feelings. It kind of suited their needs just fine, but for Emily, it was one heartbreak after another, and suddenly Song found themselves resenting the chasers they brought home, knowing that given the opportunity, they'd do the same to the tall beauty who deserved so much better.

Song wondered if this guy was one of those, but his reluctance to rest his hands anywhere below their tits showed he wasn't, though it also showed a kind of inflexibility that could be just as frustrating, leaving the horny Zeta to kick around the idea of just playing pillow princess for the evening.

'At least he's hot.' Song thought, not having shared one interesting word with the boy all evening.

Song slowly dragged a well manicured finger across the conquest's chest, a smile creeping to the corners of their plump lips without their knowledge. While the idea of having a boyfriend, or worse yet, being someone's girlfriend, still made Song sick to their stomach, something had changed in the time they were hurriedly trying to fill Bianca's quota. Without a steady supply of praise, Song was doomed to crash and burn without the necessary ego fuel. In their present form, nobody was more willing to give it - to worship them as they should be worshiped, than horny young men. The hotter the guy, the better it reflected on Song, so without even trying to, Song conditioned themselves to really appreciate a hot guy. A hot enough guy, giving just the right kind of attention, could start smashing the dopamine button, and really get that libido revved and ready to go.

Whatever the young man's name was, Song had to admire the effort the man clearly put into his body. Seemingly carved from marble, with rich dark skin, and close-cropped black hair, the diminutive princess sized their small hands against the stone figure's bulging abs, and wondered if it might be possible to climb him like a rock wall.

Even though their height was a point of insecurity when comparing themselves to their friends, Song regularly adding an inch or two whenever asked directly, for reasons they could not fathom when a suitor made Song feel like the smallest thing in the world, that feeling of powerlessness was a new kind of thrill, one that couldn't be replicated in the kind of private controlled environments they used to refuse to leave.

Before climbing the stairs, when the guy threw Song over his shoulder, belly down, something stirred inside the intoxicated Zeta. With each step he playfully swatted Song's rear, while Song was left to watch Emily, and her beau closely trailing behind, the tall girl's legs wrapped tightly around the young man's waist, with her tongue shoved down his throat. While the boy desperately tried not to fall, simultaneously trying to avoid any action that could possibly derail the leggy beauty's steamrolling libido, Song covered their mouth, and stifled a giggle, marveling to themselves that even in that moment of pure comedy, they somehow still had five percent of an erection with no signs of it diminishing anytime soon.

Gripping their nails into the sexy man's ripped back, Song took a guilty pleasure at the little wince that escaped before their date forced the confident smirk back to his face.

"Rowdy, aren't you, little girl?" he half-whispered, as the sounds of smacking lips rang out across the room.

Song gently bit the tip of their finger, smiling a seductive smile up to the imposing figure hovering over them. "I'm a little naughty, sometimes. Is the big strong man going to do something about it?"

Taking the cue, Tedd-Todd gripped both of Song's wrist in his left hand, with room to spare, then pinned them down against the bed above the blushing beauty's black silky hair. While his other hand lubricated his manhood, before sliding it between the raven-haired vixen's welcoming cheeks. He looked into Song's widening eyes, catching just a glimpse of the quivering lips beneath, and said simply, "I'm going to ravish you."

The horny young man's right free to explore again, it found its way to Song's throat, where it gently rested, loosely gripping the tender flesh enough for Song to realize it was there. As the guy steadily increased his rhythm, through soft whimpers, "Oh... big man, holding a girl down like this, huh? I'm just not sure how this is supposed to be a punishment though. A strong guy like you should be able to throw me over your knee if you wanted to."

Though those words were soaked in the waves of pleasure coursing through Song's body, they still somehow rang with the kind of pure entitlement that could make a man feel small. With his pride a little bruised, and his arousal reaching new heights, in one motion, the guy flipped Song over to the other side of the bed, their ass pointed high into the air, begging for its new friend back. Easily sliding back into place, the boy started thrusting again, each pump slow, but firm. Every few seconds he would pause, and swat a wide open hand down on one of Song's round cheeks, not much caring if he bruised the tender porcelaine flesh, before resuming, and grunting the order, "Tell me how much you fucking like that, little girl. Maybe then, I'll let you cum."

Song's cheeks blushed, and their loins flushed, as the man's strong hand made contact with his bouncing cheeks. Though not a feeling they had the language to articulate, allowing themselves to be at the mercy of a sexy boy turned out to be a welcome respite from the rest of their lives, where they were brought up to believe rigid control was something to be maintained at all times.

As Song moaned, "I fucking love that!" their eyes rolled into the back of their head, thinking how this was the hottest encounter they'd had for a while. Bracing themselves, as the spanking fully stopped, and Tedd-Todd ramped up his pace, seemingly ready to blow his load at any minute, Song lifted their head from the mattress and looked forward to see Emily, lying on her back, one leg wrapped around her date while he gently pumped, as the two looked deeply into each other's eyes, seemingly oblivious to the world around them. In that moment, they could see the pure joy spreading across Emily's face, as the gentle interaction slowly built into something painting unbridled joy across the young coed's face. The way she giggled when she came, Song found both incredibly adorable and incredibly erotic. Just minutes before Song was having some of the best sex they'd had in years, but when they finally exploded, it was due to the sound of that seductive little giggle, and the humid room was left with four sweaty stinky bodies, heaving exhausted breaths, covered in four different textures of cum.

Every now and then, those pangs of guilt, and decimated masculinity flooded their mind, but just as quickly, Song reminded themselves that they deserved happiness, and sometimes that happiness came ten seconds at a time with an orgasm. Unlike their bestie, Song wasn't looking for romance, at least not in the same places. While fear of embarrassment, and rejection stopped them in their tracks, the romance Song wanted was with the girl they'd slowly caught feelings for, the one that was the current president of the Central College Zeta chapter.

Already resigned to spending the rest of their life alone, Song only dwelled on their feelings for Emily for a little while. It was strange. Years before, they would have gone after what they wanted without regard to the other person's desires, or agency. They would have used blackmail, or other nefarious means to get their way. While Song knew Emily was searching for love, they also knew that they, themselves, were the last place the girl was looking. In what was perhaps the most significant sign of growth in the Korean-American princess, was that they'd rather Emily be happy than getting what they wanted for themselves. It was also the only kind of growth others would never see.

Instead of pursuing a dead end, Song showed their affection in other ways. They'd support their friend in any way they could, even cleaning her room again and again, each time saying it was the last. They'd fix her hair, listen to her talk about her boy troubles, hold her when she cried, and even handle a ton of the administrative duties that came with her campus office, when things were going especially crazy at the hotel. Song was learning that care wasn't a thing, it was an action, and one they were more and more willing to perform. That's how the two found themselves as close as they were, sitting right in that salon, just before Emily was to graduate.

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" Song asked, after snapping back to the present from his momentary flashback. "Once I get started, there's no going back."

"I'm sure." Emily nodded. "I trust you. Just make sure you leave enough time for me to get to work."

"Okay. Here we go." Right then Song bunched Emily's hair behind her neck, and chopped it off right to the shoulders.

The hours flew by, filled with stripping, and another round of stripping, then came dye, then came foils, then a keratin treatment to make sure it still felt like hair instead of straw, after all that processing. When it came time to style, Song meticulously worked away with shears, and a comb, at the thick curly damp hair. Seemingly never satisfied, the last ten minutes was just a snip here, and a snip there, until finally the perfectionist was done. A round brush, and a blowdryer was all it took to finish the job, before Song spun the chair around, for their favorite client to see.

"Ta-da!"

Anybody who could see Song's chair, Eun, Emery, Mary, and a bunch of other people the girl had never really met, examined Emily's reflection, impressed.

"Pretty!" Emery squealed.

"You've really outdone yourself, Song." Eun praised, patting her little sister on the shoulder.

The only person who didn't seem happy with it was Emily herself.

Song decided to enter a time machine of sorts, and recreate the style Emily first wore after her transition. Silky brunette curls, parted in the middle, decorated with glistening blond highlights, and a gorgeous streak in the front.

After the crowd dissipated, Song's expression fell, as they met Emily's gaze in the mirror. "You don't like it. Is it bad?"

“No, no, no,” Emily was quick to assure the forlorn youth. “It’s beautiful... like, objectively beautiful. I honestly look the best I have in years. This is exactly what I asked for. I was just in my head for a moment. It kinda took me back, you know?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” Song replied, still not quite believing her.

“For real. I mean it. It’s lovely. It’s so lovely we have to go out tonight. Wear something pretty for me.”

Later that evening, while Song was fixing their makeup for girl’s night. Dressed in her uniform, a peach silk blouse that tied at the neck in a decorative bow, tucked into a figure-hugging black pencil skirt, Emily swung the door open, and came bolting in, her face dripping with glee. “Girl, you’re not going to believe this.”

“Something tells me I will.” Song replied with a smirk, not taking their eyes off the mirror.

“I ran into Trevor, and Trent, walking back from the bus stop. They want to take us out tonight.”

“Who?” Song asked, turning to face the excited girl, and furrowing their brow. “You can’t get mad at me for not remembering. Those don’t sound like the names of anybody who’d live here.”

“Remember that guy from the bake sale a couple of years ago? You sold him overpriced cookies, and then got his number for me.”

“Oh right...” a look of recollection spread across the preening beauty’s face, which quickly shifted to one of disapproval. “Wasn’t he being super flaky? I mean, you guys made out a few times, and every time he wound up ghosting you after.”

With all the confidence of a three-legged man in a three-legged race, Emily shook her head. “That was, like, over a year ago. We’re all different people now. I guess since we’re graduating soon, he decided to finally shoot his shot.”

“Right...” Song remained skeptical, but decided not to burst the smitten senior’s bubble. “Fine, but we’re meeting them there. I’m not getting stuck in the living room of some dingy off-campus boy apartment with his discount friend while you pop a shitty air mattress in the one-bedroom where somehow five dudes live.”

“That happened one time.” Emily said defensively. “Besides, I wanted you to drive anyway. They’re taking us to some fancy place across town where the free water is sparkling.”

Two hours later, Song and Emily found themselves seated at a table with the aforementioned boys. From Song’s memory, they could swear that Trevor was even taller, but part of that might have been the reasonable three-inch heels they wore with their little black sleeveless wiggle dress.

Emily wore an outfit that absolutely screamed, “Oh my god, please just fuck me already.” A red bustier top, over a tight black miniskirt, fishnet stockings, and four-inch fuck me pumps. Clearly the giant didn’t make her feel insecure about her height. Through the first couple of rounds of drinks, while they waited on their appetizers, Emily was hanging from every word the boy uttered, making sure her cleavage was on prominent display, the pendant of her long necklace dangling between her breasts.

“That’s so funny!” she squealed, downing one more martini, and it was obvious the meathead, as Song quickly realized the guy was, lavished the attention.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the table, Song was trying not to get as drunk as their friend, but it proved a difficult task, as they hadn’t eaten anything since getting off work, and they barely weighed more than a hundred pounds.

“I like your dress.” Trent said, trying to spark up a conversation.

“Yeah, sure...” Song wasn’t really listening. They had other worries on their mind, as their ears honed in on the very tipsy girl, throwing herself at the smuggest dipshit they’d ever met, though they might not have been including their past self in that math.

“So, why’d you finally ask me out properly, cutie?” Emily asked. If she could lean in any closer, she’d be inside of the tall boy.

“Well, I mean, I’ve liked you for a long time, but, like, since the whole campus knows that you’re trans now, I just didn’t want people to think I was gay. When I saw that you switched back from that pride hair, or whatever, I thought to myself, maybe she knows what’s up now. Like, you’re so fucking hot, I’ll never understand why you’d wanna advertise it like that, when nobody would ever know. I guess since we’re graduating soon, I don’t have to worry about the old crowd. Trent here is cool though. He’s not judgy, and he doesn’t spill people’s business. He can keep our little secret...”

As Trevor continued to drone on and one with the same smug look on his face, he failed to notice the tears streaming down his date’s plump cheeks.

Emily stood up from the table so fast, her chair fell backwards behind her. She slammed her palms on the table, knocking over her drink, and shouted, “It’s not supposed to be a secret, asshole! It shouldn’t have to be! God, you piece of shit...!”

The girl couldn’t finish her insult before the ugly crying came, so she ran out the door. As Song stood to follow after her, Trevor looked at them with a befuddled expression, and asked, “What the fuck was that all about?”

Song picked up their cosmopolitan, and with a little smile, splashed the drink in the guy's face. They thought it would be more satisfying though, and when it wasn't a rage built up where that hole in their chest used to be. Quickly, that rage washed over their face, and for the first time in their life, Song threw something both forcefully and accurately. After the glass made contact with Trevor's nose, it didn't break, but the nose probably did, evidenced by the two rivers of blood staining the white linen tablecloth.

After the diminutive princess thoroughly wrecked the guy twice their size, they collected their purse, and turned to the other, saying. "Have a nice night, Trent. Sorry your shitty ass friend ruined it for you."

As they were making their way to the door, Trent shouted behind them, "That's okay...! Call me...!"

The entire ride home, it seemed Emily got over it, just as quickly as her heart was broken. That or the last few drinks hadn't quite hit her yet, when she bolted. She just sang along badly to the classic rock station, occasionally squeezing Song's hand, and thanking her for having her back.

It was only after Song parked, and they got out of the car to see the BMW as crooked as it could be in the space and still be technically legal, that they realized they probably shouldn't have been driving. Fortunately they were already there, and since Song now had junior parking, it was a mere five minute walk back to Zeta house, which they did with Emily's arm looped around Song's neck, while Song wrapped theirs around her waist, singing an off-key acapella version of "Bohemian Rhapsody."

Stumbling up the stairs, all the way to the third floor, the girls found their way into Song's room, and collapsed onto their queen bed. Drunkenly, the two stared into each other's eyes, giggling, until Song sat up to slip off their shoes, and turn on the table lamp. Not that they expected much, but when they laid back down, and rolled over to face their bestie, they definitely didn't expect what was coming.

Before Song could open their mouth, Emily leaned in, and suddenly kissed them on the lips, and for a moment they couldn't believe it was actually happening. They could taste the sweetness of her lip gloss. They could smell the aromatic notes in her perfume. They could feel the grip of her fingernails, as they gently dug into their back through their dress. Once the shock wore off, they knew it was reality, and it was a reality they were all too happy to live in.

Song opened their lips, and let Emily's tongue pass, and the two explored each other in a way they hadn't in years. With Emmanuel, it was always a bit of a clumsy affair. The former boy could hardly kiss like a human being before Emery got ahold of her, and trained her to her liking. When Song went down on who was then their boyfriend, the horny teen was a melty lump of putty, a stray gust away from orgasm.

Emily gently rested one hand on Song's cheek, while the other found its way to the zipper on her former lover's dress. Sliding it down slowly, she quickly found the bra, and unfastened it with one hand. Hooking up with Manny was always something of a struggle. With Emily, it reminded Song of a dance.

As the boys turned girls continued to make out, they pulled each other close, feeling the warm body heat growing between them, as their legs intertwined. Both their tucked members pressed into their partner's leg, as they moved, and grinded against each other, the tension in the room building with each heaving breath.

It was Song who reached the breaking point first, rolling Emily onto her back before straddling her hips. The lithe porcelain beauty slipped the dress bunched up around their waist, and their bra over their head in one fluid motion. Discarding the bundle of cloth onto the floor, they slowly started undoing the dozen eyelets holding Emily's sexy top together.

"You'd think they would make this thing easier to take off, given how likely it is you're going to hook up when you're wearing it."

The joke brought a smile to Emily's face, and she continued to grind while Song worked, teasing them enough to keep them going, despite the laborious task. Once it was off, Song threw the thing across the room, and wished to never see anything cover the alluring figure again. Their efforts complete, Song looked Emily deep in the eyes, marveling at how pretty the hazel saucers were.

"Hey there, gorgeous." Emily said, brushing Song's hair behind her ears with her finger.

At that moment, Song felt more like a girl than she ever had before, and for the first time in her life, she was totally fine with it. If she was to be Emily's girl, then the label suited her just fine.

Unable to contain herself any more, Song leaned down, and supporting her weight on her arms, gently kissed Emily on the forehead. She did it again and again, slowly making her way to the girl's cheek, while the supine beauty giggled, but as those lips found their way to her neck, the giggles became moans of pleasure, as her body quivered beneath the tiny girl.

Song's delicate fingers slowly found their way to Emily's large areolas, gently stroking them until they stood in upright attention. From there, her lips gave up their claim on her old-new lover's decolletage, and moved on to the tender bumpy flesh, begging to be kissed.

If nobody knew the pair had arrived home, they certainly did when the ecstatic squeal Emily let out rang through the old oak wood of the home. When Song bit down, just gently enough to remind her she was alive, she was stuffing a pillow into her mouth. After massaging the girl's chest, and kissing every square inch of her neck, Song sat upright, and continued to grind against Emily, as her eyes, for a moment, rolled back into her head.

It was a position the two had found themselves in before, all those years ago on Emily's mom's couch, so the taller of the two thought she knew exactly what to do. Gently, she moved her finger to Song's backside, stroking the extremely aroused Song's puckering hole.

When Song felt the tip of Emily's acrylic extension probing for a way in, she was now certain why the sex-worker from a couple years prior kept those two nails short.

"Umm, I don't think that's going to work like it used to." she giggled. She took Emily's hand, and moved it to the front to play with her own breasts, while the two continued to look into each other's eyes, trying to figure out how to proceed.

Of the pair, Emily's was the only phallus standing upright, as Song's had long since gone the way of disco. Nervously, the erect girl suggested, "Maybe I could put it inside of you?"

"I think I'd like that... I mean, I know I'd like that." Song blushed, as her heart fluttered. Sex had always just been sex, but the idea of sharing the experience with someone she cared about so deeply gave it a new kind of intensity.

"Okay... but like, if it's bad, please don't be mad. I've just never done it before." Now Emily was blushing, and suddenly the two who couldn't keep their hands off of each other, were hardly able to face one another.

"You've never put your penis inside of anything?" Song asked, not quite believing it. They were both full blown adults after all.

"Well, I prefer to call her my lady dick, and no I haven't. I mean, your mouth, Emily's mouth, and Teddy's mouth, I guess, but that's it. You two were the only girls I've ever been with, and most every guy I've hooked up with has had no interest in it."

After time traveling back in her mind for a second, Song realized the girl wasn't lying. Strangely, it brought a smile to her face. "You make her sound like a girl private investigator." The joke was enough to break the slight build in tension.

The entire time since they'd come back into each other's lives, Emily had guided Song through almost everything. She convinced her to go back to school. She taught her how to make friends. She even got her mom off her back. Finally, it was a chance for Song to lead the way. It was a chance for Song to show she could take care of somebody.

Song leaned in for another kiss. "Don't worry, beautiful. I'll take care of everything. You just lie back and enjoy yourself."

From there, Song retrieved a condom, and lube from her nightstand, and got Emily ready to enter her. The epitome of a power bottom, it was her time to shine. She straddled on top of

Emily, as the girl looked on nervously. As she slipped all of Emily's eight inches in, the curly brunette bit her lip, and those nerves seemed to go right out the window.

Resting on her heels, Song began to slide up and down on the pole, gently swaying back and forth, until her muscles had adequately relaxed. After that, all bets were off. The sensation felt amazing, but for the first time in her life, Song was more concerned with the pleasure of the girl she'd fallen so deeply for. Watching Emily's face, she took her cues to know what was working, and when she found a rhythm that had the top virgin whimpering, she kept herself going steady, as Emily's lady dick swelled inside her.

Unable to remain a passive participant, Emily's hands found their way to Song's hips, gripping them tightly, but unlike most all the rest of Song's liaisons, they didn't start bouncing her up and down until they were satisfied. Emily squeezed tightly, letting Song know she was with her, then guided the gorgeous creature riding on top to bend over for another kiss.

As their pleasure crescendoed, Song braced her hands against the bed, and squeezed herself around Emily's pulsing cock, while Emily in turn, wrapped her arms around Song's slender frame, and gripped the back of her neck. As the sensation built and built, Emily was giving small pecks to Song's cheek, but when she couldn't contain herself anymore, her lips grabbed ahold of Song's neck, and refused to let go.

Song shuddered, but remained committed to bringing her favorite girl to climax, never once breaking the all important rhythm. She could feel Emily begin to swell like never before, and she knew what was coming, while the moans vibrating into her neck told the former pillow princess to hang on for dear life. It was the gasps of Emily's orgasm that told Song it was a job well done, and the unselfish act was enough to push herself over the edge, finally letting the seed she'd been holding back spill out onto Emily's tummy.

In the afterglow, Song collapsed onto Emily's chest, keeping the girl inside her, as she wrapped her arms and legs tightly around the person she never wanted to let go of again. As Emily stroked her fingers through Song's sweaty hair, the two slowly faded, and soon they were asleep in a tangled mess of sex, bodies, and sheets.

Chapter 7

The next morning, as the sun streamed in through the window, Song awoke with an optimism never before felt. The smile plastered to her a face, a genuine smile for that matter, never once budged. As she recited her mantra from its tattered sticky note, for the first time she believed every word.

While Emily continued to sleep in her bed, gently snoring away, as she often did the morning after heavy drinking, Song thought the drooling coed was the cutest thing she'd ever seen. Her thoughts drifted back to Emmanuel, and she began to wonder if she'd never given in to her rage, and got her revenge, would they have lost all this time, or maybe, just maybe, might they

still be together. Feeling momentarily selfish, Song shoved the thought out of her head. If Emmanuel, and Song never split up, the anxious, brooding Brooks would still have that charming girl trapped deep inside.

After a quick dusting of foundation, a little mascara, and some blush, Song started getting dressed in a pair of Emily's jean shorts, and her far too large braided leather belt, which Song left the excess dangling, somehow making it look fashionable, while she tied one of her own button-down blouses just above the waist. A messy bun on top of her head was all that was required before a quick trip to a quaint little breakfast shop that opened up just across from campus.

The short walk back, after collecting the food, Song's mind was abuzz. She thought of the future with a new kind of eagerness, and suddenly optimism didn't seem so absurd. The idea of looking to the future with hope rather than dread felt foreign to the Korean-American princess, but the unfamiliar waters did nothing to slow her down.

'I wonder if she'd want to wear matching wedding dresses, or if we'd just do our own thing. Should one of us wear pants? I mean, she wears more pants than I do, but I do remember her talking about the kind of wedding dress she dreamed of, so probably not her. I mean I could but... Nope, matching dresses. She'll definitely agree.'

Song fantasized about the day, wondering what piece of music they'd dance to, who'd lead, and if her father would be willing to pay for someone to handle live swans. Riding in on a gondola, down a water feature seemed extravagant, but tasteful nonetheless.

'Song Kelly Rim-Brooks... Song Kelly Brooks-Rim... Emily... Emily... What the hell is her middle name? I need to know so I can figure out the best way to hyphenate...'

After strutting through the Zeta house door, Song rested her sunglasses on top of her head, and then gleefully bounded up the stairs as fast as her short little legs could carry her. Swinging open her bedroom door, Emily sat on the edge of her bed, dressed in a clean pair of pajamas.

"Oh no! Did I wake you as I was leaving? I was trying to let you sleep in some more." Song leaned down, and pecked Emily on the cheek, before thrusting her favorite, a frappucino, into her hands. She took a seat on her vanity stool, and started digging through the paper bag. "I got you a bagel sandwich, just like you like. Oh yeah... What's your middle name?"

"Lauren... I just took my mother's name. I didn't really have one before, and I kinda panicked when we were filling out the forms at the courthouse." Emily took the wrapped sandwich that Song dug out, and was practically drooling as she inhaled the aroma. It was an everything bagel with what some would consider too much cream cheese, and two pieces of crispy bacon. She knew it wasn't good for her, but oh how she loved it. Still feeling the effects of the alcohol from the night before, and having never actually made it to dinner, it was like mana from the gods.

“Thank you for this... and thank you for last night, by the way. You really helped me figure some stuff out.”

“Me too.” Song’s smile brightened as she noticed a little smattering of cream cheese in the left corner of Emily’s kissable lips. “Like what?” she asked, hoping to hear something at least close to what she was feeling, meanwhile Emily, her face half-stuffed with bagel, couldn’t help but notice her best friend practically sitting on the edge of her seat.

The tall girl forcefully swallowed the large bite, before taking a deep breath, and explaining, “Well... I mean... I guess I know I’m straight now...”

“How is hooking up with me straight...?” Song asked through clenched teeth, trying to remain calm, only noticing for just a moment that she was thinking of herself as much of a female as Emily. “I know for a fact you enjoyed yourself. You made quite the mess inside of me, after all.”

“Sure... We’re all a little gay in college. Girls are hot, I can totally admit that. I mean, look at you. I’m not opposed to trying a three-way or something like that in the future. Don’t get me wrong, I’d totally worship a cock with you. It’s just... Well, I don’t think that’s the role I want- the role I’m supposed to have in a relationship. I want a boyfriend. I want to be some guy’s girlfriend. One day, I want to be some lucky man’s wife. When I try to picture anything else, it just doesn’t feel right to me.” Emily set her food down, as she finished her thought, she could see the pain in Song’s eyes, but she knew that if she tried to offer any comfort, it would only make it worse.

“But... What about our past? You used to not be able to keep your hands off of me. I don’t really understand what’s changed...” The girl’s face was white as a sheet, but she forced herself upright, and kept a composed expression. The last thing she wanted to do when she felt so vulnerable was to show any weakness.

“It’s funny, I’ve actually talked at length with my counselor about that. Joey says that a lot of trans women, before they figure themselves out, find themselves deeply infatuated with other trans people. It’s like living vicariously through your partner. I mean, you and Emery were both so breathtaking, and on the rare occasion I let myself wonder what it would have been like if I was in your shoes, I couldn’t imagine being anything other than an ugly brute. I just always assumed that’s why Bianca didn’t punish me the same way. Of course, once you guys pulled the trigger for me, and I saw that I...”

“... that you were pretty.” Song finished for her.

“Yeah... I guess so... It all felt so insane. I couldn’t believe it was me I was looking at in the mirror. I felt sick to my stomach at first, but over time, when I walked into enough bathrooms, and nobody ever screamed, ‘Man!’ before hitting me with their purse- when Teddy kept making me feel beautiful everyday- when the hormones started doing their thing, that’s when it got easier for me to start seeing what everybody else was seeing, and Song, I really really liked what I saw. Ever since then it’s been a journey to figure out just who that girl in the mirror is, and

I can now tell you with one-hundred percent certainty, she's straight. I mean, you're the hottest girl I know. If not you then...?"

Emily looked her friend in the eyes, happy tears welling in her own, and she gripped both of Song's hands in hers.

"You're the best friend I've ever had, and I'm so grateful to have you in my life." Pausing for a moment, Emily summoned up her courage. "Listen, I have some more news I've been sitting on, and I was waiting for the right time to bring it up. Umm... Last night, at work, that senator from Florida came in... Reagan Arnault..."

"The one who made you change your major?" Song asked, her voice cold as she still stared off into the distance.

"She didn't exactly make me change my major. Her election made me rethink the possibilities in this world. Anyway, she actually spoke to me, and by the time I stopped being starstruck, we were actually having a real conversation about the sorry state of youth outreach in the democratic party. You're not going to believe this, but then the craziest fucking thing happened."

Song snapped back to the present, only just then processing the news. "What happened?" she managed to squeak out, feeling a tsunami of tears struggling to break through behind them.

"She's switching parties to run for President as a Democrat, and she offered me a job on the campaign. She was saying that the only reason the left keeps losing as of late is because it's a party of old dinosaurs, who refuse to change the playbook. She wants new blood working under her, so I start a week after graduation. I'll be leaving for D.C. pretty much right after I toss my cap."

"That's great news." Song said, unable to bring herself to look Emily in the eye. "Listen, I've got some stuff to take care of today. Gotta pack for the summer. Umm, I'll be around if you need me. Just text, or whatever."

As Song turned to run out the door, Emily noticed the paper bag containing the rest of Song's food, glazed beignets, a rare sugary indulgence of the extremely diet conscious young woman, but it seemed folly to chase after her at the moment. Song always struggled to adjust to change, and she knew space and time were usually the best medicine. What Emily had no way of knowing was that in the basement, where the bonnet dryer was now whirring, and the creepy servant's tub was now splattering, Song, dealing with the first true heartbreak of her life, wailed into a pillow, while the world felt like it was collapsing around her. They were the kind of tears that hurt, and for the first time in years, that hole in her chest had torn right back open.

*

Three weeks later, Song was once again lying in her bed, doom-scrolling through her phone as she stalked Emily's Instagram account. Apparently campaign workers partied every night, because her new nemesis had fresh photos to flaunt of her out enjoying the D.C. nightlife posting every day. The boy turned girl's identity had taken quite the beating, and depending on the minute was bouncing between boy, girl, and everything in between. Presently Song had the clarity to look in the mirror and see a woman, and that was a woman scorned.

"I can't believe that bitch used me like that!" she shouted to Mr. Mittens, perched upright, listening on the bed, but not answering of course, because he was an inanimate object. "And now she's flaunting all these pictures with this Conner guy. Who the fuck is Conner? Has Conner ever held back your hair while you puked? Does Conner know your favorite fucking breakfast sandwich? Did Conner spend his entire fucking life to go to school with you, all because you batted your stupid pretty eyelashes? Fuck no!"

Song rolled back and forth, occasionally looking to Mr. Mittens for an answer before realizing that it was an insane thing to do. Desperate for some sense of revenge, the tortured stylist tried to think hard about when Emily might have felt like she was making her feel.

"I mean, she's only ever really loved Theo... Teddy... yuk!" As Song uttered the pet name, she pinched her nose and gagged. Turning back to the little stuffed tiger, she continued her ruminations. "You know, the way she always used to go on about how it was mutual, I bet he dumped her, and she was too embarrassed to own it."

Song continued to tell herself the story she wanted to hear, over and over, each time Emily being just that much more pathetic. Without realizing it, she opened her facebook, and found herself searching for one Theodore Hamilton. The profile wasn't private, so a little more investigation was in order. It turned out not to take that much investigation at all.

The top status read, "Home for week, BROS! Drinking with my boys at Rosie's bar tonight. If you wanna see me, be there!"

Song rolled over onto her back, and stared up at the spinning ceiling fan, and slowly a devious smile spread across her lips. Rather than cold, she was starting to think revenge would be a dish best served drowning in booze, and sloppy.

Motivated for the first time in weeks, since she optimistically hoped Emily would stop the taxi, and run back into her arms after graduation, Song flung open their giant closet door, and started digging for the littlest black dress she owned, seemingly designed to never be sat down in. Tossing it onto the bed, a pair of five-inch fuck-me pumps followed, eased barely by the one-inch platform under the toes.

A quick hop in the shower, and a few expert swipes of a razor later, Song was hairless below her eyebrows, which she then set to meticulously sculpting. From there, she threw in some hot rollers, and began touching up the red polish on her toes, and fingers while they cooled. Once

those were dry enough, makeup followed, and the order for the night was big, bold, and breathtaking. Plump kissable lips, begged for attention under smoky lustful eyes, and that same cute little nose she'd been blessed with. After teasing out the curls to the sky, and donning the nothing outfit, could Song be best described with two simple words - pure sex.

After a drive back across town, to the campus she'd only just left, Song pulled up to Rosie's bar, where she could see a small crowd gathered inside, but not much else. After walking in, seated at the bar, Song spotted her target, Theo Hamilton.

The manipulative queen bee made some inferences as she examined the scene. Every boy in the place that night, shouting rowdily at the NBA tournament games on the hanging televisions, was an Epsilon. The ones who lived in town, which was most given the low status of the school, were all gathering for a guy's night, and if Rosie's beleaguered expression was any indication, it was a messy one.

As Song's heels click-clacked across the concrete floor, even in the towering shoes, she still had to crane her head back to look each guy now staring at her in the eyes, and smile as she walked by. The self-styled royalty always enjoyed a good reminder that she was something to be admired. Once she reached her destination, she was expecting the king of bros, out looking for a conquest. Instead she found a sad man approaching thirty, who just realized anybody who actually went to school with him had just graduated, and he was now partying with fresh-faced children who had yet to have the light stomped out of their eyes, and who couldn't have cared about his basketball record any less.

"Hey there, handsome." Song said, taking a seat next to the giant man. She offered a hand, expecting a gentle shake- possibly a little kiss if the guy was corny enough, but much to her annoyance, Theo just nodded, and kept staring down into his drink like it hid the meaning to life at the bottom. Trying to plow through, Song continued, "I'm Song... Emily's friend... We met at Emery's birthday party...?"

It took a moment, but the drunk alumnus picked up on one word. "Emily?"

Quickly, he stood, knocking over his bar stool, and spilling the bottom of his drink on the bar. In a hurry, Theo tried to stuff his crumpled shirttail into his jeans, brushed some crumbs from his shoulders, and then quickly checked his reflection in the bar mirror. "Is she here?" he asked, nervously scanning the room.

"No," Song answered, clearly very annoyed that the guy had yet to look at her once. "Why don't you take a seat, and calm down, hon? Maybe some water?" Gently resting a hand on Theo's forearm, and giving it a light squeeze, Song noticed how small her hands- how small all of her was compared to Emily's ex.

As the tiny co-ed got the guy to eat some more peanuts, suddenly the seduction plan was out the window, and in its place she was left to string together a course of action with a little more subterfuge.

“Hey, why don’t I take you home? It’s getting late anyway, right?”

Theo looked at her like she had suddenly grown five heads for a moment, but eventually the words sunk in, and he bobbed his head up and down in what approximated a nod. Helping the stumbling brute to the BMW would have been a tall task for most anyone, but for the diminutive princess, it was proving to be a near impossibility. In the parking lot, Song had to cast off the sky-scraper heels, and drag them along with the three-hundred pounds of man, probably only supporting just enough of his weight not to crush the girl.

“How much did you have to drink to get this drunk?” Song asked the lifeless husk. She was two drinks in, and tipsy - drunk in four. A guy who almost weighed three times as much must’ve had a keg to himself before she arrived.

Getting Theo to plug his Aunt’s address into the GPS was a battle all its own, but eventually his fingers managed to successfully fumble their way through it, and the two were on the road.

After arriving at their destination, Theo was practically out on his feet, but his internal auto-pilot was better equipped to get him to his childhood bed than to a random car in a parking lot. Once inside, Song steered his head towards the pillow, and somehow managed to get Theo’s shirt unbuttoned and removed, at least well enough to suit her purposes. Shedding her dress, and bra, she curled up in bed with the former basketball star, and tucked herself into the little spoon position. Phone in hand, Song snapped a dozen selfies until she landed on one she liked, and then sent it off to a certain Zeta, with the caption, “You’ll never guess who I ran into...”

Almost immediately the three dots started dancing in the bottom of the screen, as Song eagerly awaited Emily’s impending meltdown. What came back wasn’t what she expected at all. “I love that for you guys! Just be careful, Song. He’s a lot more fragile than you’d think. Send me the first date details tomorrow! I can’t wait to hear them! Oh, also I’ve been meaning to show you this, but I haven’t heard back from you for a while. What do you think?”

Completely stunned, Song was left jaw agape, as her former bestie assumed the role of her biggest cheerleader, after she implied she just fucked her old boyfriend. That couldn’t have prepared Song for the heartbreak that came next, when Emily sent a selfie, her wearing a tasteful linen dress, with her hair now a bright golden blond. She suddenly looked far less like Song’s hipster friend, and far more like one of the many cookie cutter bimbos talking politics on the television.

“Your hair...” was all Song could reply. She had spent hours creating Emily’s new look, just before she left, and at the first opportunity the twat had gone and undone all that hard work, just to be another carbon copy of the basic white bitch template.

"I know, it looks so different, right? I mean, I got my first paycheck, and bitch, there were four digits. I just realized that I could afford to do something impulsive for myself for the first time, so I decided to try something scary. Conner says it makes me look more grown-up."

Song didn't even bother replying. For just a moment, they let a few tears out, before going to stand from the bed, but that's when they realized that Teddy's arm was far heavier than they thought. Struggling to make their way from underneath, the giant stirred, and took a deep whiff of Song's hair.

"Hey there, Milly." he murmured, basically still asleep. "God, I've missed you so much." Wrapping his giant arms around Song, he pulled them in closely, and squeezed even tighter. That's when a hand wandered south, and found its way to where a once familiar landmark should have been. "Did you get smaller?"

As the man gripped Song's flaccid member through their silky black lace thong, Theo's half-conscious form shimmied his underpants down far enough to expose his undercooked erection. Gently stroking Song from behind, he grinded into the feminine form until in a matter of seconds, the giant spilled his seed all over the outside of Song's panties, glueing the delicate fabric up the heir turned heiress' crack, before passing back out, fortunately on his back, allowing Song to finally escape the humiliation.

Grace and Jii's only child couldn't get dressed fast enough, but the short dress couldn't quite cover all the soaked material of the undergarment. Hurriedly, they tried to flee from the house, only to find, standing in the foyer, putting away her coat, Emily's old boss from the hotel, Bethany Long.

"Well, you certainly don't look like the usual floozies my nephew has been bringing home, since he's been visiting." The woman somehow seemed snobby, but also like she wasn't judging Song nearly as harshly, as she was judging herself. "Disappointing night, I take it? Don't worry, it's not you. He got his heart broken a few years ago, and he hasn't really been right since. I get why. That girl was a saint. It's not her fault he didn't bother asking her how she felt about the future before making plans."

For a moment, Song heard those words, and something resonated, but quickly they reminded themselves that Emily was a bitch, and it was probably her fault Theo was now a shell of his former self. Song tried to move towards the door, but their wrist was caught, just before she reached the handle.

"I'm sorry to stall you, but I have to ask. I can't be held responsible if something unfortunate were to happen. Would you like for me to call you a cab?"

"No, I haven't had a drop." Song replied, reaching for the handle again, but the woman's grip never loosened.

“It’s just that you smell rather pungent...”

“That would be whatever rubbed off from your little baby boy in there.” Song spat back with venom. The shock on Bethany’s face gave the spoiled princess pause. For a moment they felt guilty, so they softened their expression, and gave one piece of advice they’d never follow themselves. “Look, Theo seems like a nice guy, but, like, maybe he should, like... go to therapy.”

“I agree, but he’s a grown man now. I can’t offer too much, but if you’d like, we can go to the pharmacy. I think there’s one open right down the street. Plan B is a paltry cost when compared to the damage a child could do to the lives of two people only meant to share a brief encounter. Better safe than sorry, right?”

From there Song fled the domicile, never to return. It was a tearful drive back home where they could only hope against hope that their insomniac mother wasn’t up waiting.

Chapter 8

“Ladies and Gentlemen, the President has already gotten her new healthcare bill through the house. If the senate majority wants to defy the will of the American people, then we know that they’ll learn just how badly they screwed up in the midterms. After that, President Demir will just try again, and again, until the old men who refuse to relinquish their stranglehold on this country have it ripped from them by the voters.”

On the television screen, Emily Brooks, the White House press secretary, quickly ran her perfectly manicured nail through her scarred eyebrow notch, a thing she often did under stress. Song noticed, and smirked.

“Hey, I was watching that.” Emery pouted as Song switched the channel to General Hospital.

It was just before lunch, on a quiet Wednesday at Rim Beauty. The grandma rush had come and gone, the actual slowest possible use of the word rush as far as Song was concerned. The same dozen wrinkled old Asian octogenarians had been coming in for decades. While the salon had long outgrown them, Grace Rim was never one to forget the people who got her where she was. The little old women were treated like royalty from the moment they arrived, and they left feeling fabulous. Though not particularly profitable, Wednesday mornings were an all hands on deck situation. They needed perms and respect, and neither were in short supply. The benefit was that it was a great day to hold meetings, and most of the staff still kicking around were waiting for the weekly rundown before they could clock out.

“If I’m stuck here, I at least don’t want to spend my time watching that bitch read off a teleprompter.” Song grumbled, before taking a seat in their styling chair. “And since when have you cared about politics?”

“It’s crazy that she’s, like, important now though. Emily looks so pretty, and confident up there, ya know? Like, I still feel like a big kid.”

“I’m sure you do, Emery.” Song replied, before checking her phone, and grumbling to herself, ‘Where the fuck is Eun? I was supposed to be out of here ten minutes ago.’

In the six months since Song had graduated, the person who fell in and out of feeling like a girl at the same rate her clients changed their hair, had spent most of her time throwing herself into her work. For the first couple of months after Emily broke her heart, she felt like a disembodied spirit, watching her life happen as a passive observer. She tried to come up with a new plan to go back to being a boy. She tried to come up with a plan to be a better girl than Emily. She wondered how much salt it would rub in the wound, if she got the pussy Emily could never afford. Sometimes she even thought about buying Emily that pussy, and then sending her off to the life that the best part of Song still wished she could give her. Their feelings on the girl shifted by the minute, but generally hovered above smoldering resentment.

Her last year at school was far less social than the rest. Turning down every sorority office, Song’s aspirations to be the chapter’s president fell to the side as she spent most of her time in her room studying. Sometimes she’d have to fix a hair catastrophe for one of the underclassmen, which she would complain about the whole time, but was actually a welcome respite where a problem was simple, had a solution, and orderly steps could be taken to solve it, unlike the chaos that was her unrelenting frantic abstract anxieties.

In her free time Song practically lived at Emery and Mary’s. The former was happy to have her best friend home much of the time, while the latter had slowly learned to tolerate the palpable arrogance that wafted from her boss’ daughter in much larger doses. While always happy to spend time with her bestie, even Emery was starting to get a little irked when Song would find any excuse to randomly start talking shit about Emily.

Feeling tricked, attacked, ruined, or any other number of disadvantaged states, it was easy for Song to fall into the blame game. After all, she was still stuck in a life, and gender that she never asked for. The voice in the back of her head that shouted, “You’re not a fucking girl! What the hell are you doing!?” still cropped up from time to time, but emotionally drained, Song thought there was very little purpose in continuing the fight. If anything, being a girl was best for business, and business was the one place even Song felt like she was killing it.

A last minute booking from a Hollywood B-lister, walking the red carpet that evening, got Song Kelly Rim of Rim Beauty, name-dropped on live television, *and* the gig paid well. All she had to do was show up to the client’s house with her equipment, and do what she was doing for her sorority sisters for free for four years. From there, the bookings came pouring in, and Song had an upcoming showcase in Modern Salon. That Sunday, Song’s biggest break yet was coming in the form of Sandra Oh. The television star hoped to try something more natural for the awards show, and wanted to work with a person she knew understood Asian hair.

It was hard for Song not to feel like the salon's rockstar, nor the level of entitlement that came with it. That was why she was so annoyed that her big sister dared to make her wait for the meeting.

"Ladies, ladies...!" Eun shouted out over the floor, as her office door swung open. "It shouldn't take too long this week, but I've got some big news." The salon manager walked out to the middle of the floor, as the crowd slowly coalesced around her. "I just got off the phone with Grace, and it looks like I'll be going down to open the new San Diego location."

As a commotion started to build, Eun threw her hands up to quell the disturbance before it could steamroll into full on crosstalk.

"Now, I know you all are going to miss me, but I'm sure you've also realized that my position will be opening up here. You all know Grace prefers to hire from within, so if you're interested, bring me your resume before the end of the week. She's opening it up to the outside next week, so I'd suggest not to drag your feet. That should be all... Oh right, I want chocolate cake for my going away party. Okay, that's it. Have a lovely afternoon, ladies."

*

"I heard about the opening today, Mummy. How long have you been planning to move Eun?" As the Rim family sat down for dinner, Song was eager to see if she could get a glimpse of what her mother was thinking.

The Rim family matriarch answered without looking directly at Song, who was eagerly hunting for eye-contact. "I know what you're doing, Little Star. Just get your resume together, and submit it like everybody else. You know I don't like discussing work at home."

"When it suits you." Song grumbled.

The domineering mother's ear perked up, as she moved her gaze to her adult child. "What was that, young lady?"

Song dabbed the corners of her mouth with her napkin before forcing a smile to her face. She answered, "I said that dress really suits you, Mummy. It's rather pretty."

Grace checked her red shift, which seemed rather plain to the woman, but taking a moment to appreciate it, the bold shade definitely suited her skin tone. "Well, thank you, Little Star. Speaking of which, I bought you some new things when I was shopping the other day. I found this cute little dress you can wear out sometime. It's the perfect kind of outfit to show a man you can be both sexy, and grown up. There was a young man on Korean Dating who seemed really interested in meeting you. He is an architect, he comes from a good family, and I know you will agree he is handsome..."

“Mummy, you’re not still running a dating profile for me, are you? That’s so weird!” While Song was desperately trying to stay on her mother’s good side, it was hard to hide her shock and appall at the brazen invasion of privacy. “I’m not thinking about boys right now. I want to focus on my career.”

“What’s weird is a beautiful, eligible twenty-five-year-old living at home with her parents. It’s time to be thinking about men, not boys. You need to start trying to find the man you’re going to be spending the rest of your life with. Daddy doesn’t want to walk his wrinkly daughter down the aisle.”

Jii’s unchanging expression as he chewed didn’t seem to indicate he had an opinion on the matter one way, or the other.

Undeterred by the silence hanging in the air, Grace continued, “You know, Little Star, arranged marriage might have gone out of fashion back in Korea, but the matchmaking industry is still thriving for the upper class. If you’d like, I could hire someone to find us a fitting arrangement - one that could benefit the family, and your future.”

“You can’t seriously be thinking of hiring a marriage broker!” Song looked to her father for backup, but still the man persisted to chew. “You and Appa got married for love!”

“Yes, we did. The story of our love is something close to one of those romantic dramas. For that to happen we actually had to meet each other though... and we were nineteen. I know times have changed, and this is a different country, but it’s not that different. You’re a full-grown woman, with a promising future. There is only one part of your life where you’re lacking.”

“Oh my god! What is it going to take for you to get off my back about it?!” Song dropped her fork. She had yet to be able to bring herself to take one bite.

“I’ll advise you to watch your tone, young lady...” The woman’s eyes narrowed. “Fine, take a little time to decide what you want, and go find it. I’ll keep my mouth shut for now, so long as you actually try, but if you don’t, or you don’t find anyone that is to your liking, then you promise to come back to me, and let your Mummy take care of it.”

“Fine.” It was an acquiescence just to end the conversation, but Song knew that when Grace said something, she meant it. She was going to have to actually start looking for someone eventually, or when she died, the ghost of her mother would still be chastising her for it all the way to hell.

*

After that, Song returned to the dating apps in earnest. One after another, she tried and tried, only to be met with disappointment, disaster, or both. One guy left as soon as he realized Song

wasn't going to fuck him in the ass. Another left after Song dropped her skirt, saying, "I didn't realize you were that trans." whatever the hell that meant. One guy just cried the whole time, and then asked Song to pray with him after. About the third time someone showed up wearing pantyhose underneath his trousers, Song was ready to write off men entirely.

"I mean, she hasn't said anything about it specifically, but the way she's been smiling at me all week, I know this is it. I'm finally going to get my own store. I can feel it in my bones." Song was babbling to her bestie, Emery, while the ditzzy girl seemed more interested in the pizza taco she'd just purchased from the food court. Even the space cadet could recite Song's thoughts on the matter verbatim, as that was all she had spoken about for the previous two weeks.

"I don't even understand why you'd want that job. You're, like, famous to famous people now. Why would you want to do any more work than you have to?"

"Well..." As Song searched for an answer, the only ones that came to mind involved clout, and that wasn't exactly something the salon's best stylist was willing to say out loud. "Enough about me. What's new with you?"

"Oh... well, last night me and Mary..."

'Mary and I...' Song mentally corrected.

"...got chinese, painted each other's nails, and then some guy came over and fucked me into a coma, while she made him wear a ball gag, and she choked him till the veins bulged out of his forehead. I'd give him a seven."

"Right..." Song let the bite she was about to take dangle from her fork. "Okay, so... where do you find these guys? Are any of them ever looking for anything serious?"

"Eww, no..." Emery answered, repulsed by the very idea of one of them even trying to stay the night. "They're, like, from fetish sites, and stuff. I mean, honestly I usually don't even look at their faces. There was this one guy that took us to Burning Man a couple of years ago, but he turned out to be a real dick. Why do you ask?"

"I don't know..." Song absolutely knew. "I just keep trying on, like, Bumble, and stuff, and it's like a revolving door of boring, stupid, gross, or some combination of the three." She lamented, "Why do men suck so bad?"

"I don't know." Emery agreed, eagerly nodding. "Like, you have to grab them by the ears, and really teach them to dive in. Like, they're all about shoving their cock down your throat, but the second you ask them to return the favor, it's like they'd choke to death if you fed them a corn dog."

“No that’s... Nevermind, Emery.” Song had to be careful not to ruin her makeup as she fought the urge to facepalm.

“Wait, are you trying to find a boyfriend... or are you, like, open to boobs?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Well, Mary’s friend, Linh, was asking about you after you left the other night? I didn’t think you’d be interested, but I can give her your number, if you want.

“Umm... yeah, maybe... that could be nice... maybe...” Song’s mind drifted back to the six-foot Vietnamese girl with supermodel good looks, wearing the backwards Dodgers’ cap. “Anyway, let’s hurry up. We’ve got that meeting after lunch, and I don’t want to hear it from Eun if we’re five minutes late for my big moment.”

Later on, back at the shop, the staff all gathered on the floor, after Grace had arrived. Having rarely spent any time at the store in the past several years, she could only put names to the faces of the tenured staffers. She didn’t need to know the ins and the outs of the day-to-day operations anymore though. The boss was there to make an announcement, and nothing else.

“Okay, ladies. I want to thank everyone for the hard work you do. After the meeting, there will be donuts in the break room. I also want to thank everyone who submitted a resume. There were a lot of qualified candidates, and it was a tough decision, but I’m thrilled to announce that, effective Monday, the new store manager for the flagship Rim Beauty location will be...”

Song was practically bouncing up and down on her toes, as her mother spoke. As the woman smiled her practiced fake smile, and dished out platitudes, she was eagerly anticipating the rush of victory that would come when she heard her name. Just as the words were about to escape her lips, the young heiress had already taken her first step, ready to execute the professional handshake she’d spent all night practicing on Mr. Mittens.

“...Mary Phan.”

Nearly in unison, both Mary, and Song said, “You’re shitting me.”

Grace continued, “Mary has been here at Rim for nearly ten years now. I remember a mouthy teenager coming in, and boasting to me that she could increase our makeup sales by an unreasonable percentage. Not only did she deliver, but she excelled. The girl has the exact kind of ruthless perseverance that we need to drive the company into the next decade, and beyond. Mary, come say a few words.”

“Right...” the young woman said nervously, as she went to face her coworkers who had in an instant just become her employees. When Mary filled out the application it was because she knew that if she didn’t she wouldn’t get the job. She didn’t expect more than that. “I’m just

floored right now... Okay... umm, speech... I know there were plenty of other qualified candidates, so I don't take this lightly. We all know Song is more talented than me when it comes to the craft of beauty, but..."

Song interrupted, "See, Mummy, she thinks it should have been me too. I don't understand..."

"That's enough, Miss Rim." Grace harshly stopped her child before she could continue. "I remind you this is work hours. If you have something we need to discuss privately, it can wait until later. Now, please allow your new manager to finish her speech."

"...Right..." Mary continued, but she could feel the palpable tension radiating between the glaring mother and daughter. "...I'm not the most talented, but I do understand the business of beauty. My goal is to continue to grow this business, like my predecessor before me, and that starts with fostering a healthy workplace. Any problem, no matter how big or small, my door will always be open."

After a short applause, Grace looked over to the makeup counter, where the new manager's girlfriend was bouncing up and down on her tiptoes, her blond curls, and breasts bouncing along with her, only for the girls to catch sight of a bug flying by, and then just wander off. The store owner shook her head, then added "...and I'll be looking for someone new to run the makeup counter, so if you'd like to transfer positions, please let Mary know."

"Mummy, Mummy!" Song shouted after Grace, as the crowd started to disperse, and every woman in there at least old enough to have a teenage daughter rolled their eyes. Nearly in tears, the girl asked "I don't understand. I thought it was my time. I finished college, didn't I?"

"Song, can't this wait till tonight?"

"No, Mummy, it can't." she replied, desperate for an explanation.

"Fine. You're needed elsewhere, Little Star. I've got you booked solid through the red carpet season, we are getting inquiries about your availability during coachella, plus that magazine shoot that you haven't been preparing for, that will be the most important press for our business this year, and I need you focused on it... and..." Grace paused, hesitant to finish.

"And what?" Song asked dryly.

"...and I figured you could use some extra time to work on finding a husband. You seemed pretty adamant that you didn't want me doing it for you."

*

"I can't believe her!" Song shouted, as she flashed back to her mother cutting her off, only to realize she was making such a tight fist that her acrylics were digging into her palms. "Like, how could she embarrass me like that. She could have told me beforehand."

"Yeah, that sucks." Emery agreed, as she gently patted her friend on the shoulder.

The two girls were sitting at Emery's kitchen table, both dressed in poofy nightgowns, while Mary scurried around the kitchen, making pizza. The last place Song wanted to be was under the same roof as Grace, after the humbling moment for the spoiled heiress, so she was staying on the couch at her friend's apartment.

The small one-bedroom didn't have much of value. The coffee table was a piece of plywood on top of a couple of milk crates. Emery's dad's old armchair was tucked into the corner, stuck in the reclined position. The dinette set was purchased from the thrift store, made of particle board that must have been left out in the rain a few times, only held together by wood glue, and a prayer. The only major purchase the ditzy blond had made so far was the giant tv, sitting on the floor against the wall, with four different game consoles plugged in.

It was Mary's penchant for interior decorating that turned the pile of hand-me-downs, and road-side castoffs into an actual home, with artistic girly flair. Tapestries in shades of purple hung from the walls, with a matching cloth covering the makeshift table, topped by a decorative centerpiece of candles on top of an old silver serving tray, another thrift store find. Christmas lights were strung around the molding at the top of the walls, plus a strand across the bar that separated the walk-in kitchen from the rest of the floor plan. It was a place Song loved to visit, but for her to sleep on the lumpy floral couch that no one would look her in the eye when they claimed it wasn't found in the garbage like she was certain otherwise, meant it must have been a rough night for the heiress. She shuddered, thinking back to the couches on the Zeta house porch, and decided the less she knew the better.

"...but maybe she was kinda right though." Emery continued, letting the idea wander through her brain.

"Bitch, what the fuck are you talking about?" Song spat, not even realizing she raised her voice. "Everyone knows I'm the most qualified person in that shop. The only thing I can't do is my dad's stupid boob inflater stuff, and that's only because I have no desire to work with needles." In reality, Song had no desire to work with the equipment that traumatized her so, when it flung her formerly developing masculine body to the feminine side of the spectrum in one afternoon, all those years before. "No offense, Mary."

Song had shouted that phrase at least a dozen times so far that night, and it didn't seem like there'd be a stop to it before the sun came up.

"None taken!" the new manager shouted back, while she fantasized about strangling the love of her life's best friend. Deciding that energy would be put to better use elsewhere, she left her

stand mixer in the cabinet, and kneaded the dough by hand, as aggressively as she thought Song needed to be slapped.

“What I’m saying is that it’s kind of weird that you’re the rich one, and you still live at home with your parents.” Emery took a pull off of her vape pen, and blew the cloud into the air before choking a little, and coughing till her face turned red, prompting Mary to run in and have her hold her hands over her head like a child. Visibly stoned, after drinking a little water, Emery continued without the modicum of tact she could soberly maintain. “Like, you’re a hot bitch, and all you do is stay home and work. It’s like you’re just killing time until you die. It’s time to start living, Song. Like, don’t you want to have babies before you’re too old to play with them? My mom used to look so tired after a day with Abner during his terrible twos.”

Song knew Emery was talking about her stepmom, and it was still nice to hear that the prefix “step” had been dropped after they became so close, but she was completely perplexed by the unexpected turn in direction of the conversation, Song stared at Emery, jaw agape. She had to snatch the vape pen from the girl, and hit it before daring to continue down the line of interrogation. “I can’t have babies, Emery. Are you telling me that *you* want kids?”

“Fuck yeah, I do!” she answered with the confidence of a mediocre white man. “We’re going to have like four or five. Eunice, Hubert, Mabel, and Wilbur. I haven’t thought of the last one’s name yet, but I don’t know if it’s going to be a boy or a girl yet.”

Mary wasn’t even drinking anything, yet somehow, as she heard those words, she still did a spit take, nearly ruining the dough if she had not turned her head at the last moment.

“With our luck, you won’t know if it’s a boy or a girl until they’re, like... fifteen.” Song took another gentle pull of the pen, before passing it back. “Wait, you do know those things don’t come out in a fifty-fifty split, right?”

“Yeah.” Mary agreed, just leaving the dough to rise, and taking a seat at the table, snatching the little piece of paraphernalia for herself. “Princess, you’re acting like it’s no big deal, but you’re not the one who’s going to have to carry them.”

“Why wouldn’t I carry them?” Emery asked. “Like, I used to carry Abner all the time, when he was, like, a whole toddler, and he wasn’t too heavy. Babies aren’t like pickle jar lids, Mary. I won’t have to come get you every time I need to pick one up.”

Mary and Song locked eyes, and though there was no world where the two would be friends otherwise, they shared the common bond of caring so deeply for a person who accidentally locked herself in the bathroom from time to time.

“Oh wait, you mean be pregnant!” Emery shouted a minute later, as she giggled like the burnout she was. “I wouldn’t expect you to have all five in your belly at the same time, Mary. Babies don’t work that way. Anyway, your mom is right, Song. You need to date, and, like, have a life,

and stuff. Maybe just be open minded and try stuff. Try anything. Just don't do it for her. Do it for you. You're worth it. Besides, what's the worst that could happen? You wind up right where you already are?" Have you tried just, like, walking around the mall, and buying some shit on your break? Guys try to give me their numbers all the time when I go to the ice cream shop."

Almost simultaneously, though separated by the length of the table, Song and Mary's minds somehow synced up, as they shared the exact same thought. Both had seen the blond indulge in sweets before, and they had to picture Emery devouring a cone of vanilla, while melting drops splattered onto her ample bosom, all while a dozen horny guys drool on the sidelines, taking turns to get politely, but bluntly shot down. What the charismatic girl who smiled at everyone who crossed her path failed to realize was that Song's resting bitch face didn't exactly give as many invitations.



Thinking about Emery's words, Song had to admit that a broken clock could be right twice a day, and if there was one area where her best friend could actually pass as wise it was romance. "Alright, fine." she relented. "Mary, is your friend Linh still interested?"

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For the rest of the week, Song texted back and forth with Linh, as they made plans to go out that Friday. As she thought back to the girl who even barefaced looked like she was ripped from the pages of Allure magazine, the young Rim couldn't help but compare her to Emily. Linh was a couple of inches taller than Song's old roommate, so she was already ahead on the scoreboard. She had the same kind of piercing eyes. As far as the diminutive beauty was concerned, or at least as she constantly told herself, the proud lesbian was far superior in every way. She definitely wouldn't have to worry about a sudden "I'm straight," conversation. Song smugly sent a little heart emoji, after the girl shot over one last text reading, "Sounds great, hot stuff. I'll pick you up at seven."

As Song was putting finishing touches on her makeup, the doorbell rang, and she was extremely grateful her parents had actually gone out on a date night. The last thing she wanted to deal with was her mom relentlessly inquiring about the girl's husbandly qualities. What she quickly learned after answering the door was that when Linh said she'd pick her up at seven, what she meant was I'll show up to your house on a longboard at seven, and expect you to drive us to our final destination, after I show off, doing a couple of ollies in your driveway. Skateboarding, much like craft beer talk, and bragging about your podcast, was at the top of Song's list of turnoffs.

The butch young woman wore an unwashed button-down, with a giant coffee stain by the breast pocket. Her short, choppy hair poked out from under her backwards cap, which probably hadn't moved since the last time Song saw her in it. The most surprising thing was that when she opened her mouth, in an instant, the image of the supermodel covergirl flew right out the window, as a smirk reminiscent of Beavis graced her lips.

"Hey, bro... Sorry, can I call you bro? I call everybody bro. I'm not being a transphobe. You get it. Hey, bro. Where'd you want to go tonight?"

It was like someone had plucked Emery right out of five years prior, before she got slapped in the face with her obvious girlhood. Song thought her date sounded like the twelve-year-olds on the other side of Mary's Fortnite games, with a level of coordination when eating to match, and her churning libido came to a grinding halt.

Somewhere around their second appetizer, which Song then realized her date definitely had no money to contribute to, she thought to herself, 'Jesus Christ, this is the same shit as dating boys. Like, I might as well fuck another Epsilon. At least they don't require accessories to get me off, not that this bitch could shut up long enough to do it anyway.'

As Song tried to picture a future with the stoner valkyrie, she imagined herself with Peg Bundy hair, wasting away watching soap operas, while her wife only came home from her shift at Jack In The Box to change into something that smelled less like grease, and more like weed, before heading back out to party the night away with her friends. Worst of all was that she'd have to hear the word bro more times in a month, than the entire human population should in a lifetime.



Song shuddered. 'I'd probably take up knitting, so I could stab her eye out with a needle as soon as I got the chance.'

When the girl got a text mid-date about a city swimming pool that had been recently drained for maintenance, the skate-boarder kissed Song on the cheek, apologizing in a way Song could tell was earnest, but in doing so she pretty much confirmed that four wheels nailed to a plank of wood was always going to be more important. It especially didn't help when she didn't leave anything for the bill.

Slowly driving back home, the young woman who was quickly realizing her twenties were already halfway over fully gave up. As far as she was concerned happiness was a status quo at the end of a sitcom, and her life was anything but funny. If she was doomed to be single forever, a marriage of mutual benefit for the sake of the family business was better than dying alone, and having her face eaten by her cats in the days before someone finally smelled the corpse.

Pulling into the driveway, Song took a deep breath, and then reluctantly trudged the last few steps to her parent's bedroom, where Jii was asleep with his glasses on top of his head, and Grace sat with the table lamp on, going through the financials for the previous month.

"What's the matter, Little Star?" Grace asked as the feminine silhouette came into focus from the darkness of the hallway.

Song cast her eyes to the floor, said, "Fine, you win. Call the matchmaker." before turning and heading to bed.

While she hated to see her child so defeated, Grace couldn't help but smile. She knew that in the long run, Song would see this was all for the best. Right then her focus shifted. The financial reports could wait.

Chapter 9

"Rim Jii, thank you for welcoming us into your home." Duri-Baek said in the family's native tongue. He was the patriarch of the Yoon family, and C.E.O. of the Yoon Import-Export Chaebol in Seoul.

As the man bowed, deep and formal, Jii did so in kind, but his back scolded the aging man for it. It had been years since anyone expected anything but a handshake from him. Nervously, he stood, and looked the man in the eye, lamenting that Grace was insistent he attend a meeting he would have very little voice in. Seated demurely behind her parents, Song was thinking the same thing.

"Yes... uh, thank you too. Um... for the rest of our meeting, my wife will be handling all the details." Bowing once more, Jii took a seat beside Grace, and tried to scoot as far behind her as the back of the couch would allow. Like most personal interactions, he was far more comfortable letting someone else take the lead

As the businessman's eyes found their way to the stunning, aged beauty perched on the edge of her seat, he caught sight of one eyebrow raised. He reminded her of a few of the reasons why she emigrated in the first place. With the silence hanging in the air, and his eyebrow raised, Duri-Baek nodded gratefully to Jii and his wife, who was going to take over the negotiations. Fortunately, as he suddenly found himself in a precarious position, it soon became apparent that part of the reason Yoon Duri-Baek had made it so far in business was due to a silver tongue.

“Forgive me. My wife passed away in childbirth, and it’s been so long since I’ve had a woman in my life, that I forgot just how capable you all are.”

“Quite the charmer.” Grace mused, offering an extremely American handshake, all while she noticed the man’s twenty-year-old daughter rolling her eyes behind him. *“So, why does your son want to move here? Not to be imprudent, but I’m sure you’re aware, in present times matchmakers are usually importing foreign women in for young men seeking a marriage. It’s extremely rare for them to ship an eligible man out.”* The unspoken part of the question hanging in the air was Baek-Su, the visibly nervous heir, fidgeting in his seat next to his sister. Was he some sort of criminal, or neir-do-well trying to escape some kind of consequence?

“Despite my best effort, I have never been able to get Baek to take an interest in the company. After his mandatory military service, and he spent years refusing to attend business school, or take a position at the office, I finally relented and paid for medical school. He graduated just this year, and he’s expressed an interest in completing his residency in America.”

What the man tactfully left out was that if his son’s arrangement didn’t work out, nobody back home ever needed to know of the foreign divorce. Divorce rates were just as high in Korea, as in the U.S. but the stigma that came with it could ruin a future venture, or at least that’s what the staunch traditionalist believed.

Grace smiled slightly, once again reminded that her daughter’s potential match was a doctor. *“I am sure you are proud of his achievements.”*

The patriarch of the Yoon family nodded, answering in kind. *“What about your daughter? I understand she’s a... beautician...”* This line of thought was not nearly as camouflaged. The real question he was asking was if Song was the unrefined trash child of a wealthy family, unable to pull her own weight in the real world, and looking to hitch her wagon to a free ride.

“Song is a celebrity hairstylist, making a name for herself in the industry, and amassing quite the notable client list. She finished undergrad last year, with the business degree you wanted for your son actually. She’s been working at our flagship location for the last five years, learning the operation from the ground up. My daughter isn’t afraid to get her hands dirty, because by the time she’s finished, her nails will be the cleanest no matter where she is or what she’s doing.”

“I see.” the man replied, eyeing his prospective daughter-in-law while she averted her gaze, staring into space as though she was somewhere else entirely. *“She’s stunning... truly favoring her mother...”*

Always a sucker for a compliment, Grace blushed, fully agreeing with Duri’s sentiment, though it was almost like he was filling out a scorecard in his head as he appraised each of Song’s features. Still, it wasn’t like the man pulled out a measuring tape and started deciphering the intricacies of Song’s bust. Jii’s father might have thought his daughter-in-law low class, but he’d still find any chance to admire Grace’s figure when he thought nobody was looking.

“Just to be clear, you are fine with a western wedding?” Grace asked, getting the conversation moving again. *“Also, Song will be taking your surname. While I’d prefer she keep the one that built our fortune, the Americans hate it when women do that here. Not doing so could be extremely detrimental for our business. Now if she was an actress, or a singer...”*

For a moment, Grace’s thoughts drifted back to a time when the dreams of her daughter’s k-pop career seemed possible, while Song was extremely grateful for the persistent march of time.

“All of that is fine.” Duri replied. *“My only requirements are that we follow the recommendations of the fortune tellers. The wedding date must be whatever they suggest. Money is no object.”*

While most might have seen an old man, bound to the edicts of tradition by some sort of misplaced faith, it was the facade of a traumatised man, whose heart had never fully recovered from the greatest loss of his life. Duri’s marriage to his late wife was one for love, but also one his parents insisted stick as closely to tradition as possible for them to allow it. After the fortune tellers read the couple’s saju, their time of birth, an unfavorable reading came back. A kunghap divination followed, which predicted calamity, should the two wed.

Determined to marry the love of his life, the heir paid for several cleansing rituals, and charged ahead with his plans. The couple shared ten happy years, blessed with their son first, but when their second child came, tragedy struck. Baek-Su, and Nari’s mother passed, before the latter ever had a chance to meet her. Searching back for any sign where he could have gone wrong, Duri remembered the fortune teller, and wished he would have heeded her words. He wished he’d let the girl go on and have a simpler, but happier and longer life.

“Everything looks great, Little Star.” Grace said in English, snapping Song back to reality. Assuming her daughter wasn’t familiar with the archaic ritual, she explained the results. *“According to the reading, you two are an extremely favorable match. No tragedy on the horizon. It looks like you’re going to be married in about six weeks.”*

For Song, that was the giant waving red flag she needed to suddenly process the onslaught of information and double speak that had been streaming at her for several hours by this point. Something for the future, in the abstract, was now something with a concrete date, barreling down on her like a train in a one track tunnel. ‘Am I really about to get married? To be a wife?’

“It looks like we’re going to be family.” Duri said, standing from his seat, and pulling Song into a tight embrace. He squeezed Song so hard, it was almost as though he was trying to see if her breasts would pop under the strain. Turning back to face his son, the man pulled out his wallet, and handed him a stack of American currency, not seen since the invention of the debit card. *“You kids go out, and get something to eat, while your mother-in-law, and I discuss how the two sides of our new family can mutually benefit each other.”*

The stoic entrepreneur was almost in tears, gazing up into his taller son's eyes, as though his prayers had finally been answered. Grace was far better at getting people to hurry though, so after a little shooing, she managed to get the three young people into Song's car, and on the way to a diner.

Having taken note of her potential sister-in-law's lack of attention during their parents' conversation, it seemed clear to Nari that the girl didn't understand Korean, so she continued speaking in her native tongue.

"The states seem nice at least, and this one is pretty... better than the last father tried to buy for you." Nari said, staring out the window of Song's backseat, having yet to speak one word directly to her brother's new fiancée.

Song glanced in the rearview mirror, biting her bottom lip after hearing the odd comment, while Baek-Su, maintaining his polite smile, chastised his sibling. *"Maybe you shouldn't be speaking with such a barbed tongue?"*

"I don't know what you mean brother. I was only saying she is pretty."

Glaring in the passenger side vanity mirror, Baek looked to the girl driving them, softening his expression and speaking in the language he knew she understood. "Apologies, my sister was just saying how pretty you are. It is not often that we speak English, so it is hard for us to switch seamlessly. We will attempt to do better."

Song mostly spoke Korean with her father, and with her grandparents. Occasionally she'd have the opportunity to practice at work, but Grace was pretty adamant about not making the rich white ladies uncomfortable. "Save the shit talking for the back," she'd say. Hearing her new fiancée using the language, or any other young people for that matter sounded different, but not in a way she could dissect the intricacies of. Hearing him speak in English for the first time though had painted a vivid picture in her mind.

The young man had the exact same wide-mouthed pronunciation as the dozens of business men she'd met in the span of her mother's professional career. It was common for wealthy Koreans doing business overseas to hire native speaking American English tutors, to jam Js and Rs into their children's phoneme repertoire, before they were too old to acquire them. Each of these kids came out with the same pronunciation, the same exaggerated diphthongs, the exact same easy to understand, manner of speech, which Song had long grown bored of. It always reminded her of the midatlantic accent every Hollywood starlet used to speak with in the old black and white movies her mother always made her watch- an accent that came from nowhere, cost money to learn, and was mostly just used to set one class of people above another.

“Kind of her to say. Feel free. The two of you speaking Korean doesn’t offend me at all and... it looks like we are here.” Song knew the benefit of being underestimated, even if being talked about like she was a prize cow made her want to claw the girl’s eyes out.

Inside the farm to table steak house, the trio were seated at a table, where the waitress was ready to take their drink orders.

“Gin?” It was the first word of English Song had heard Nari utter since meeting the girl.

“ID, please?” the waitress asked, her professional forced smile unwavering. Handing the woman her passport, Nari rolled her eyes at the request. “I’m sorry, but I can’t serve you until your next birthday.”

As the twenty-year-old’s face began to flush with anger, the server braced herself for another onslaught those in the service industry had all grown far too accustomed to.

Quickly speaking up, Song, ID already in hand, interrupted, “She’s going to have a virgin Cosmo. I’ll have a Cosmo myself actually, a shot of vodka, and a glass of water.”

“And for you sir?” the server asked, never once meeting eyes with the young girl wringing her knuckles.

“Just water for me.” he answered nervously.

The tense silence at the table could be cut with a knife, as they awaited their beverages. When the waitress returned, she found Baek-Su counting the light fixtures in the ceiling, Song scrolling through her phone, and Nari on the other side, glaring daggers through her future sister-in-law.

“Are y’all ready to order, or...” The waitress didn’t bother finishing the question, before she darted away. The table definitely needed some more time.

“This isn’t what I wanted, brother. How dare she order for me like I’m a child!” Nari spat, sneering at Song without any subtlety.

“Well, I wouldn’t have to if somebody could keep themselves under control.” Song answered in Korean, looking up from her phone, staring her future sister-in-law in the eyes. She picked up the extra shot, and dumped it into the virgin glass in front of the catty girl. *“It took me a long time to learn too, but sometimes it’s easier to catch flies with honey.”*

Looking down to her freshly spiked potable, a wide grin spread across Nari’s face, as she realized just how close to her ample chest Song kept her cards. *“Looks like she does have claws, brother. I really do like this one.”* Collecting her purse, and the glass, the young girl said in English, “I’m going out for a cigarette.” then strolled off towards the door, shouting back, “You talk like a boomer, by the way.”



"I apologize for her rudeness." Baek said, blushing at his sister's shamelessness enough for the both of them. "She's always been a bit... assertive. Father has never had my Mother's patience. Please don't hold it against her."

"She's fine." Song said, smirking slightly. In a perfect world, she'd have shaved a stripe down the center of the girl's short hairdo, but she'd have to settle for a little surprised embarrassment. "I used to be something of a brat myself."

Song took the moment to eye her future husband up and down for the first time. He was handsome. His career choice told her he was at least smart enough. In any other circumstance he seemed like the kind of guy who would get her engine going, but for reasons she couldn't quite put her finger on, her loins were quiet. Still, realizing this was a guy she might have to fuck for the rest of her life, she decided to take him out for a spin. If he was pure trash in the sack, she'd have to throw a hand grenade into the whole arrangement before it got off the ground.

Leaning in closer, Song rested a well-manicured hand on Baek's knee, and then whispered in his ear, "You know, I think we could probably get away with leaving your sister at the mall, and there's a hotel nearby. Why not try out the milk before you buy the cow?"

Inwardly, Song cringed as she realized she'd just referred to herself as cattle, but what came next was far more humiliating than anything she could ever conceive of - rejection.

"I'm sorry, Song, but it wouldn't be p- proper." the nervous young man sputtered, as he gently tugged his leg away, leaving his bride-to-be stunned in silence. A new awkward tension draped over the table, and this one was there to stay.

*

As Song stood on the tailor's riser for her dress fitting, her mind raced a thousand miles an hour. Was the man she was to be married to only out to steal her inheritance? Was he going to kill her on their honeymoon? There hadn't been a single mention of their gender during the discussion. Did he even know? She had basically thrown herself at Baek, and he actually said no. Song was used to disappointment, but rejection was something that was never going to sit right, and she believed his "It wouldn't be proper." excuse as much as she believed in Santa.

Her mother and Emery were accompanying her for her dress fitting, and it was anything but a pleasant experience. The only solace found was in the bottomless champagne that accompanied the feminine ritual.

For the tenth time that hour, her mother had just called her fat. In the two weeks since the engagement was made official, the Rim heiress had been stress eating, and while most wouldn't notice, Song, and even worse, her mother, definitely did. Another glass of champagne though was all it took to quiet those anxieties, and to tune out the domineering presence.

Gazing at the curvy silhouette in bridal lingerie, reflected in the three angled mirrors, it was hard for Song to see anything other than a young woman who was supposed to be having the happiest day of her life every day, until walking down that aisle. In the fog she heard Emery's voice in the distance.

“But she’s, like, even skinnier than she was when we were in high school Mrs. R”

Why was she skinnier than in high school? That wasn’t typical for most people as they aged. It was then that everything that had happened to Song since that first terrible day at The Hanger, hit her like a ton of bricks. That was when a young man strolled up behind Song in her reflection, walking through her very existence, his eyes glued to his phone.

Looking up for a moment, the guy, his words dripping with sleaze, said, “Damn girl, you’re looking hot. Certainly you’re not the man you used to be, but that’s okay. Just sit there and look pretty. That’s all you’re good for. You might want to lose that weight though, because if you get fat, I mean well, what good are you then?”



It was then that Song recognized the person in the mirror. It was themselves, Song Jae, only Jae was taller. He wasn't a giant, but she could see a little muscle beneath his shirt. His voice was deeper. He could even actually grow a little goatee.

"Are you me?" Song asked their reflection, while the droning hum of their mother's complaining faded even further into the background.

"Nah, babe. You were supposed to be me, but you let all these people make your decisions, and look how that worked out."

"What are you, like five-seven?"

"I'm five-nine!" the boy shot back, though even as drunk as they were on the champagne, Song could clearly see that wasn't true. "Whatever, bitch. At least I'm not mommy's little girl, like you."

Not sure what to make of their obvious nervous breakdown, Song was pulled back to reality for seconds at a time, dealing with the noxious chemical compound that was their mother, and their blond bubbly best friend. After defending the girl, they'd be pulled back to their reflection, and time seemed to stand still, leaving them to contemplate the direction of their life for what felt like an eternity.

'Oh my god, I'm a boy.' Song thought, as the curves he'd once been so proud of suddenly felt like alien invaders. 'I'm supposed to be a boy... How the fuck did I ever let it get this far...? How the fuck did I end up here?'

*

For the next month, wedding planning was non-stop. Grace was regularly talking on two phones at once, one managing the business, and the other micromanaging the florists. Thrilled that her daughter was finally taking her final steps into adulthood, the proud mother beamed the girl's praises to anyone who would listen.

The Yoon family was paying, so a destination wedding was in order, but Grace knew that if the destination was too far, the attendance would suffer. Splitting the difference between location, and prestige, a set of suites was booked in a luxury resort in Napa Valley for the end of the month, along with space in their vineyard for the ceremonies. Hotel staff were handling most of the preparations, so all that was left to fall on Song was cake tasting. In what was proving to be life's greatest cruelty, even though Grace allowed Song to try dozens of options from some of the greatest bakeries in the state, he was never allowed to swallow, always spitting out whatever hit his tastebuds to make sure he kept his weight down before the big day.

What nobody knew was that behind the blushing bride being tormented by her mother, Song was scheming again, this time plotting his own freedom. That night, after being spurned by his husband-to-be, the boy turned girl decided he'd rather spend the rest of his life in poverty, than

go from being his mother's plaything to that man's cash cow. Swiping Appa's credit card through college had the unintended benefit of leaving the sizable sum of four years of paychecks to accumulate in Song's account, and that was the money that would buy him a plane ticket straight out of Napa Valley, and onto a better life in Alaska, where Song could reclaim his manhood, and live off fish forever or something. The plan wasn't Song's most thought out. Scheming appeared to be one of those skills that if you didn't use, you would lose.

All Song had to do was keep playing the good girl, make it to the resort, and then disappear in the inevitable chaos. That's what he told himself, as he gazed into the mirror one last time, checking his makeup, and feeling a familiar irritation that it didn't look perfect, before taking a shot of vodka hidden under the sink. After that he had to listen to Jae in the mirror demean him once more for good measure.

"Damn girl, you're almost pretty now. You should learn to smile more though. No man is ever gonna want to take home that ugly ass frown you got there."

"God, you're such a piece of shit!" Song shot back, as his cheeks burned crimson. "No wonder you had to blackmail people into fucking you!"

With a deep breath, he repaired his lipstick, popped in a mint, and then carried his suitcase down to the taxi, where his parents waited. A short flight later, Song had watched Bridesmaids for the tenth time, and then they arrived at their destination. It was only that evening, yet somehow, already weary, Song felt like it had been weeks since they left. This was it though. The time had finally arrived for Song to make his escape.

When the Rim family arrived at the hotel, the Yoons were waiting in the lobby, their proud patriarch wearing a warm smile that almost seemed out of place on his wrinkled features. Baek-Su wore an equally out of place grin, as he shared a whispered conversation with a guy Song recognized as his best man, the husband-to-be seemingly not even noticing his fiancée's arrival. Grace, knowing her child struggled to remember the names of anyone not resilient enough to be her friend, tortured Song with flashcards of the entire guest list, a routine they hadn't done since Song had finished high school.

Even weirder still, it was Nari, Baek's bratty twenty-year-old sister, who threw her arms around Song's neck, and nearly choked the life out of him.

"So good to see you, sister." she said, giving one more squeeze before allowing the air to return to Song's lungs. "I'm so happy to finally have someone to talk to who isn't a stick in the mud. We arrived yesterday, and I've been stuck with these idiots."

"*Nari, behave!*" her father chastised in Korean.

Undetoured, the girl continued, "This is so exciting. I can't wait for you two to make it official, and then give me nieces and nephews. Kids are so fun after all, but only when you can give them

back to someone else, when they get shit in their pants. I know I certainly don't want any of the gross little things coming out of my vagina. ”

“Nari, that’s enough!” The old man’s booming voice echoed around the lobby, but it seemed to phase his daughter none. *“If you admire Song so much, you should follow her example, and begin looking for a husband.”*

The girl rolled her eyes. As she had made clear dozens of times before, she was far more interested in finishing business school.

After saying the formal hellos to the groom’s family, meeting the best man, equally as handsome as Song’s husband to be and equally as uninterested, the bride’s time was finally unspoken for.

“Mummy, Appa, I’m feeling pretty tired from the flight. I think I’m going to go take a nap before the girls get here.”

It was a line well-rehearsed, and one his parents accepted without argument. That was step one. Step two was to pack a bag of necessities, easy enough in his room alone. The last step was to figure out exactly where he was going. This changed by the minute. Frantically Song would pace around the room, convinced Alaska was the obvious option. Starting over in New York seemed plausible too. Lots of movies started that way after all. As this argument with himself persisted, a dozen other options were tossed on the table. Without realizing it, time had crept up on the runaway bride, and it was already seven. Any of his bridal party that hadn’t yet arrived would be soon, and the texts blowing up his phone told him there were already plenty of girls conglomerating down in the tiny lobby bar. All that was left was to camouflage his escape in a diaphanous black, floaty little black dress, the perfect outfit for a bride to be spending a night out with the girls.

Deciding to choose the destination back at the airport, Song collected his purse, stuffing his travel documents in. All the girls’ clothing was to be left behind. It should have been the easiest break ever. If Song had paid as much attention as he should have in the previous eight years, he’d have realized that nothing was ever as easy as he hoped.

The elevator door opened on the lobby, and Song could see four letters shining in the distance with the promise of freedom. “EXIT”

It wasn’t a short hallway, but with every step taken, Song’s destination seemed miles and miles further. His plan factored in getting held up out in front of the bar. One of his sorority sisters could stop him, and he’d just say he was going to the little girls’ room first, and he’d be right there. The one thing he could have never planned for was that it would be his father seeking his attention.

“Ttal, I was hoping we could talk before you meet up with your friends.” Jii said, catching his daughter by the wrist, as she hurried by, nearly scaring her out of her four-inch heels.

“Appa!” Song squealed, his heart pounding a thousand miles an hour. “Is... Is everything okay?”

“I’m okay... I just...” The man paused. Emotion had never been his strong suit, but he loved his little girl enough to push past his discomfort. “Look, I... I just want to thank you for tolerating your mother through all this. I know she is a lot...”

A warm smile spread across the proud father’s lips, as he reached up and brushed his daughter’s cheek.

“Do you know why she always calls you her Little Star?”

“Umm, because she wanted me to be a singer.” Song felt uncomfortable witnessing the rare display of affection from his dad, but the man’s gentle touch felt nice, and he couldn’t bring himself to pull away.

“Not quite, Song. When we first moved here, your mother wanted to have a hundred kids.”

Song smirked, thinking of how much that sounded like a certain blond Grace couldn’t stand.

“I know, it sounds crazy, right?” Jii continued, catching the look. “Anyway, we uh... ran into some problems. We both had complications, and it was looking like children weren’t in the cards for us. Your mother would have adopted, but I think there always would have been a part of her that wished to carry her baby inside of her. One night, we were out on the patio, before the light pollution got so bad, and we saw a falling star. Right then, throwing all of her cynicism out of the window, Grace made a wish. With tears in her eyes, she asked for a baby.”

Without realizing it, tears started pooling in the corners of Song’s eyes.

“Anyway, that night we cuddled on the couch, had some wine, and then...” The emotional father realized right then the story didn’t need every detail. “Um, and then a week later, your mom was pregnant. She calls you her Little Star because you’re her greatest wish brought to life.”

“Then, why did you both stop paying attention to me after I started middle school?” Song could feel the love from his father. He knew he wasn’t lying, but remote love did nothing to curb the former troublemaker’s problem behaviors.

“I don’t think we really knew what we were doing. We got so preoccupied, trying to establish ourselves, and set up our future, that we forgot to pay attention to the little things. ”

Jii paused, placing a hand on his child’s shoulder.

“Losing focus on the most important things- the most important person was a huge mistake. You were always so smart, I guess we just sort of felt like you didn’t need anyone looking over your

shoulder. By the time you started acting out, which in hindsight is pretty obviously because you felt abandoned, we thought that rewarding bad behavior with any attention was only going to make it worse. We know now how wrong we were. The last few years, we've been a real family, and while you've had your problems, overall you've been the happiest I've ever seen you. Look, Song, the point I'm trying to make is that if you're not happy... If you don't want to do this... your mother will get over it. She might be mad for a little while, but she is going to love you more than anything until the day she dies. Nothing, and I mean absolutely nothing, is going to change that."

"Thanks, Appa." Song said, fighting back the waterfall hiding behind his eyes. It was then that he realized that the man who always seemed so distant had never taken his eyes off of him. "I'm okay... Umm, I'm just going to meet the girls."

"Here here..." The anxious dad dug into his pocket, and retrieved a handkerchief. "I didn't want to upset you, Song. I just wanted to make sure you knew you're the one in charge here. This is your wedding after all."

"I'm okay... I'm just gonna get cleaned up, and then meet the girls at the bar. Thanks for the talk though, Appa. I love you." Song wrapped his arms around his dad's neck, and wondered if this was going to be the last time he ever saw his father. What would his dad think, knowing the last thing his child ever said to him was a lie.

"Of course, Ttal. I love you more than anything too. I'll guess I'll leave you to your friends. Have fun, and I'll see you at the rehearsal dinner tomorrow."

After the two said their goodbyes, Song took a seat on a nearby bench, and repaired his eye makeup, wondering what the point of bothering was, but feeling compelled to do so nonetheless. As the noise in his mind quieted in the meditative process, Song began to pick up on the sounds of the world around him. That's when, behind his head, through an open decorative window to the hotel bar, Song heard a voice he'd only heard on television for the previous few years.

"Hey, Emery!" Emily shouted, on what Song could only assume was her arrival. "My flight was delayed. As soon as we landed, I headed straight here."

"Milly, hi!" the blond squealed back. "Where's Conner?"

"Oh uh... he's not coming. Something... came up..."

Every fiber of Song's being was telling him to flee while he still could, but for reasons he'd never fully understand, the Rim heir closed his compact, dropped it back in his purse, forced a big smile onto his face, stood, and then walked into the hotel wine bar.

Chapter 10

Summoning all the confidence, and cockiness he could, Song strolled through the decorative saloon doors segmenting the vineyard resort's wine bar, from the lobby.

"What's up Zeta bitches?" the alumnae squealed as they first set eyes on a mass of young women, all dressed for a night out. Representing the Central College chapter, Britney, Gwen, Felicia, and Stacy were all in attendance, having driven the six hours from the LA metro together. Song could infer that Gwen must have been the one behind the wheel, as she was the only one who didn't smell like a bottle of Merlot when they group hugged in a mob of bouncing squeals.

While the cluster of white girls huddled together, it was easy to see the division between the two halves of Song's life. On the other side of the room sat a dozen women, some older Asian immigrants, and some, the first generation raised in California, all employees of Rim Beauty. There was one little blond mixed in, pulling what seemed to be art supplies from a giant bag under the table, while her pink-haired partner, and the present store manager, arrived with a tray full of corked test tube shots tucked under her folded coat.

"I can't believe your mother shut down the shop, and rented a bus to get us all up here, Yeodongsaeng." Eun gushed as she hugged her sort-of adopted little sister tightly, after sneaking up behind her. "Three days without a sale. Your mother must be losing her mind, but I guess if anything would be worth it to her, it would be you."

"God help us, Noona." Song replied, taking note of how excited she was. They weren't sure if they had ever seen Eun gush about anything before. "You'd think the woman was getting remarried herself, the way she's been acting."

"Well, come Sunday you'll be done, and we can all quietly resent you for finding a husband before us." Eun replied with a playful huff

From the moment he'd walked in, Song had been playing the part of the giddy bride-to-be, channeling the happy years at school, but the entire time his eyes searched the room for the source of the voice still bouncing around in his head. A few moments later, the door to the ladies room swung open, and out walked the very last person Song expected to see.

"Hello there, Miss Song!" Bianca, the woman behind the nightmares he was still having seven years later, walked out with the biggest smile in the world.

Without a thought, Song took one step backwards, then another, holding out a hand to somehow try and deny Bianca's presence.

"No... Just no..." In an instant, Song was transported back to the day he snuck into the dressing room at the woman's store- the first day he was thrust into the role of she, despite his many many protests.

“Did your mother not tell you she hired me to do the wedding photos?” the woman asked, but she didn’t need an answer. It was already painted all over the bride’s stunned expression. “I was just looking for the little girls room while we ran our lighting test, when Emery caught me in the hallway, and dragged me in. Don’t worry, I’m not sticking around. I just wanted to catch up with Emily since we haven’t seen each other for a few years, before I left. I have to say, you look lovely. I’m very proud of the beautiful woman you’ve grown into.”

As Song turned and watched the person who’d singlehandedly sent his life careening down a path he never asked for walk away, seeming to have never suffered a single consequence, he shouted, “Yeah, well it’s nice to see you actually getting paid to be a photographer!” only after realizing that it wasn’t exactly the insult he hoped it would be.

“Boo.”

As that single syllable was whispered into Song’s ear, he nearly leapt out of the filmy black dress encasing his feminine form. Spinning like a scene from a horror movie, Song was suddenly faced with the subject of his pursuit, but like a dog chasing a car, he didn’t know what to do now that he’d actually caught it.

Standing there, the once brooding young man, now gleeful as ever, Emily Brooks awaited Song with arms wide open. Surveying the giant beauty, Song found her same goofy smile out of place on an otherwise picture perfect portrait of a pretty face, made for television. She was dressed in a navy blue collarless button-down, tucked into a pressed khaki skirt that fell to just below the knee. The White House press secretary’s ensemble was tastefully accessorized by a pair of taupe three-inch pumps with a pointed toe, and a pale burgundy leather belt, that perfectly matched the designer handbag tastefully hanging from the crook of her elbow.

“I know, I know, not very festive.” the young woman said, making excuses for her three-hundred dollar outfit. “I had a press conference literally right before my flight, and then after I got my rental, I came straight here. I couldn’t be late for my bestie’s bachelorette party.”

“My what?”

The answer to Song’s question left hanging in the air would come from a certain bubbly blond, now handing a stack of pink glittering binders to whoever would take them. “Okay, ladies, I had one job for this whole thing, so I made sure I did it right.”

“You had several jobs, Emery.” Song said flatly. As she thumbed through the pages of the informal document, noticing the subtle floral fragrance emanating, she only realized how much she performed the task like her mother. Even her tone with the ditzy blond was similar. “You came to my fitting, you helped me pick out bridesmaid dresses, we did that cake tasting together... You even argued with my mom when we were deciding on my hair.”

“I thought we were just hanging out.” she replied, before standing in a chair, much to the amusement of a few nearby businessmen who could almost see up her short skirt. “Y’all we’ve got a busy night ahead of us, so let’s get going. Now, I think we have enough cars here, but if we get too drunk, I made sure that Mary checked the Uber service area covers all our destinations so we won’t get stuck. Just be safe, but otherwise have fun. I’ve included a schedule in case we get separated.” Emery beamed proudly, while Mary rolled her eyes at the idea of her girlfriend’s supervision.

“What the actual fuck...” Song muttered as he flipped through the pages of the binder. “Why is there a picture of a puppy in here?”

“Because she’s trying to guilt me.” Mary answered, sneaking a shot from under her coat, before passing a few more around, all while the bartender purposefully looked away, not paid enough to care, and tipped just enough to pretend not to notice. “I told you, Princess, the apartment has a no animals policy. We have to wait until our lease is up, and then move before we can get a dog.”

“I’m not trying to make you feel guilty.” Emery turned her binder around to show everyone the picture of the puppy despite them already having their own. “She’s just a little cutie, so I figured she’d make everybody smile while we were going over everything.”

“Sure...” the maid-of-honor’s girlfriend shot back, rolling her eyes once more, sarcasm dripping from the word.

“Anyway, our first stop on the bar crawl is just down the road, and that part ends at this little place I found just outside of town. We’ll be ready to go just as soon as we get the bride to wear her special stuff.”

As Emery held up a few cheap items, Song recoiled at the thought of being forced to walk around in public wearing them. “Fine, we can go out, but there is absolutely no way I’m doing it in those.”

Song’s resolve might have been steel, but it was going up an even stronger force, his best friend, Emery, with puppy dog eyes even sadder than the little canine in the picture.

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A couple of hours later, Song found himself seated at a giant table, at an all-male strip club, a lonely rectangle of a building out on a random two-lane highway. He was supposed to be at the airport, booking a flight to somewhere halfway across the world, but instead, due to a mixture of curiosity, guilt, and what he would describe as an insane propensity to generate his own suffering, Song was sporting a sash that read, “Bride-to-Be” and a gold plastic crown glued to a flimsy headband. He was left holding a fairy wand, though instead of it being tipped with the little star his mother would have chosen, Emery picked one with a big pink plastic cock.

There were cocks on all the party favors. There were a bunch of colorful little individually wrapped dicks filling the candy bowl on the center of the table. Emery even spent hours in the weeks leading up, drawing little peckers in the corners of each of the pages of her binders, one by one.

While the humiliations of such a getup normally came with being the center of attention, even in this Song felt he was falling short. Across the table sat the tall girl with the perfect blond coif he hated, though mostly because he didn't do it himself. It was Emily that was left to field the nosy prying of her sorority sisters.

"Girl, I love that look on you!" Stacy gushed, as she booped her former little on the nose. "It's crazy, I feel like I see you more on the TV now than I ever did when we lived together. That job is keeping you busy."

"For real though," Britney added, leaning into Stacy and almost splashing her drink on her friend. "it's sad Conner couldn't make it. I was really looking forward to meeting your boyfriend finally."

"Well, the President's speech-writers serve at her whim, so he rarely gets a free moment that isn't stolen away. Fortunately, my position allows me to take advantage of a long weekend from time to time. It's still pretty hard though. I don't think I knew exactly what I was signing up for."

"Yeah, it's great to see you putting that degree to good use." Song interjected, after downing yet another glass of wine. "It must be hard for you to read off that teleprompter when the words scroll by so fast."

An awkward silence fell over the table, emphasized by the dancer's music cutting out as he finished his number, while Mary and Emery chucked dollar bills at the stage.

"What about your man, Song?" Britney asked, trying to break the tension, as Song and Emily locked eyes, the taller girl's frustration just beginning to poke through her well-practiced, polite facade. "I hear he's a doctor."

"Oh he's..." The bride searched for an answer, as his intoxicated mind struggled to find a single fact about the groom that wasn't about how uninterested the man seemed in the whole affair. "...doing a residency or something... yeah, doctor stuff..."

"Leave Song alone, guys." Emily interjected, as she finished another dark beer, determined to catch up to the rest of the party. Returning the bride's sour expression, she explained, "You all know she has a hard time caring about anything that doesn't involve her directly."

"Alright, ladies, time to move this party along." Tippy, and riddled with excitement, Emery swooped in like she was trying to calm things down, but in truth the ditzy girl had no idea what

she was walking into. "Next up, we've got a scavenger hunt planned. I've split us up into teams of three, listed in the binders on page eleven, so that way everybody should have a car. Starting here, we'll meet up at my hotel room where we've got drinks, and karaoke waiting. First one back wins, and if nobody finishes the list then, like, most stuff."

Song opened the binder, still floored that Emery managed to be this organized about anything, let alone something that didn't involve makeup, weed, or food, and found his name at the top of the list, accompanied by two more that were all too familiar. "You've got to be kidding me..."

"That's right!" the blond squealed, running over to Song, and throwing her arms around his neck. "The original group, back together again!"

Mary, on wobbly legs, with a straw in her mouth, glanced through the list until she found her name. "Who's Gwen and Felicia?"

As the two sorority girls made their way across the room, looking like the last two people Rim's store manager would even speak to, Gwen looked equally as pleased about the whole arrangement, while Felicia led with a question. Eyeing Mary's eyebrow piercing, she asked, "Is that real?"

'Dammit, Emery!' Mary shouted in her thoughts, knowing full well the love of her life definitely wasn't getting lucky that night.

*

"I can't believe you gave that stripper fifty dollars for that thing, Emery." Song groaned as the trio climbed into Emily's rental car.

The first item on the scavenger hunt was a banana hammock, and not one meant for the kitchen, so, determined to win at her own game, Emery bought one freshly tossed from the stage when the dancer came to collect it after finishing his number.

"We're already ahead of the curve though." Emily said, starting the engine, then opening the binder to check the list.

In the past two years she went from being a faceless campaign staffer to being the president's literal mouthpiece, as press secretary. While she liked her job, and she definitely liked her paycheck, the constant scrutiny of the public eye exhausted the young woman. Being the second most public facing trans woman in the country, next to President Reagan Arnault, the former hooligan was forced to always remain on her best behaviour, so the bachelorette party at a remote northern California resort was a welcome change of pace. Unfortunately for her, that moment of relaxation was snatched away, along with the binder when Song yanked it from her grip, to his own after he climbed into the passenger seat.

“Better save your voice just in case Politics Barbie gets called back to Washington. Your boss might stick her foot in her mouth again.”

While a lot of Emily’s job was damage control, when President Arnault would shake a foreign diplomat’s hand incorrectly, or some other trivial nonsense, or even when she accidentally used a word she didn’t know was a slur, she got the sense that wasn’t what Song was getting at.

“Now, it looks like next on the list is a fireman’s underwear, photo proof required. Perhaps I should handle this one. I’d hate for you to cream your panties, Emily.” Song jabbed the knife in a little deeper, as he remembered the time he walked in on his former roommate, enjoying some self stimulation with the firefighter calendar that usually hung on the back of her door.

A short while later, after snapping a photo of Emery flashing her boobs to some random college kids, the trio pulled into a gas station, partially to fill up, but a cashier’s underpants were on the list, so Song was sent in, armed with his debit card, and his charm.

“Just remember, you can use money to buy the gas, Song!” Emily shouted after him. “You don’t have to suck the guy’s dick... unless you really want to!”

Returning just a few minutes later, Song was carrying a pair of tidy whities when he jumped back in.

“That was fast!” Emery said excitedly, practically tasting the victory. “Wait... did you actually suck his dick?” The only response the blond got was the bundle of wadded cloth thrown at her face.

Over the next couple of hours, Song, Emily, and Emery roamed the NorCal roads, drawing dicks on underpasses, procuring absurd sex-toys, and photographing themselves with a dozen strangers, even one with a somehow impressive, yet horrifying mullet. While the bubbly blond was having the time of her life, the palpable animosity between the other two was building. With just a few items left, it was decided by an extremely exhausted bride that most, if not all, of them could be found back at the resort.

After pulling back into the parking lot, Emery was bouncing in her seat, as she could hardly contain herself, practically tasting victory.

“Okay, so next on the list is a foreign tourist’s underwear...” Song’s voice trailed off as a theme was becoming very apparent. “Emery, why are there so many underpants in here?”

Emery’s blue eyes looked up, as she bit her bottom lip, thinking about the question before answering. “Emily told me about you guys’ sorority boxer hunt, and it sounded fun. F.O.M.O. you know?”

“Right...” Song’s memory of the experience was not so positive, as on his first raid night he had to make out with three stoned boys who weren’t even cute.

“Okay, I’ve got this! Get the last item, and I’ll meet y’all upstairs. We’re, like, so close to winning. Isn’t that exciting?”

“Woo.” Song replied, as bland as possible, while the ditzzy girl leapt out of the back seat, and prissily ran towards the building.

Once she was gone, the two estranged friends sat quietly for a moment, before Emily finally broke the silence. “So, like... can we talk?”

“Talk about what?” Song opened the binder again, and started searching for the last item, while hoping that would be the end of it. He wondered how hard it would be to get to the airport after midnight.

Emily gripped the steering wheel in frustration, and gritted her teeth. She took a few deep breaths in through her nose, and out through her mouth, trying to remain calm. “Song, you haven’t called me in years. When I call you, I feel like I’m talking to a wall, and you find an excuse to hang up as soon as possible. Like, I’ve been calling your mom just to keep up with what you have going on. I get Emery being your maid of honor, but, like, I just thought I’d be more involved than this.”

“Here it is!” Song shouted, forcing a smile to his face, while one heeled foot tapped the floorboard frantically. “It’s the groom’s underwear. Good news, I’ve got a key to his room, for after the wedding. Gotta consummate those vows, right?”

The bride-to-be cringed as that last sentence escaped his lips, spurring him to throw open the door, and basically jog to the building, as fast as his little legs would carry him. He was practically running, given that the leggy beauty in pursuit had no trouble matching his stride in the converse sneakers she’d changed into hours before.

“Song, seriously,” Emily huffed, as they bolted past a small family walking to their car, “we need to talk. I’ve been waiting for a moment alone with you all night. Why don’t you want to deal with this?”

Sprinting right past the elevator, Song was running up the service stairs in his three-inch strappy sandals, finding just a moment of comfort that he didn’t hear a second set of footsteps coming up behind him. Stepping out onto the third floor, he paused for a moment, and caught his breath, as the first time since meeting up with the girls, his asshole finally unclenched. That small relief wouldn’t last, as a second later, a bell rang from the elevator, the doors slid open, and out stepped Emily, with plenty of energy left to continue the chase.

“Baek’s room is right here.” Song said, trying to continue ignoring the problem hunting him down. “He and the best man, umm... Chan-Woo I think... Anyway, they’re supposed to be golfing in the morning. I’ll sneak in quietly, so we don’t wake him up. Just wait here, okay?”

As he turned to unlock the door, Song felt a slender hand, with long fingers grasping his wrist. Turning back, he saw Emily, tears streaming down her cheeks, looking at him with pleading eyes.

“Song... Look, I’m sorry I couldn’t love you the same way, but that doesn’t mean I don’t love you. Shit has been so rough for me lately, and I just miss my friend...”

Song looked the girl in the eyes, and he was transported back to that fateful morning, when what was left of his heart was shattered into a million pieces. It was like nothing had changed. No matter what he kept telling himself, he was still that same little girl whose heart had never stopped breaking, and she was about to melt down right in front of the person she wanted to kiss as much as she wanted to strangle. Unable to make any move, she turned, quickly slid the keycard, and then slipped into the room, locking the door behind her.

As Song turned around and slumped back against the door, she expected to find the sleeping man she could never get a beat on. Armed with the explanation of her ditzy friend’s game, should she find the man awake, when she looked towards the bed, the man’s eyes were definitely wide open. Song’s future husband was on all fours, while behind him, his best man was frozen, mid-thrust, balls deep in the petrified groom.

“Uh... I c-can explain... It’s... It’s not what it- it- looks like.” Baek stuttered, while his best man had already withdrawn, and was frantically searching for his pants. He was completely terrified, but that terror quickly gave way to confusion, as relief washed over his bride’s face.

“Oh, thank god.” Song chuckled, while the best man, clearly not fluent in English, continued to panic, deciding pants were all he really needed, before fleeing the room, shirtless, once Song pulled herself up from the floor and out of his way.

“Thank god?” Baek was still in bed, though now sitting with the sheets hastily pulled over his privates. He couldn’t make heads or tails of Song’s reaction. Most brides, the night before the rehearsal dinner, would have smashed the half-drunk champagne bottle over his head by now, but the diminutive princess with which he’d only recently become acquainted seemed to be taking it in stride.

“I thought I was losing it or something. Like, I was terrified you were after my family fortune or this was all some scam, or something... or you just found me repulsive... but you’re just gay... For real, thank god, I’m still hot.” Song tossed her head back, a small laugh building in her throat at the absurdity of it all.

“Right...” Baek found a pair of boxers, and took a seat on the foot of the bed. “So, you’re not angry?”

“God no! I was terrified that I’d have to keep fucking you for the rest of my life!”

“Wait...” As the pieces came together in his mind, Baek was finally getting a clearer picture of his own. “Why did you want to get married then?”

Song plopped down next to the man, and fell backwards onto the bed, her legs still hanging off, giggling at the pure absurdity of the situation. “Look, honestly... I got my heart broken a while ago, and I just kind of impulsively agreed to my mom’s bullshit. Like, in any other circumstance I’d probably just be single forever, but our marriage is a great arrangement for my family, and our business. I’ve fucked plenty of dudes I didn’t really care for, and at least you were nice, you know. What about you though? Clearly you don’t want this.”

“I didn’t say that.” the young doctor replied. “I do want this. It’s the easiest path to living here, and getting out from underneath my father’s thumb. The man actually thinks I’d want to be intimate with a girl just because she has a penis. I think he believes when you get your vagina, that would turn me straight by default. I love him, but he’s never going to be okay with who I am, and I needed out.”

“Wait, you knew I was transgender?” It didn’t go unnoticed by Song that it was the first time she referred to herself as trans, and actually meant it, but that was baggage to unpack in the future.

“Yeah... I thought you knew I knew... That’s why the matchmaker set us up... because of our “unique situations”.” Baek made the air quotes, and Song realized lots of other people were steering the ship, and she was just along for the ride.

“So your plan was to what... cheat on me all the time, and throw me some pity sex on my birthday, while you try not to vomit?”

“What about you?” he shot back defensively. “You’ve made it pretty clear sex with me was appalling... Thank God!” With that last part, Baek did a terrible imitation of Song’s high pitched voice, causing the betrothed to burst out into laughter.

“Yeah...” Song rubbed the dried tear dust from her cheeks, and sat up straight, looking her husband-to-be in the eyes. In them she found a kindred spirit. “I was probably gonna cheat on you a bunch too. I guess we deserve each other.”

“Hey, I still want to do this if you do.” Baek said optimistically. “I understand if you want to call it off, but from what I’m hearing it sounds like we could help each other. Song, I’m not looking for romance, or happily ever after, but I could really use a partner, and while the idea of us having relations is patently absurd, I have to say I think you’re one of the best girls I’ve ever met. Not

only do you have style that could kill, but you also put my sister in her place... effortlessly I might add. If we're both looking for a marriage of convenience, I couldn't think of anyone better."

Song took a moment to digest all the new information, and made a decision. She offered a handshake, and said, "I think I'd like that... Just don't puke when we have to kiss the one time... also, I'm gonna need a pair of your underwear."

The two sat together for another few minutes, sharing small talk, and getting to know each other better in an actually honest way. When Song stood to leave, Baek followed, and wrapped her in a genuinely warm, heartfelt embrace.

As she stepped towards the door, Song muttered to herself, "I guess I better go deal with the other thing I've been letting get too big."

Opening the door, Emily was sitting in the hallway, with puffy bloodshot eyes, while she played some puzzle game on her phone. She looked up to Song, who found a spot beside her, leaning back into the wall, and sliding down to the floor, resting her head on Emily's shoulder, just like she always did back at Zeta house all those years ago.

"I think I'm losing my mind, Emily... For the past month I've been seeing Jae in the mirror, and, like, actually talking to him... and he really fucking sucks. God, he's such a piece of shit..."

Emily gripped Song by the shoulders, and the two girls sat on the floor were facing each other, and for the first time in years, it was like they could truly see each other. Emily, with a knowing smile, couldn't help but chuckle.

"Song, let me tell you a story."

Chapter 11

Emily first began her relationship with Theo under duress, or at least that's what she told herself. Just a short time prior, she was still presenting to the world as a boy named Emmanuel, and Emmanuel was thrust into a relationship with two beautiful girls by a disgruntled retail manager, who in reality was playing dolls with him and his two very male best friends, though best was a stretch. "Only" might have been a better description.

The smaller two boys, aided by a little cosmetic enhancement, were easily sculpted into visions of feminine beauty. Song, the severe goddess in winters on one arm, mirrored Emery, the summery knockout on the other. While as enforced, and unorthodox as the new arrangement was, it was the closest to normal the impoverished teen had ever felt.

Before, Emmanuel never really had much interest in girls, other than a distant appreciation. He'd see a popular girl, sitting towards the front of the class, braiding and unbraiding a strand of hair, before reapplying lip balm in her smartphone camera. It was enrapturing, yet something

never to be approached. He never actually knew her. Compared to the rest of his life, getting into streetfights, dealing with the judgemental stares of neighbors who knew his father was in prison, and committing petty crimes to save his mother the expense of lunch money for a few days, that girl's world was something else entirely, so she was obviously meant to be kept far away from his ilk.

One minute, after Song and Emery's daring incursion into the women's dressing room at The Hangar, Emmanuel was prepared to spend the rest of his life in jail, and though as heavy handed as a punishment like that might have been, instead he was given his first real job on a silver platter, a new wardrobe that would have cost his mother a month's wages, and two gorgeous ladies, one for each arm. The only remote hint that this was supposed to be penance for something was the threat of what would happen if he didn't arrive on-time for work the next day.

While Song and Emery looked just like any other girl he'd ever seen, something different stirred inside Emmanuel. It was as though for the first time in his life he knew what it was like to crave another person. While he couldn't think of any other differences besides the obvious one between their legs, the teen, not quite consciously, decided to shove all those complicated feelings to the back of his mind to deal with later.

Emer had sunk into their new role effortlessly as Emery. The guy who was every guy's best friend, easily became every girl's best gal pal. She reveled in it, the way every strip of fabric draped from her body became a work of art, the way every bouncing curl radiated the fun energy she brought into the world. She was having the time of her life, save the hours spent tutoring her unwanted boyfriend into someone who actually kissed like a person instead of a bowl of jello.

Song on the other hand was quick to protest, seemingly uncomfortable in all spaces. At first, after the transformation, she was a demure creature, a far cry from the snooty, statuesquely challenged boy who tried to dominate every space he entered. It didn't take long though for the girl to find her voice, and soon enough she was the kind of porcelain teen queen, with a vocabulary of daggers, ready to eviscerate the poor fool who got between her and her morning espresso. As often as she protested about her new circumstances, Emmanuel couldn't help but notice the way her cheeks flushed when they touched, or how much she quivered when he made her cum.

While it should have come as no surprise, the troubled teen didn't see the revenge plot coming. Song had been scheming for a little while, and though Emery enjoyed her new life far more than before, even the himbo turned bimbo knew that she deserved more agency in the situation. The pair rightfully pointed out how the bulk of their so-called punishments seemed to actually be a benefit to the tallest of the trio.

As he awakened in that salon chair, the girls had planned to show their captive how they'd evened the score, but when Emmanuel first set eyes on his reflection, and the fog lifted enough

that he could decipher that the girl in the mirror was him, for reasons who couldn't articulate at the time, tears began to form in his eyes.

After a comedy of travel, bickering, and spats, with a little heavy conversation peppered in, Emmanuel agreed that the punishment he'd been receiving compared to the other two was unfair. Like a death row inmate, taking his last steps towards the chair, the new leggy beauty would catch sight of his reflection in a shop window as he approached the date Emery set up, and liked what he saw far more than he thought he was allowed to. Suddenly, that part of his brain that he shared with Song, the one that excelled at rationalization, would kick in, and he'd tell himself sadly, 'You deserve this.'

The first night with Theo was fine, outside of the terror of being discovered, though every person whose path Emmanuel crossed that night, one way or another, made it clear that they saw nothing but the pretty feminine, if tall, creature in the short brown skirt, even the guys she drunkenly tried to fight in a gas station parking lot. The act of kissing the boy wasn't revolting like he feared it would be, but it was still a wholly foreign affair, only made easier by an occasional retreat to a similar act with Emery just a few nights before. What Emmanuel wasn't prepared for though, was the night to end the way it did. Theo's member was knocking on the door of his puckering butthole, and the boy turned girl coped in the most unintentionally healthy way he could. Giving up, Manny let himself just be Emily, and enjoy the things Emily naturally would without any judgment, and that's how the teen finally lost their virginity, in a way they'd never even considered an option before.

Over the course of the evening, Emmanuel learned that Theo's aunt, who was basically his mother, given he'd lived with her his whole life, was his mom's boss. Always the worrier, he began to tell himself a story about his mom losing her job if he didn't play the part that was expected. If the newly dubbed Teddy Bear wanted the perfect girlfriend, that's exactly what the new Emily was going to give him. On top of that, after arriving home, Emmanuel's mom was absolutely thrilled. The two had always been close, but they were never able to speak so easily. After this, Emmanuel told himself he was stuck. He told himself he didn't have any choice but to be Emily.

After being given permission to steer the ship more often, Emily took over in stride. While Emmanuel floated through the halls like a ghost in his junior year, Emily was a welcome sight, especially as far as the plethora of horny teenage boys were concerned. The cool girls were insistent she join them at their picnic table for lunch hour, her popularity only egged on by tales of the weekend, hanging out with her basketball player boyfriend, and his college friends.

Spending time with Teddy was hardly anything but enjoyable. The two shared a love of classic rock, and good food, which the new girlfriend enjoyed far more often than his impoverished life usually allowed. When Emmanuel brought his girlfriends flowers he felt proud that he was being a good partner. When Teddy gave Emily a bouquet it filled her with an indescribable joy that had nothing to do with a role she was supposed to be playing. It was a time when despite her

anxieties attached to the boy she told herself was holding her mother's happiness hostage, her feelings for him only grew, though she'd brush it off as Stockholm syndrome.

Over time, Emily found herself loving being the unofficial mascot for Zeta house, and loving the genuine friendships she was forming with the girls. She loved the effusive praise she got for her cheap, but well coordinated outfits after raiding the thrift store the day she realized Song's purchases might have been quality, but wearing hundred-dollar dresses twenty-four-seven wasn't really sustainable, especially if she wanted to keep them nice. She especially loved how despite her five-foot-eleven supermodel stature before wearing heels, Teddy made her feel like the tiny cute little thing he saw her as. Though it was ascribed to antiquated gender roles, she really liked that she didn't have to be the big man, taking care of everyone else all the time. Of course, Emily never stopped taking care of people, but that mostly consisted of packing Teddy's lunch on Sunday before going home for the week, and cleaning up after all the parties.

All of this happened around the same time that Emmanuel started showing up in the mirror, reminding Emily that one wrong move might piss off the boy, and then everything would be in shambles. Like some looming spectre, he was the personification of a feeling that Emily wasn't allowed to be happy - that she wasn't allowed to enjoy her new life. It was supposed to be a punishment. Hindsight would tell her that she never felt like she was allowed to get what she wanted, and the fear of losing it all, twisted her perspective into having to see it as a weight around her neck when it was the wings carrying her off to a better future.

All of this came to a head the night that Theo's former best friend made a pass at her, and got punched in the face by the former street tough for his efforts. Presented with two stories, Teddy had to choose between his best friend, and the girl he'd only been dating for a few months. It wasn't even a decision. Floored, Emmanuel could see for the first time that Theo wasn't lying. He truly loved Emily more than anything, the young puppy love that it was. That was the last time Emmanuel tried to drive the car, letting Emily take the wheel, and she let herself lunge towards the handsome hunk of a man she craved so badly. Of course, nothing in the teen's tortured mind could ever be perfect, so the looming axe was moved from Theo to his Aunt, Emily's mother's boss, Bethany. The mirror manifestation of Emmanuel would still pop up from time to time, but it was easier for the blossoming beauty to laugh it off as time went by.

When Emily started her freshman year, now officially a Zeta, and a middle of the road English major, she had her entire life laid out before her. Step one, graduate. Step two, marry Teddy Bear. Step three, buy a house, and get a job teaching somewhere. With a positive attitude, she optimistically assumed step four or five would be moving her mother in, and letting the woman finally rest. All was going according to plan until the end of her first semester.

Over Christmas break, separated from their social circle, the couple was curled up in bed in Emily's messy room, while the girl helped Theo type up his resume to start sending it off to potential employers. She didn't think it served much of a purpose that far out from graduation, but Teddy had a sense of urgency she'd rarely seen, so she wasn't about to douse his fire.

“All done.” Emily said, saving, and emailing the doc to her beau. “Hopefully you get some bites, but it might be a bit early though. I doubt anybody is going to want to hire you for a job you can’t start for at least six months. Any particular reason for the rush?”

“I just wanna make sure I’m ready to give you everything you deserve, babe. A job that pays us enough that you don’t have to worry about working. Making anywhere we live a home, giving you time for hobbies or whatever you like. I’m picturing coming home from work, you, stress free, eating cheese poofs from a bag and still in your pajamas or... selfishly I can imagine you all dolled up, sending me nudes through the day, and then just ravishing you when I get home. That is what I see for our future, doesn’t that sound great?”

Rather than wait for an answer, the eager boy started kissing the top of his girlfriend’s head gently, before flipping her over to straddle him, and planting his lips into hers before she had a chance to reply. As the boy’s tongue snuck past her lips, Emily might have been a girl without a vagina, but she knew at that moment that if she did, it would have been bone dry.

“Teddy Bear, can we just cuddle tonight?” she managed to get out, once her eager beau finally gave her a chance to breathe. “I think I’m starting to get a headache.” Emily started to feel like she could hear her own heartbeat. She felt as though her blood pressure might spike, and then burst out of her ears.

“Of course, babe.” he replied, pulling the young woman he loved into a tight embrace, leaving Emily to stare at the wall, and wonder what the hell just happened. It was the first time Theo was ever raring to go, and her engine just refused to start.

A month later, up in Theo’s bedroom, after a night out where she noticed just how loud the boy could be, Emily felt his hand start massaging her lady dick through the paper thin skirt she wore to the club. It didn’t stir. The momentary heartbreak on Teddy’s face was enough for her to profusely assure him that sometimes it just didn’t work, especially the longer she was on hormones.

After a moment of conversation with herself, Emily thought, ‘Well, it’s not like we don’t have to use lube anyway.’

Not giving her tipsy partner time to think, she quickly dressed his raging hardon in a rubber, spread the slippery substance all over it, and then hopped on. That night she mastered a new feminine skill all of Bianca’s coaching had never prepared her for - faking an orgasm. The sex felt good enough, but something was missing, and that something was apparently the thing that let Emily actually finish.

This cycle continued through the early spring, to a party at Epsilon house, themed in angels and devils. It was the last big blowoff before time to cram for finals, so the entirety of the frat, the sorority, and a solid chunk of the rest of the campus was in attendance. Youthful debauchery was in the air.

Always the party mother, Emily, dressed in tall wedges, with a white ribbon strap, classy opera length gloves because why not, a white tube dress, adorned with wings, and a halo hovering on a wire above her teased ponytail, made her way around the party, swapping empty cups for full ones. It was after dumping an arm full of trash, that she turned around and found herself face to face with a young man sporting a close cropped beard, dressed in a red suit, with two red horns poking out of his shaggy hair.

"I'm sorry to startle you." he said, as Emily caught her breath. He took a slight step back to show he didn't mean any harm. "I just saw you walking around the party, and I thought I would be a fool if I didn't seize the once in a lifetime opportunity to introduce myself to you. Hi, my name is Chuck. I really like your wings. Very interesting."

As thrifty as ever, Emily had recycled a pair of butterfly wings from an old halloween costume, glueing on the remaining feathers from a few down pillows that had seen better days. They didn't look quite right, but in a way that gave them their own kind of charm.

The boy offered a grin, as he extended his hand politely. Emily didn't quite know what to make of it. It was not even two years before when in the very same room she had her fateful encounter with Porkchop, Theo's former best friend. Unlike that time, the strange gentleman had yet to grab her, so she didn't feel nearly as on edge. If anything, his general clumsiness in approach she found quite charming.

Gingerly shaking his hand, Emily replied, "Well, thank you... Hi, Chuck. I'm Emily. It's nice to meet you... and you should know, my boyfriend is out back, playing cornhole."

"Oof!" Chuck mimed a dagger to the heart, as he playfully stumbled backwards. Returning to his feet, he was pleased to at least see a smile on his pursuit's face. "Of course a girl like you has already got a boyfriend. I mean, how could you not? Can't blame a guy for trying, right? Ships that pass in the night, and speak each other in passing... Have a nice night, Emily. It was a pleasure to meet you."

"Longfellow?" Emily shook his hand goodbye one more time, only to find herself not letting go. "Are you in the English program here? I've never seen you before."

"Oh no," the boy replied, his hand still bouncing up and down, "I live in Vancouver... Washington, not British Columbia... I graduated a few years ago... but I grew up here. My grandma just died, so I flew in with my mom. That was a few weeks ago, but estate shit takes forever. I was dying of boredom when a buddy dragged me to this party."

Finally letting the boy's hand go, Emily sat on the edge of the kitchen counter. With a skeptical smirk, she said, "You look a little well prepared for this to have been last minute."

“Oh this?” Chuck playfully asked, as he pridefully stroked the fabric of the red skinny tie, of his bold ensemble. “I just had it lying around.”

In response he only received a sideways glance.

“No, seriously.” Amused by the girl’s dynamic face, Chuck could hardly contain himself, as he giggled like a little kid. “I play sax in a ska band, and it’s like a stage look thing.”

“...and the horns?” Emily continued her path of inquiry, as she playfully pointed to the cheap plastic adorning his head.

“Party city...”

The two strangers looked into each other’s eyes, as they shared a moment of connection. It was Emily who broke the silence.

“I guess I can forgive you for playing the devil’s music, since you tried harder for this party than most of the guys. That’s a good look on you.”

Chuck took a step closer, matching Emily’s grinning countenance. “Ska is gonna make a comeback, I’m telling you. By the way, any guy would be a fool not to put in the effort, with you looking as good as you do.”



As Chuck slowly made his approach, giving Emily plenty of time to tell him to stop, she thought she shouldn't, but she wanted him to. The cute expression on his face, the shaggy mop of hair, the casual if only slightly pretentious use of classic poetry, and even the aged aroma of the fabric of his vintage suit, all of it had Emily lusting for the boy in a way she hadn't felt in months. It was the revival of a part of her she was beginning to wonder might be long dead. Only when his lips briefly grazed hers did she fully realize where things were heading. It was then she jerked back with such force to smack the back of her head on the cabinets, taking the building mood, and killing it, stabbing it in the liver once extra for good measure.

"I'm sorry, Chuck. You seem really nice... and you're very hot, but like I said, I've got a boyfriend."

Proving to be just as nice as she'd accused, Chuck hurried to the freezer, and filled a cast off plastic bag with ice, before handing it to the angel, nursing her bump. "It's fine. I completely understand. I just felt something for a minute there. My mistake. It was a pleasure to meet you, Emily." As he sadly walked to the doorway, Chuck turned back one last time. "Two ships in the night."

'Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit!' Emily screamed inside, as she hurried to the bathroom, slamming, and locking the door behind her. She pressed the ice against the swelling, nervously sliding a fingernail through her eyebrow notch, as she gazed into the mirror, only for the first time in months to have Emmanuel show up.

"What the hell are you doing?!" he screamed, while his counterpart paused to consider brain damage, before realizing this had always been a thing. "If Theo finds out, Bethany is going to fire mom. She'll be out on the street, and you'll have to support her on a next to nothing retail wage. How the hell are you going to do that, and finish school? This whole year will have basically been a waste. Get the fuck out there, and make sure your man knows you love him, or else."

As Emily gazed at the young man in her reflection, he looked just as beat up as she felt. The notch in her eyebrow that she'd grown to love for its character, was still the open wound, fresh from that fight. He had a black eye, and busted lip. Seeing Emmanuel in that state was a stark reminder of where she came from.

Nervously, she nodded in agreement, unable to contain building tears any longer. Trying to fight it back the entire time, she cried for five minutes. Finally catching her breath, Emily fled from the bathroom, and hurried to Teddy's, so she could repair the damage to her makeup before anyone saw. All of the complicated feelings were there. She couldn't ignore them, but her best hope was to stuff them all down, just like she did when she was little, and her dad went away. There just wasn't room to have them.

Hey, babe!" Theo shouted, as he came barreling into his room, while his girlfriend sat applying one final layer of lip gloss. "I just got great news! I'm getting that job up in Oakland!"

Emily replaced the applicator into its little tube, then turned to face her boyfriend. He was wearing a sheet in the same arrangement he wore to the toga party earlier that year. When prodded about his choice in garment, it was met with a shrug, and the half-hearted explanation, "I'm, like, St. Peter, babe." The only thing that half-saved the outfit was a coat hanger halo Emily quickly threw together at the last minute, though it was half-ruined by the letter jacket Theo wore on top.

"Did they call you this late?" she asked as her eyes scanned the alarm clock.

"Dewey called. He's my bro who graduated before we met. Said he could get me on, and he wasn't lying. The pay's real good, so like, you can probably just drop out, and move with me. It'll be so fucking awesome. We can get a dog, and some new furniture, and like some good kitchen stuff, and maybe a pool table. I'm gonna get a barbecue..."

While the intoxicated man swayed in place, continuing to list every tiny aspiration for his future, Emily felt the metaphorical shackle around her tighten with each word. The crushing sensation

squeezed, and squeezed, and squeezed, until a phrase popped out she never thought she'd actually utter.

"Theo, I think we should break up!"

Once again, holding back the urge to cry, Emily stood horrified, and yet somehow she also felt relieved. It was like the dam had finally broken, and the village had already drowned, so what was there left to worry about.

"Theo..." the near graduate muttered. He couldn't remember the last time he'd heard Emily call him that. It was like a blow to the skull, one so jarring he could hardly process the rest of her words. "Wait... what...? But, babe, I thought things were good."

As the feelings poured out of Emily, her thoughts were proving just as hard to contain. "Teddy, I'm sorry, but I just don't love you like that anymore. Like, you'll always be important to me. You're the guy I gave my virginity to after all. It's just... Well, I know you've been thinking about our future, and that's because you're such a wonderful guy who just wants to take care of me, but I don't want those things. I want to stay here with my friends, and graduate. I want to meet new people, and do more stupid shit, you know? Like, you're talking about happily ever after, but I feel like my story is just beginning, and I can't walk away from it now. I'm really sorry."

When Emily gazed up at the gentle giant's tearful face, she could hardly believe she was the cause. The look made her feel like she had just cut him wide open. The young man had been the largest part of her life for years. The relationship may have begun as a setup, tainted by sex on the first date, but it blossomed into something else entirely. The smile on Theo's face when they simply held hands as they walked across campus, the random texts just saying how he was thinking about her, that had been her every day- her stability. One second she started talking, and before she knew it she'd just blown up her entire life, and stranger still, even though every fiber of her being was telling her to take it back, she just couldn't bring herself to. Instead, she stood from her seat, and fled all the way back to Zeta house, where she curled up in bed crying. Meanwhile, Emmanuel became a constant presence in every reflection she passed, freaking out just as hard as she was. While both were terrified of what was to come, neither was sure of just exactly what that was.

That first night curled up in bed became three, the only thing changing being Emily's pajamas, and the amount of cheese puff dust staining them. Every so often a sister would pop in, offering comfort to the newly single Zeta. Britney kindly told her, "Just because you were the one to break it off doesn't mean you're not allowed to be sad about it. You guys were together for a long time. There'd be something wrong with you if you weren't upset right now."

While she only received quivering sobs as a reply, the words sunk into the freshman's mind. If only they didn't have the counterpoint of a beat up Emmanuel Brooks telling her what a dumb bitch she was for screwing everything up.

“God, would you shut up?!” Emily whined at her reflection, as the Sunday evening sun hung low in the sky.

“I didn’t say anything.” Jenn, Emily’s first roommate, said, as she pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose, not once taking her eyes off her computer monitor.

“Oh, right, sorry. I was talking to my... self...”

For Emily it was strange to refer to Emmanuel as such. He certainly didn’t look much like her - like a delinquent brother maybe, but definitely not the popular goofball she’d grown into. He definitely didn’t act like her either, but for the previous few days she was just as moody.

Pulling herself upright, pondering the fastest meal she could get without having to travel further than the kitchen, suddenly Emily’s phone rang. When the number came up, Ahuva Bahyeet, the hotel where her mother worked, the brunette beauty’s mind went into full panic mode.

“Mom, is everything okay? Why are you calling me from work... Did you lose your phone again? Wait... Why are you working on the weekend?”

“Emily?” a familiar voice asked, before continuing, “Emily, this is Bethany Long.”

It was Theo’s aunt, basically Theo’s mother, who also happened to be the operations manager at the Ahuva Bahyeet hotel, and Lauren Brooks’ direct supervisor.

“Hi... Bethany... Umm...” It was the moment Emily had been dreading, the moment Emmanuel had been warning her about for nearly two years. Emily had finally fallen short in her duties as Teddy’s perfect girlfriend, and her mother was about to face the consequences. “I guess you heard about me and Teddy... Theo...”

“Oh yes, I was sad to hear about the end of your romance, but you’re both young. You’ll bounce back.” Emily heard some papers shuffling through the receiver. “Anyway,” the woman said dismissively, like the topic was not worth dwelling on, “I had to come in this weekend to address a shortfall in our schedule. One of our staff, Harmony... She left without any notice, and while I’ve got most of her hours covered, I need someone to cover the front desk on weekends, and one or two short evening shifts. Your mother told me you’d probably be interested, and when I called your workplace for a reference, a Miss Bianca practically begged me to save you from quote, “retail hell”.”

“Oh wow...” Emily left things hanging in the air for a moment. While that’s normally not the best thing to do when a person offers someone a job, she was too busy watching Emmanuel in the mirror, for once without something to say, slowly fading away into nothing. “Sure, I’d be thrilled to come work at the hotel!”

Her excitement evident, more from the weight leaving her shoulders than the new position, Bethany was pleased to hear the eagerness in her new employee.

“Technically you’ll be working under your mother, but you won’t be working the same shifts, so I don’t think there’s a conflict of interest there. Mostly she’ll just be making your schedule, and just a warning, you’re going to have the worst one to start. You remember the hours Lauren used to work around five years ago?”

“No, that’s fine.” Emily happily agreed. “Gotta start somewhere, right?”

“That’s exactly what I like to hear.” Clicking a few keys, Bethany continued, “The position starts in about a month. We could use you now, but the HR process takes time, so we should be able to get you in just before the summer season begins. That is my problem, so you’ll have time to give The Hangar notice. Piercings, bright hair colors, and visible tattoos are fine, but we insist that at all times you maintain a professional, put-together appearance. We’ll provide your uniform blouse, but you’ll need to arrive the first day with a knee-length black pencil skirt, black tights, and black dress flats. The position is part time, and doesn’t have benefits, though I believe you still qualify on your mother’s plan, so that shouldn’t be a problem. Do you have any questions?”

“No, ma’am, none.” Emily could feel the years of tension pour out of her body.

“Excellent. I’ll be in touch. Your new hire packet will be arriving in the mail. If anything comes to mind, I’m always a phone call away.” It was then that the tone in the woman’s voice became something kinder, no longer professionally distant, the voice she normally heard her speak in around Teddy. “I am sorry to hear about things not working out with you and my nephew, but you should know, I have always thought very highly of you. Have a great evening.”

“You too.”

It was an unusually chipper goodbye for the blond hospitality professional, though one that did even more to ease Emily’s worries. The freshman approaching the end of the year could hardly believe it, but the turn of events left her no other option but to believe it. It also left the former boy to face a few difficult truths she’d been refusing to see. Sitting back down on the edge of her bed, she was left to ponder her circumstances.

‘If she was never going to fire my mom over that, then why the hell...?’

Like a ton of bricks, it all hit her at once. Suddenly Emily realized that the looming threat- the proverbial guillotine hanging over his mother’s job, set to come down with the full force of gravity, should the boy turned girl ever break Teddy’s heart, wasn’t there. Not only that, but it was never really there in the first place. Sure, Song and Emery might have instigated her first makeover, and set up the blind date with Theo, but ever since that night, every step she’d taken to remain as Emily, to be Teddy’s girlfriend, was a step she’d taken all on her own.

'I mean, of course she wasn't going to fire mom... Of course my mom got that job because she was the best candidate... I wasn't even giving her any credit...'

As a child, the former Emmanuel had to watch the police kick in her door, and drag her father away because he broke the rules, and he had to be punished. That's what people told him, trying to make sense of a very complicated situation to a little kid. In the aftermath, while most kids had a hard time understanding the importance of some things, the young Brooks assigned the highest level of importance to everything.

Every bad decision was a calamity. Living as a teen in poverty, it was obvious that her mother was stretched as thin as possible. The parent and child only shared breakfast before Lauren was off running from one job to another, or doing gig work between naps. It got to the point that the child decided to never ask for anything, feeling too guilty to rob her mother of the extra time to sleep without having to sign into the apps. Using her resourcefulness, sometimes a rule had to be broken to get by, so every time enough courage was mustered to break them, every possible contingency had to be weighed first. Not wanting to dump that mess on her mother, she got really good at putting on a mask, and keeping those feelings inside. They might not have been seen by others, but they shaped every decision she ever made.

Realizing that nothing was forcing her to be a girl, and that she could go back whenever she wanted to, the nineteen-year-old young lady recoiled at the thought. At first she tried to make the excuse that losing the daughter she'd grown so close to would hurt her mother, but then again she realized she was stepping out of observable reality. She wasn't taking responsibility for what she wanted. Happy for only a moment, Emily returned to bed, hiding under the covers, saddled with a new kind of self-loathing - imposter syndrome.

Too tired for more tears, she curled a pillow into her breasts. 'I'm going to go talk to someone tomorrow.'

The next day, after classes ended, Emily's anxieties were occupied by thoughts of studying for finals, but she forced herself to head to the campus peer-counseling offices in the student union, like she promised herself she would the night before. Nervously seated in an awkwardly short chair, the girl's extensions clicked on her phone screen in the empty waiting room, while she tried to distract herself from the complicated ideas she'd been plagued with since her meltdown.

"Emily Brooks?" the counselor asked, as they swung around the corner, holding a clipboard.

When Emily looked up, she didn't expect to see a person with a shaved head, wearing harem pants, a t-shirt with the neck cut out, hanging down off one shoulder, and bright red lipstick, with bold winged eyeliner.

"Hi, I'm Joey. They/Them. You're She/Her, right?"

Emily nodded, hoping her surprise wasn't as apparent as her insecurity.

The nonbinary counselor pleasantly smiled. "Follow me."

In short order Emily found herself sitting in an old wooden chair with cushions tied to the backrest spokes, tucked into what she had to assume was the smallest office on campus.

"So, Emily," Joey began, flipping through the girl's intake paperwork clipped in their clipboard, "what brings you in today? It looks like you checked LGBT+, and that's why they paired us. Have you been struggling with your sexuality, or...?"

"Oh, um... no... I guess..."

While the nervous girl crushed the pleats of her casual skirt in her long fingers, struggling to finish her thought, Joey was quick to offer some assurance. "Take your time. I'm in no hurry. Just know this is a safe space, and anything you say here stays between us. I won't judge you."

Emily took a deep breath, and then began to speak. "So, I guess I started my transition about two years ago. Like, it's almost to the point that the doctor says I'm cooked, and then I'll just develop like any other girl until I'm twenty-five, but I guess I won't get any shorter."

"Neither will Gwendoline Christie..."

Despite feeling anything but happy, Emily found herself snickering a little. "Yeah, I guess you're right... but, like, I'm just worried that I'm not really a girl. Like, what if I'm just a boy, but I don't want to be because my life as a boy sucked so bad? Like... what if I'm just a coward, running from pain?"

"I remember being a kid, and my dad getting locked up, and my mom saying to me, "Emmanuel, you're the man of the house now. I need you to be strong, and take care of me. Can you do that?" Of course I said yes, but, like, what if I was just too scared to be that, and when the opportunity to be a girl became a thing, I was just hiding from my responsibilities?"

Joey paused for a moment, their heart breaking from the blossoming young woman who was clearly in a lot of pain. After collecting their thoughts, they first tried to offer comfort to their patient, eagerly awaiting any wisdom with wide-eyed hopefulness.

"Well, first off Emily, this goes without saying, but it sounds like you need to hear it. Nobody gets to decide your gender, but you. It's a personal thing, and for me to tell you one way or another would be disingenuous. I can tell you about other people's experiences they've shared with me though. A lot of trans people report the same worries that you're describing. You can blame that one on the patriarchy, and the internalized sexism, and transphobia that comes with it. The idea that being a man is living up to some kind of responsibility, on its face it's kind of absurd, right?"

Let me ask you this. How does your mom feel about her daughter? Does she seem to love you any less than when she thought you were her son?”

Emily thought about it for a moment. “No, I guess not. We’re actually closer than ever.”

“And since you’ve transitioned, have you stopped being there to support her however you can?”

“No... not really...”

“Emily, when your mom said that to you, I believe she was trying to give her child hope, and courage, but unfortunately, she also gave you some baggage to go with it. She didn’t realize she was saying something nobody would normally say to their little girl. Of course that doesn’t mean she was trying to hurt you. She made a mistake. Moms are people. Sometimes they don’t have all the information, and they fuck up too.

“Look, that discomfort in your previous life as a boy, that sounds a lot like gender dysphoria. If I was a betting person, I’d say you’re not a failed man. You’re just a girl... an average ordinary girl who dealt with a lot of trauma in your developmental years, and you’re presently dealing with the fallout of that. Congratulations. You’re a normal person. If I was going to make a suggestion or two, I’d say one, you definitely need to start meeting with a therapist- someone who can help you work through that trauma. I mean, it took nineteen years to build up, so it’s not going to just go away over night. Second, it sounds to me like you arrange so much of your life around other people, and their needs. When was the last time you asked yourself what Emily wanted? When you leave here, contact a therapist, and treat yourself. That is my recommendation... and of course, you can always come back and see me if you need to.”

“Uh... thanks...” As Emily stood to leave the room, just as she was about to reach the door, she turned back, and threw her arms around the nonbinary advisor, tears streaming down her cheeks. It was the first time she could remember somebody giving her permission to want something.

Feeling empowered, and determined to find the part of herself that she felt was missing, Emily’s first stop after leaving the peer-counseling office was the campus drugstore. Armed with the wishful thinking of the average teenage girl, she bought two boxes of purple hair dye, and went home optimistically.

In an explosion of grape colored chaos, Emily managed to coat her hair in the substance, as well as a few bathroom fixtures. While the color processed, burning her nose just a little, she scrolled through her phone, searching for the pieces of herself she let fall away while entangled with her ex-boyfriend.

A text to Emery was met with a quick reply, the blond always eager for another night out of the town. While she talked to Bianca at work often, it had been ages since the last time the two

enjoyed a shopping excursion. It was when she scrolled to Song that memories of her former partner flooded her mind.

Song could be a pain in the ass, and her feelings with Emily always seemed hot and cold. One minute she was forcefully feminizing her former boyfriend, and the next she was sending her a thirst text just before last call. While Emily could easily find herself frustrated with the smug little lady, it was Song who she related to the most. Both had dealt with seemingly endless rejection. Both felt they had the weight of their parent's expectations on their shoulders. Both could feel alone in a crowded room. On top of that, the pair shared many intimate moments when they were together, as coerced as that situation was, that couldn't be faked. Somewhere along the line, the tall girl realized just how much she missed her friend, and the thought occurred to her that she could do something about it.

Riding her recent high, Emily decided that the moment she got home for the summer, she was going to reach out to Song. It had to be last minute, otherwise the Asian-American princess might find an excuse to back out before they met up. Fully determined, with her nose burning from the fumes of the hair dye, the girl made a decision. One way or another, she was going to drag Song out of her shell, and help her see just how wonderful she really was, flaws and all. Briefly she realized she was still trying to solve someone else's problems, but after a moment of reflection she realized that's what *she* wanted to do, and doing what she wants was exactly what she was supposed to be doing. The memory of a rare genuine smile from Song as the two cuddled on the couch together, wholly unlike the ones she forced on her face in public, was all the fuel she needed.

Chapter 12

"See, you're not that crazy." Emily said, resting her cheek atop Song's head, which had found its way to her shoulder, while the smaller girl nervously fidgeted with the plastic crown she'd pulled from her coif just a moment earlier. The bottle blond had just finished her tale, recounting the first time her and her on-again-off-again bestie had lost touch for years, and she was starting to feel like they were finally bringing the second to a close. "What I'm saying is that those boys in the mirror aren't real. They never were. They were just our traumatized minds scrambling to make sense of things. They were the parts of us that tell us that we're not worthy, but I can assure you, those idiots are big ole liars. Oftentimes to others, but mostly to themselves."



Song felt like she could breathe for the first time in ages. As she cuddled with her friend, the young bride couldn't help but notice the difference. Before, she held a carnal yearning when they touched, but on this occasion, Song just felt safe. It was like time had already healed her broken heart, but she couldn't let go of her resentment long enough to notice. The realization struck that Song wasn't angry anymore, and she wasn't looking for romance either. Like Emily, she also just wanted her friend back.

"You just always seemed like you had your shit together. Everything was so perfect...everything you do is perfect. I just wanted half of your confidence."

Emily scoffed. The idea of any part of her life being described as "together" she found completely absurd. "Bitch, are you kidding me? I'm a walking, talking mess. I had a boy who might have been a little dumb, but he worshiped the ground that I walked on. After that, I had you, a stunning wrecking ball of a woman anybody would be lucky to have. Instead, I only seem to be attracted to giant pieces of shit. Literal giants, metaphorical pieces of shit. Probably Daddy issues, right? Conner didn't have to work, by the way. We got into a fight over some stupid thing. He didn't like the way I looked at him while I was on the phone with our boss, and I still have no clue what the fuck he was talking about. I didn't know when he wrapped his hands around my throat for the third time, either. I left most of my shit, but I got the important stuff, and I'm never

going back to that apartment. Like, I'm gonna pay someone to just get the rest for me, and if they miss something, I'll call it, and that shitty Ikea kitchen set he knows he didn't pay for, a necessary sacrifice.

"Right now, I'm just trying to fight the urge to blow up his whole fucking career by telling the president. The worst part is this isn't even the first time. Back during the campaign, he and I were talking. I could have seen the red flags then, but then he blew me off for some girl we had working the phones. Between him, every guy I dated had those same red flags, gaslighting me all the time, and making me feel like everything was my fault. I don't know why it's so easy to convince me that I deserve to suffer, but apparently I can smell out the ones who are primed to take advantage of that. By the time we'd gotten settled, and we were established, when Conner assured me he'd sewn his wild oats, compared to the endless parade of swiping through douchebags, he was looking pretty good. Little did I know he'd actually been honing his craft in that time, and he is now the most proficient douchebag to ever ply the fucking trade. All because of a chiseled jawline, Song... Can you believe it?"

"Girl, I'm sorry." Song said, looking up to her friend with tearful eyes. "I had no idea you were dealing with that."

Emily returned a warm smile, having already wasted enough tears on her recent ex. "Seriously, it's fine. I didn't say anything about it because I was embarrassed, and this weekend is supposed to be about you."

"If the president would fire him, I'd definitely tell her. He fucking deserves it."

"Yeah... he does... and she definitely would. All I'd have to do was just bat my eyelashes. I know she loves her husband, but like you, that lady is also a little gay. I thought my story genuinely moved her when we first met, but now I'm pretty sure I only got that job because she wanted to fuck me." In just a few years, Emily had long grown jaded with the American political system, especially after actually getting to know the prominent trans woman she once put up on a pedestal. Reagan Arnault was the best vehicle to get necessary social changes enacted, but her press secretary no longer harbored any illusions about the first transgender president's motivations. "Song, for real, I don't think I have room to ever call you selfish again. The sheer volume of narcissism exuding from that woman, let alone her prick husband, would make your head spin. First Gentleman, my ass... The first horndog is more like it."

"God, I fucking missed you." Song spouted, hardly able to contain herself. She collapsed onto Emily's lap, and wrapped her arms around her waist.

"I missed you too." Emily gently stroked her fingers through Song's disheveled hair. "For real, I know you struggle with the being a girl thing too. Like, what are the actual odds of all three of the people Bianca set out to punish actually being a girl the whole time?"

"I don't know." Song rolled onto her back, looked up into Emily's eyes, her face painting a picture of her mind pondering the question without a pen or paper. "Well the odds of being trans is like point-eight percent, so, like, one in four-fifty-ish... or is it three in four-fifty-ish...? Whatever, that's actually not that strange. You're less likely to win the lottery, or die from the flu... or even get struck by lightning for that matter. Sometimes though, I wonder if all this gender stuff is just a lot more squishy than we realize."

"Squishy, you say?" Emily teased. "Alright, Emery..."

"I've been called worse." Song giggled.

"I think for me it was like," Emily forced a short breath through her nose, trying to order her thoughts, and only moderately succeeding, "I was always looking for an excuse not to go back. For you, it just seemed like you resented Bianca for taking away some kind of power. Otherwise, you're a hot bitch, you know it, and you're obviously proud of it. I mean, the way you walk around everyday in those ridiculous shoes I'd totally steal if your feet weren't so small... refusing to be seen with a single hair out of place, or picture perfect makeup. It's just who you are, and you love it. Your obstinate ass just didn't like being told you had to."

Song's lipstick covered lips pressed together, as she briefly considered her friend's point of view. "There was mom too." Song admitted. "I couldn't let myself go back because she was finally in my life again, and I didn't want to lose that." The girl, processing a decade of bottled emotions took a deep quivering breath.

"Bullshit." Emily shot back her reply with a sideways smirk. "Grace might have made a few passive aggressive comments, and punished you in some petty way, I'm sure, but she'd have gotten over it, and you know it. That woman might have gotten wrapped up in her work when you started showing your ass, and being a delinquent, and it felt like a longer time than it was because we were younger, I think, but she has always cared more about you so much more than anything else. It's just super obvious. If anything she's fucking smothering. I'm honestly surprised she doesn't have a tit in your mouth right now. You weren't worried about losing your mom. You just like singing karaoke with her, and that's fine."

"Yeah, maybe you're right..." Pulling herself upright, Song stood up, and offered Emily a hand. "Either way, however I got here, I know what I want now, and I'm tired of being ashamed of it."

Emily took the girl's hand, and pulled herself off the ground, before dusting off the dark fabric of her blouse. Looking at the diminutive princess she was so fond of, she pulled Song into a tight hug. "You're my best friend."

"You're *my* best friend." Song replied, smiling, but with a hint of venom, like she was still trying to one-up the least likely Washington elite in history.

“Hey!” a familiar voice whined, as a certain ditzzy blond turned the corner from the stairs. Emery whimpered, “What about me?”

“Bitch, c’mon,” Song chuckled, “of course you’re our best friend too.”

Two arms parted, making way for another in the warm embrace of three old friends, all having grown and changed in many different ways over the years, and not just the curves. After a moment, it was an excited Emery that broke the silence.

“I’ve been looking for you two! Do you have the goods?”

“If by goods you mean my fiance’s boxers, then yes.” Song answered, dangling the undergarments, pinched between her fingers. “What about you? Any luck on the foreigner?”

The first answer Song got from the bimbo was a giddy little smirk before she pulled a wadded pair from her purse. “Yeah, I found a tourist in the lobby, and I think he was from Germany, or Russia... or maybe Cuba, or something.”

Emily playfully asked, “How do you know? Did you get a look at his passport?”

Considering the question, as much as Emery considered most things, she gazed up and to the left as she earnestly responded, “Well, he might have been faking the accent, but he was definitely uncircumcised.”

Feeling like weight had been lifted, Song listened to her two friends banter as they made their way back to Emery and Mary’s suite, where the party was in full force, and the reluctant hostess, Rim Beauty’s newest store manager, was three sheets to the wind. When her partner arrived in the last team to return, the smug look on the blond’s face told the woman she loved everything.

“Of course you got the groom’s boxers, Emery,” Mary spat, “you had the only teammate with a key to the room. Think about it. How is that fair?”

“All I hear is excuses. You always think I cheat.” her partner replied. “Now you know how I feel when we have a tickle fight. You’re too strong.”

While Emery pouted, her partner’s heart thumped, and she tackled her love to the floor, before planting a dozen kisses all over the girl’s face, while some of the older salon ladies rolled their eyes at the carnal youthful display taking place on the green high-pile carpet. They were just there for the free drinks at that point, anyway. Song snickered to herself, knowing that at least in some ways, Emery wasn’t as dumb as everyone thought she was.

When Mary finally let Emery off the floor, still giggling like a toddler, the trans girl ran off to the bathroom, her bladder at its limit. Meanwhile, the Vietnamese-American tormenter, in pink dog-eared pigtails, set her sights on her love's bestie.

The aroma of tequila on her breath, she threw an arm around the Rim heiress' neck, and pulled her in close. Looking hard at Song, Mary spoke loud, but slurred. "You have to hear the truth... You are a massive bitch... but sometimes I see you... and I think that is our bitch... but you are still a bitch, but, bitch... I love you for it... well sometimes... because you can be a real bitch, but Emery fucking loves you like a sister... so I guess I do too."

The intoxicated manager planted a kiss on top of Song's head, after holding her in something of a headlock for a moment. Mary eventually released her grip, leaving Song, hair-mussed, watching her sorority sisters huddled around the karaoke machine. While Stacy was insistent they all do a Kelly Clarkson song, the others had their own ideas. It brought a smile to the bride's face, as the scene brought her back to the constant loving bickering of Zeta house. The salon ladies were all thrilled with the long weekend. Their constant hum from the shop had the volume cranked up to eleven. A few bottles from the vineyard were out on the coffee table, but without the class, or the glasses. Instead, a sleeve of small cardboard cups served that purpose.

After finding a chair, Song sat back, and took it all in. The chaos of the gathering still held a kind of warmth, bringing a smile to her face. While Emily spoke of the loneliness they shared, it was impossible to deny that that wasn't an issue anymore. There was no stronger evidence for this than the woman who once saw Song as an irredeemable monster, that now viewed her as family. With rosy cheeks, Eun, who was a good head taller than the bride, plopped down onto her adopted little sister, squishing her underneath.

"You look happy, little one, but not comfortable to sit on." she said, booping her on the nose, while Song struggled to adjust, and find a position where she could breath. "Are you going to sing for us?"

"Oh, you have to!" Emily interjected, seemingly appearing from nowhere, with stars in her eye at the prospect of hearing a number from the talented bride-to-be.

"I'm not a chair." Song answered nervously. "And I don't think anybody wants to hear that."

Ironically, the only talent Song could demonstrate any amount of humility for was the one where she excelled the most. Unfortunately for her, the only two people in the room that knew for a fact that she actually had the voice of an angel were the ones she was trying to convince otherwise. They weren't having it.

"Nope. I don't like that." Eun got up, sending pins and needles into Song's legs, before grabbing her hands, and trying to pull her up. "Who are you, and what have you done with that cocky bitch I call sis?"

Meanwhile, Emily, while she agreed with Eun, could see the strain on Song's face. On mildly wobbly legs, she effortlessly lifted Song up from the chair, and let her feet dangle to the floor. Once they'd found their foundation, she whispered in her ear, "You don't have to, but I'd love to hear it. Go splash some water on your face, and then decide."

Song looked Emily in the eyes, and tried to come up with another excuse, but all she could do was nod her head silently. When the five-foot-eleven young woman relinquished her hold, Song grabbed her purse, and headed for the bathroom. A few deep breaths came first, followed by a look into the mirror, where Jae was standing there waiting, eyes glued to his phone like always.

"Is Mommy's wittle star gonna go sing a song?" he asked, condescending baby talk dripping from every word.

Song clenched her teeth, and balled a fist. Only the modicum of sobriety that remained kept her from swinging it at a mirror. "You know, you're such a prick. In the past seven years, I've dealt with a mountain of guys like you, and one thing I've learned is that sometimes you have to tell the asshole to fuck off... so fuck off. I need to fix my lipstick. My audience awaits."

As the sneering waste of space dissipated into nothing, Song uncapped the crimson tube, and perfectly applied the waxy substance to her kisser, feeling more badass than she ever did before she had breasts. From there, she headed out into the suite's little living room, where the machine was waiting. Searching through the catalog, the bride's thoughts were on the girl who should have been Emery's co-maid of honor. Starting the track, she found Emily sitting in an arm chair, and zeroed in on her target. That was when she serenaded the leggy beauty, making sure she felt equally as embarrassed, taking her hand, dropping to her knees, acting like she was nursing a heartbreak, while she belted Whitney Houston's "I Will Always Love You." a cover of a cover done to absolute perfection.

When she was finished, a blushing Emily squeezed her friend's hand, as they shared the tender moment, while the rest of the room went from stunned silence to erupting. That was also when a call from the front desk told them it was too far late to do karaoke anymore.

"No, for real though, Song's super talented, especially with her throat control." Emery announced to the room over quieting applause. "Did you ever hear about the time me and Song were handcuffed, sucking on a giant double-headed dildo? We had to kiss in the middle, and, like, I thought we were gonna die, but this bitch is a machine."

"Emery!" Song and Mary shouted in unison, while the party continued to be the loudest thing in the hotel that night. Song wasn't sure what annoyed her more, Emery's grammar, or her complete lack of discretion.

Chapter 13

Song stood behind a plush velvet curtain, where despite the cool afternoon air, she feared a nervous sweat might destroy her picture perfect make-up. Only sheer willpower stopped her from perspiring. The bride couldn't be the one to ruin her own wedding day photos. She'd leave that to Emery, who she found far easier to forgive.

Just in front, the wedding party was bunched up together, waiting for the ceremony to begin. From back to front, Song saw Nari and some random man, then Eun with another. Emily had her own stranger. It was only up at the front that Song recognized the best man, waiting patiently beside Emery. She'd never forget his face, after witnessing him bury his manhood deep inside her husband-to-be.

To her right, Song could see the resort's vineyard, stretching out into the horizon, a picturesque scene, though even in her anxiety, she found it humorous that the beautiful spectacle was hidden behind a curtain she could just as easily peek around. She did briefly, to see Baek standing nervously, while a string quartet's soft classical harmonies drowned out the murmur of the guests. Turning back, there stood her father, his smiling face framed by the sun hanging low in the sky.

Jii leaned over and gently kissed his daughter on the cheek. He looked deep into her eyes, beneath the veil. "You've got this, Song. Just know, I'm so proud of you. I'm going to miss having my little girl in the house, though."

"Appa, please," Song whined, gently swatting her father on the shoulder, as she fought hard to suppress the tears welling up. "I'll literally be two blocks down the road."

The night before, at a wedding rehearsal dinner, where the bulk of the bridal party was too nauseous to eat, save one bubbly blond who seemed to be immune from ever suffering any consequences, the betrothed were happy to learn that instead of apartment hunting when they returned from their honeymoon, Grace and Jii had already purchased them a home. Song was less thrilled when she realized her mother had made sure she'd be within a five minute walk's distance, but at least she could finally have sex in her own bedroom. Clearly her father also preferred the arrangement, as the man struggling with the prospect of letting go, knew his little girl would at least be in arm's reach.

As she heard Pachelbel's Canon in D Major begin, the bunched up line in front of her started to stretch out, as the bridal party made their way down the aisle, Song thought to herself, 'Why am I nervous? I'm beautiful, and I look better than any bride... fuck... I'm really going to get married, aren't I?'

The wedding party assembled at the front, and once the song reached its end, next came the wedding march. Suddenly Song knew there would be no walking away, unless she was ready to cause the biggest uproar in the Korean-American community, one that her mother wouldn't live down for years.

A few more quick checks were made, just to make sure nothing was out of place. The old star hair-pin held in her half-updo a piece of the shawl from Grace's hanbok from her wedding, something borrowed, and repurposed as a lovely veil. Brand new pearl earrings, a gift from Emily, ticked that box. While Song thought blue shoes, strappy sandals, with a three-inch heel, were a little short, and a little bold, Grace was insistent that they were perfectly suited for the floor length hem of the gown, ballooned out subtly by a small petticoat. The tasteful dress was an echo of old Hollywood glamour, accented by the decorated pierced lace sleeves that came up to just before they met the shoulder, then wrapped around the top of the white silk bodice.

When the dust settled, there was nothing left to do but walk. Strangely, in that moment, the future Mrs. Yoon knew that she was exactly where she wanted to be. Marching down the aisle, on the right Song saw the faces of dozens of strangers. Their expressions, making it very clear who the most beautiful woman in the room was, filled Song with a kind of joy that she wished she could bottle. On the left, there were plenty of strangers she could only assume were her mother's business relations, but towards the front the beaming faces of the Zeta girls, and the women from the shop warmed the former hellion's heart. Up at the front, the brightest smile in the room was the man she planned to spend at least the next several years of her life with, if platonically, with tears in the corners of his eyes.

"You're beautiful." he whispered, taking the hand wearing the giant engagement ring, and giving it a squeeze.

Jii lifted his daughter's veil, kissed her gently on the cheek, and then shook Baek-Su Yoon's hand before taking a seat next to his wife. The wedding was non-religious, with the ceremony performed by a local city official. While the man droned on about two people he'd never met before, the bride and groom looked into each other's eyes, unconcerned with the rest of the world. There was a genuine connection, though not romantic. While the two didn't really know each other that well yet, they could relate in a way Song generally struggled to with other people. When the officiate finally said, you may kiss the bride, Baek pulled his new wife into his arms, and planted a deep kiss on her lips. While it went on for a minute, mostly just for show, it was more intimate than Song expected, almost like he was saying "thank you".

Many kisses followed at the reception, though none imitated the same passion. Little moments of affection like that put on a great public performance, but in them there was a kind of affection between two people that had been trying to rescue themselves, and were now trying to rescue each other. After the rituals were out the way, cutting the cake, the couple's first dance, and such, Song spent most of the night sitting at a table with Emily, and Emery, while the candles dotting the vineyard flickered on the hillsides behind them. They were making up for lost time, while people would occasionally stop by and offer their congratulations.

As the night grew darker, the giant event tent fluttered in the wind, while the open wine bar began to shut down. With just a handful of tipsy aunties and uncles left, Grace approached the table, and held out her hand. "Girls, I need to steal Mrs. Yoon from you for a minute. Song, come dance with your mother."



“Are you serious?” the new bride asked, in complete disbelief. “Shouldn’t you be dancing with your new son-in-law?”

“He seems occupied.” Grace answered, glancing back to the groom, sitting at the bar with the best man, talking closer and closer with every drink. “Come on, Little Star, don’t be a spoil sport. I need to talk to you about something anyway.”

“Alright...” Song took her mother’s hand, and followed the matriarch to the dance floor. For a brief moment she wondered who would lead, but quickly answered her own question. As her mother gently rested a hand on her waist, Song looked the woman in the eyes, and the approval she so desperately craved was right there, shining back at her.

“I’m glad you two get along so well. You have so much in common.”

“That we do, Mummy. He seems like a very good man.”

“He is. You’re both smart, capable people. You both come from good families. You’re both very stylish... and you seem to have similar taste in men as well.”

“Yeah, we do... wait...” As Song processed the meaning of the words coming out of her mother’s mouth, once it sunk in, it hit her like a ton of bricks. With a horrified expression, Song aggressively whispered the question, “How did you know he was gay?”

“How could I not? You hear him when he speaks, right?”

The smirk painted on Grace’s countenance said it all. It was becoming very clear to Song that gay voice, though it came in different forms, existed in every language.

Song’s eyebrows contorted into new shapes never thought possible, as she tried to make sense of the bombshell her mother had just dropped. “Okay, so... if you knew, then why did you set us up?”

“Oh please, Little Star, I know what my daughter needs. Marriage is a necessity for our business, and securing your future, but I know you’re not the type to be tied down. This seemed like the perfect arrangement. You both get to move into the next phase of your lives, while you each have the freedom to pursue romance where your heart leads you. Like I said, I know my little girl, and if we married you to some stud, no matter how much he turned you on at first, you’d be bored with him within the month. It’s just who you are. There’s no reason you should be punished for that though. With this arrangement, you two can live happy lives, and be there to support each other. Discretion in the office is a must, but otherwise you have your freedom. You need a partner, not a lover.”

“Please never say “turned on” to me ever again, Mummy.” Song said, completely mortified “Is that what you wanted to discuss?”

“No, dear, I wanted to discuss your new responsibilities at Rim.”

“Holy shit! Am I finally getting my store?!” Song’s excitement was palpable, but as quickly as it arrived, it left again when she heard the next words out of her mother’s mouth.

“You’re not getting a store, Little Star... and language...”

“Well, why the hell not? For the last eight years, I have done every single thing you’ve asked me. For fuck’s sake, I just got married to a complete stranger...” Song leaned in closer to whisper. “A completely gay stranger, because you spent months pressuring me to. Just tell me...” the hushed voices fell by the wayside, as Song escalated, her insides tearing to shreds at the denial of everything she had worked so hard for. “What is it going to take, Mother? What the fuck do I have to do for you to trust me?”

“Are you done?” Grace asked. The dancing had stopped, and Song was just standing in the middle of the dance floor, so upset she was nearly hyperventilating. “You didn’t let me finish.

Typically the bride explodes just before the wedding, but after is fine too. You're allowed to be crazy today. Just don't make a scene."

"Okay..." Song glanced around the room, and fortunately nobody had taken notice of her momentary outburst. "So... finish."

"Like I was saying, Little Star, you're not getting your own store because instead, starting when you get back from your honeymoon, you'll be shadowing me for the next few years. I still expect you to take our high priority clients, and work all the big events, but outside of that, you're my number two. You're going to learn the ins and outs of the business because not next year, but very soon, Daddy and I are going to start taking a step back. We're planning on retiring before we're too old to enjoy our money, but I'll still be around to support you when you're sitting in my chair... Well, I guess it would be your chair."

"Are... are you serious?" While a moment before Song was ready to combust, now she stood with her jaw on the floor, hardly to believe the news.

"Of course I'm serious. I'm not giving you a store, Song. I'm giving you the seeds of an empire. I've already made my mark, and now I'm ready to sit on the couch with Daddy, and grow old, without all the stress adding any more wrinkles than I can tolerate. It's time for you to make yours. Because of this wedding, our new import deal, and the property negotiations which will be the first thing you're assisting me with, I've laid the foundation for you to take Rim Beauty all the way to a nationwide brand. Paul Mitchell, eat your heart out, right? Rim Cosmetics will be in every superstore from here to North Carolina as well. It doesn't get any better than that."

"Mummy... I... I don't know what to say..."

Grace wrapped her daughter into a tight embrace, and kissed the top of her head. Don't say anything, Little Star. Just go on your honeymoon, enjoy the time off, and come back ready to work to the bone. I want you to know I'm so so proud of you. I only had the chance to have one child, and I'm blessed to have gotten the very best. I love you."

"I love you too, Mummy." Practically ready for bed, Song decided to let the tears pour, and to worry about her makeup later.

After staggering back upstairs, on her new husband's arm, Song slid the keycard, and then collapsed onto the bed face first after walking in the door. "Can you unzip me?" she asked, turning her head just enough to stop muffling her voice.

Duri-Baek, the groom's father, dreamed of this night for his son. Baek-Su would unzip the dress, proceed accordingly, and by the end of the night he'd be halfway to dealing with the "homosexual issue" as he called it. All that remained was for his new daughter-in-law to have one surgery, and then it would be like it never happened.

The Yoon patriarch would be disappointed to know that instead the newlyweds spent a wonderfully pleasant evening, sitting in their pajamas, eating pints of ice cream, while watching the Korean dub of Mean Girls, before falling asleep in a perfectly platonic pile.

Chapter 14

The first few days of the honeymoon, Song and Baek enjoyed their island getaway, mostly sitting on the beach, and drinking mojitos, while they shared stories from their childhood, and ogled the cabana boys. Still, a wall of politeness remained in place between them, Baek carrying the repression of his extremely conservative upbringing, and Song trying to gently coax him out of his shell, instead of ripping him out like every fiber of her being was screaming for her to do.

'If we were an actual couple, I'd just suck his dick until he stops thinking so hard, but that's not going to work...'

Things started to become less formal when an older woman, clearly rich, but without the taste to match, strolled up to the little tiki bar near their umbrella. As she placed her order, Song couldn't help but notice her eyebrows. The stylist knew in the nineties that for a brief time, women were getting their eyeliner and eyebrows tattooed into place. While that seemed crazy to her on face value alone, given that times and styles change, what she never could have imagined is that someone could have done it so poorly, and still be smugly proud of the results. The woman clearly thought she was hot shit the way she barked orders to the underpaid resort workers, but it was hard to take her seriously when there was twice as much distance between her eyebrows and eyes, as there was between her eyebrows and hairline.

As the woman finally walked away, leaving a bartender sneering behind her, Baek said something that caught his wife off guard. "She must have gotten those done at a haunted house. I've never seen the top half of someone's face look so terrified, while the bottom looked like she had shit in her mouth."

"You catty bitch!" Song squealed, with the biggest smile her husband had yet to see on her face. Song searched the beach, and found an older gentleman, frowning at girls in bikinis when his wife was watching, and leering when she wasn't. "Oh, do him next."

"Not for all the money in the world."

The rest of the day was more of the same, and by the end, Song realized that in a different life, Baek would have fit in great with her besties. He easily could have been an honorary Zeta, though his washboard abs might have made him look a little strange in a two-piece at the annual carwash.

That evening, while the couple were having dinner, Song eyed the rings on her finger, and liked the sight. The server in the hotel bar, a tall, dark, and handsome man, with manicured stubble, seemed to be paying extra attention.

“Mr. and Mrs. Yoon, I hope you two are having a wonderful time. Just know, we value all of our guests here, but I’ve got a special soft spot for honeymooners. If you two need anything at all, and I mean *anything*, don’t hesitate to ask. Another glass of chardonnay, Mrs. Yoon?”

“Yes, please.” Song answered, catching sight of her husband checking out the waiter’s tight ass.

“Looks like somebody has a fan.” Baek teased, once the man was out of earshot.

“Bitch, please.” Song shot back. “What are you talking about? Clearly that guy wants to jump your bones.”

With a playful smirk, he gave his wife’s hand a gentle squeeze. “I sincerely doubt that, after the way I just saw him staring down your cleavage.”

Song glanced over to the bar, where he was waiting for the order, when the reality of the situation suddenly dawned on her. “Holy shit, I think he’s checking us *both* out.”

While the newlyweds gazed at each other, pure mischievous glee spread across both their faces. Song looked her new husband in the eye, and asked, “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

That night, after all three parties had cum, and cum again, Song thought back to something Emily had once said before, and suddenly the idea of “worshiping a cock” with your friend made so much more sense. Song and Baek passed it back and forth like one of Emery’s expertly rolled joints, while taking turns riding the young man’s face.

After the honeymoon, time began to move at a rapid pace. Getting moved into the new house came first, where the Yoons each had their own bedrooms, plus three more. It wasn’t any bigger than Song’s parent’s home, but without Grace’s overwhelmingly huge personality there seemed to be so much more space. The interior designer was only given one prompt, Osiria roses, just like the ones Emily brought Song all those years before. She gave them to her then girlfriend, saying they reminded her of every part of the complex young woman. They had pretty red and white petals, but also the thorns. It turned out they were the perfect template for what came out as a wonderfully decorated abode, giving the home a classic, yet colorful charm.

Around the same time, Emily put in her notice of resignation at the White House, politely thanking President Arnault for the opportunity. Spending time with her old friends showed the press secretary that the life she’d been living just wasn’t for her. Fortunately, it left her with enough clout to get slotted in at the last minute in Central’s graduate studies program. Of course they were too happy to accommodate any whim of their most famous alumnus, and Emily was

thrilled to get back to studying her true passion, the written word. She also began working on a memoir of her transition, with the hopes that she could show other girls like her that sometimes it isn't the "I've known since I was a child." narrative that gets thrown around so much. Trans people, much like all people, were complicated, and she hoped to ease some of the pain in others that she struggled with for so long.

Meanwhile, Emery and Mary put a down payment on their first home, and actually bought some real furniture. After a few months of Mary's new salary, it became apparent that Emery was just working to fill her days. The problem was she was beginning to find those days far less fulfilling. One night, as the couple lay in bed, Emery couldn't catch a wink. It was then that she couldn't contain her feelings anymore, and her thoughts were finally given voice.

"I wanna have a baby."

Mary, through half sleeping eyes, slipped an arm around her girlfriend's waist, and pulled her little spoon in closer. "I know you do, princess. You talk about it all the time."

Frustrated, Emery pulled herself away from her lover's grip, and sat up on the edge of the bed. "No, I want to have a baby, like, right now. I want to be a mom. Like, I know I'm not that smart, and I know I'm not that responsible, but I'm a great big sister. Kids make sense to me, Mary. Like, time keeps going, and I keep getting older, and that's, like, bigger stuff than I want to think about, but, like, I don't want to feel like I wasted my life. I want a baby... I want your baby."

Now fully conscious, Mary sat up, and for the first time ever, she could see just how serious her girlfriend was. "You really mean it...?"

"Of course I do." By this point tears were streaming down the blond's cheeks, and all Mary could do was hold her tightly, while she waited for her to calm down. "Like, I can't have it myself, so I can't do this without you, but also, I don't *want* to do this without you. I love you, and I can't think of anything better than us raising a person who is made out of little pieces of both of us. Doesn't that sound wonderful?"

Before, Mary had always chalked this discussion up to Emery being mad that her little brother didn't appreciate her affection as much as when he couldn't speak, but she could see that the woman she loved was in pain. She had so much to give, and nowhere to put it. Though all evidence in every other aspect of her life pointed to the contrary, Mary somehow knew that Emery would in fact be a phenomenal mother.

"Okay, let's do it. You're going to have to go off your girl pills for a little while though. Are you sure you're okay with that? Like, what if you start to grow a little mustache or something? Your chest hair might come back."

"Then, I'll shave. I don't care. I don't want to be ugly, but I want a baby more."

“Oh, honey, you could never be ugly.” Mary kissed her love on the forehead. “So it’s official, then. I only ask that you don’t stop taking your pills cold turkey. Let’s work with your endocrinologist on this. I think that’s probably the way to go where we’re most likely to succeed.”

“My endo-wha...?” The tears quickly dried, as all Emery really understood was that she was getting what she wanted.

“Your boob doctor... Nevermind, I’ll take care of it.”

A couple of years passed, where Song’s time was spent shadowing Grace, styling red carpet looks, and partying with her friends. She counted herself lucky that she was the only person who could bring her husband to girls’ night, and it was a boon to the good times. Baek spent his time working in the ER, and getting involved in southern California’s thriving gay club scene. Slowly, but surely, his extremely practiced business speech gave way to the vocabulary, and memes of his new community, and by the end, Song could hardly believe she ever thought the man was straight.

As husband and wife, they referred to each other as “my love” and it wasn’t a show. Though no sexual attraction existed between the two, and most physical affection beyond hugs, and little pecks were a performance during business dinners, they had grown to love each other as a family, neither able to imagine their life without the other. They both knew dick was in plentiful supply, but the kind of bond they’d forged was not one that could be easily replaced. What Song never expected was a phone call from her mother, who rather than asking was telling her that her little family would be adding another.

Nari, after graduating, had finally worked her way into her father’s good graces. Reluctantly, he gave his daughter a position at the chaebol, and she took it and ran with it. In a matter of months she’d become indispensable. While the board full of sexist old men had their reservations at first, they couldn’t argue with the volume of business the relentless young professional brought in. A few years later, Nari was instrumental in an upcoming merger that would send Yoon’s stock price through the roof. Unfortunately it was also around this time that she would get pregnant from a drunken one night stand, where nobody could remember how condoms worked.

While South Korea had become far more progressive over the years, getting an abortion was still strictly reserved for victims of incest. Most people wouldn’t judge a child born out of wedlock, or the mother who raised them, but the conservative partners at the firm were a different story. At first, Baek’s little sister tried to pretend it wasn’t happening. Six months later that was no longer an option, nor was it something she’d be able to take care of legally overseas. When she finally brought this information to her father, the man was furious, though at the same time he couldn’t very well replace her on any of her accounts without causing a fuss. As far as he was concerned the best option was adoption, though he didn’t wish to disinherit his grandchild.

Duri-Baek made a phone call to his counterpart across the Pacific, Grace, where they discussed how best to handle the sensitive issue. It was decided that Nari would come to the US for a few months for a “family visit” where then Song and Baek-Su would adopt the baby after it was born. To Song, all of this sounded fine on paper, but nobody bothered to ask her if she actually wanted to be a mom. She most definitely didn’t.

For the first time since high school, the daughter lashed out at her mother and a screaming match was had, the likes of which Baek had never seen before. He wanted to be supportive, but all he could do was watch his wife storm around every room of the house, using the kind of profanity one would typically reserve for tax collectors. They probably didn’t even need the phone, they were so loud, with Grace and Jii living just down the street. The two strong opinionated women could have just walked into their yards, and had it out. Eventually, through well practiced needling and guilt, Grace wore her daughter down, getting her to agree to the plan, though Song was far from happy about it.

Just a week later, Baek was picking up his very pregnant, and very angry sister from the airport. After returning home, Song had taken the day off work to prepare the guest bedroom. “Hello, sister,” Nari said coldly, after walking in the door, and dropping her carry-on in the foyer, while her brother wrestled two giant trunks up the porch stairs. “Do you have anything to drink... Vodka maybe?”

Song rolled her eyes, tapping her heeled foot on the tile. Somehow, she of all people was left to be the voice of reason. “You’re not drinking, Nari. Frankly, I don’t want to deal with this any more than you do, but while you’re staying here, I’m not going to let you brain damage a baby because you’re bored.”

“Still as much fun as ever, I see.” the girl replied. “Now, where can I set up my office? I still have responsibilities you know. Can’t laze around the house like you, unfortunately.”

“Nari, I took the day to get the room ready for you, you selfish... You know what, nevermind. Take the kitchen table. It’s yours.” Song threw up her hands, and poured herself the drink she’d deprived the pregnant girl.

After Baek finally managed to get all the luggage in, it was discovered the reason one trunk was so heavy was because it was packed with a full desktop computer, as well as the necessary adapters and such to get it working on North American power. Nari picked up the tower, and carried it to the table to find a place to plug everything in.

“Should you be lifting that in your condition?” Baek asked out of concern for his bratty sibling.

“My condition...” she spat back. “What would you know about a woman’s body, brother? I bet you haven’t even seen your wife’s new vagina yet.” Turning to Song, Nari continued, “Father told me you came to Seoul to have the procedure. I’m hurt you never stopped in to say hello. How is it? Does sex feel as good as before? Have you taken the pool boy for a spin yet?”

“We don’t have a pool, Nari.” Song groaned.

Defensively Baek felt the need to add, “I have seen it. Who do you think helped her through her rehab after? Who do you think changed the bandages? I’m a doctor for fuck’s sake.”

“Ohh, I’m loving this spicy new you, Baek. I’ve never heard you have such bite before. Honestly I’m here for it, and that little Americanism as well.”

“Can’t you take anything seriously, Nari?!”

Song walked across the room, and gently rested a hand on her husband’s shoulder. “Baek, don’t. She’s just mad because her life isn’t going according to plan, and she’s taking it out on you. Feeding it will only make it worse.”

“Aren’t we insightful?” Nari replied sarcastically. “What would you know about how I feel right now?”

“I know because I used to do the same shit.” It was then that Song did the one thing that could leave Nari speechless, surprising even herself in the process. She walked up to her sister-in-law, and held her tightly. “I’m sorry things aren’t great right now. I’m sorry you’re hurting. I’m sorry your father cast you out here like something to be ashamed of. I’m not judging you. Honestly, if I could have gotten pregnant it surely would have happened by now. I’m also sorry I didn’t come to see you when I was there, but I was in a lot of pain, and I don’t think I would have been as nice as I’m trying to be right now. You’re welcome in our home as long as you need. It’s none of our fault that both our parents are aging machiavelis who treat their loved ones like chess pieces. They’re fucking crazy. This situation is crazy. We love you.”

What happened next nobody expected, least of all Nari. As Song pulled away, she was crying the snottiest, sloppiest tears a girl can cry. Song could only take a step back before the girl had pulled her back in, and held on tight, while she wailed months and months of repressed feelings out.

Three months later, Song paced around the waiting room at the hospital. It was Baek’s turn to be calm. There were some complications, and knowing what happened to the Yoon siblings’ mother, for a brief moment, Song was terrified that the sister who frustrated her as much as she loved her was going to die. That was just anxiety. When the all clear came through, instead she had to find something else to freak out about.

“This isn’t going to work, Baek. I fucking hate kids. I hated kids when I was a kid. I can’t be responsible for the development of an actual human being. I’m just going to fuck her up.”

Tugging her by the arm into the seat next to him, Baek looked his wife in the eye. “My love, you think you’re this uncaring monster sometimes, but in the time I’ve known you, you’ve given more

than most. You're always there for the people you love. I mean, the way you've been taking care of Nari, and handling Rim Cosmetics at the same time, I'm certain you're going to be an excellent mother. Sure, we might not love the baby at first, but that kind of thing grows over time. Didn't you tell me you hated Emily when you met her? Look at you both now. Plus, the baby is going to be way cuter than her, so she'll probably win you over faster."

In reality Song saw her as something to be used. "I didn't hate her, I just thought she was dumb... but I see what you're saying. I'll try to relax."

Another two hours went by, and Song did anything but. Only the slightest relief was felt when a nurse finally came out and told them they could head back to the room. Inside, the platonic couple found Nari, on her phone, texting furiously about her return to work date, while a little lump of a baby, swaddled in a blanket, slept peacefully in a small plastic tub on wheels off to the side.

"Have you held her yet?" Song asked, as she slowly approached the sleeping infant.

"What?" Nari replied, her attention impossible to steal from the screen. "Ew... no. Why? That's not my baby. That's your baby... *God dammit, Saeoyun, you were supposed to get those fucking papers filed Monday!*"

While the woman who just gave birth continued to yell in Korean at a person who couldn't hear her, it was suddenly very apparent to Song that she was in fact the only mother this baby was ever going to know. With hesitation, she picked up the child, cradling her head just like the thousand books she inhaled told her to. For just a second, the baby smiled, and in that moment Song's cold heart melted. From her reading, logically she knew that it just meant she was passing gas, but from then on logic no longer mattered. Song held the little girl, unable to stop herself from smelling her head, covered in a dark fuzz, and tears began to pour. She'd cried a lot in her life, especially since abandoning testosterone, but one thing the Rim heiress had never experienced before was tears of pure unbridled joy. Right then, she knew that baby was her little girl, and if anyone was going to try to take her away, they'd have to pry her from her cold dead hands.

Just then, an older woman knocked twice on the door, rolling in a computer and printer on a cart. "Hi, I'm with the registrar of deeds, and I'm here to get this little lady a birth certificate." Turning her attention to the patient in bed, still glued to her phone, she asked, "So... have we chosen a name?"

Angry that no one was letting her finish her correspondence, Nari pointed to Song, and spat, "How the hell should I know? Ask its mother."

Epilog

"Judith Grace Yoon, get your butt down here, right now!"

When little Judy heard her full name, she knew she was in trouble. With her eyes pointed to the floor, she hurried from her room down to the kitchen. “Yes, Mommy?”

Song, still dressed for work in a figure hugging white pencil dress, and an open jacket on top, stood with her arms crossed, tapping her foot. “Would you care to explain to me why my potted plants on the back porch are dug up?”

“I don’t know, Mommy?” the little girl replied, with perplexed sounding sweetness, and a shrug worthy of an oscar, but unfortunately the dirt smeared all over the front of her pristine white dress wasn’t as good of a liar as she was.

Most mothers blessed with tomboys struggle to get their daughters in anything resembling a dress. By this point Song would have preferred her child only wear garbage bags, given how many garments the rambunctious girl could destroy in a month, but Judy insisted on looking her best at all times, just like her Mommy.

Song squatted down and met the six-year-old at eye level. “Now, Judy, do you remember what we discussed about honesty?”

“Yes,” Judy nodded her head dramatically, parroting the sentence, “Mommy is so good at lying that she can trick herself, so I’ll never get one over on you.”

“Those are your father’s words, not mine... but still correct. So would you care to try again?”

“I’m sorry, Mommy. We just wanted to look at some bugs.”

Song shuddered at the thought of the squirming grubs she must have been handling. “Well, how about next time you ask me or Daddy first, and we’ll figure something out that doesn’t involve giving you another bath before dinner. Our guests are going to be here soon, and Mommy’s not going to have time to change. What if I wanted to dress up pretty too?”

“But you always look pretty.” came the earnest reply. It was enough for Song to almost forget she was mad in the first place. The girl was being honest, and at the same time manipulating her. Even if Judy didn’t know it, it still worked.

“Let’s go upstairs. Is Wilbur as dirty as you are?”

“Yeah...”

“Yes.” While Song wanted nothing less than to turn into her mother, time pushed her in that direction. Fortunately her husband had an actual backbone when it came to parenting, and he kept her in check. That didn’t mean grammar wasn’t corrected constantly though. The working mom would sooner die than have her daughter grow up, speaking like the poor.

Up the stairs, Song opened the door to Judy's room. "Hey, let's get in the bath, Wilbur, before your parents get here."

"Coming, Aunt Song." the chipper little boy practically sang back, as he ran through the door at full speed. Being of Vietnamese and European descent, the biracial child got the dark hair of one mom, as well as her eyes, but Song thought he somehow looked like an Asian Emery in her childhood photos. To the mothers, the seven months between the children's ages seemed shorter and shorter every year.

Toting her little girl by the hand to follow her partner in crime, Song was reminded of the first time she brought Judy to see Santa Claus at the mall. An hour spent curling the uncooperative toddlers hair, then pinning in the flowered headband in a way she couldn't just pull it out was going to be worth it for that perfectly adorable photo that would sit on the mantle into their golden years. Of course she screamed bloody murder the moment she sat down on the old man's lap, and the only way to make it stop was to pick her back up. Things with Judy rarely went to plan, but to Song, she'd suffer a thousand struggles with the child happily. While she might have been slowly morphing into Grace with age, one thing she was determined to do was to not ignore her child when things got difficult, and hope the problem just went away.

Retirement had proven to be the thing that finally removed the stick from Grace's ass. Song marveled at how in just the previous year, the suits, and two-piece sets of her mother's wardrobe had been replaced with some of the most comfortable, loose fitting dresses, looking like they were bought out of a car trunk in the woods at a music festival. The doting grandmother who visited almost every day, with a pint of ice cream, and a new doll, made the new president of Rim Beauty and Cosmetics wonder if pod people were actually a thing. While she didn't want to chastise a child for being pudgy, she certainly had to chew out her mom on several occasions over the mountain of sugar she regularly brought into the house.

After bathing Judy, and Wilbur for the second time since he'd arrived that afternoon for their playdate, it was back to the little girl's bedroom, where, having learned from plenty of past experiences, Wilbur practically had a whole wardrobe of his own. After dressing the boy in a pair of overalls, and a little t-shirt, she sent him on his way, while Judy got dressed.

While most kids struggle to put their arms through the right sleeve, one thing about Judy that could be called girly was her fashion sense. Without needing any help, she'd already dressed herself in a pair of black tights, a black turtleneck sweater, and a red plaid skirt. She only needed mom to blowdry her hair, before adding the matching headband. Right as the little one stepped into her flats, they could hear the front door open.

"Daddy!"

Judy took off running, only to be caught by her mother, and carried. "We're going to see Daddy, but I don't want you to break your neck doing it."

After reaching the bottom of the stairs, Wilbur was glued to some puppet on the TV, while Baek and another man in scrubs, with meticulously groomed eyebrows and purple polished nails were hanging their jackets in the closet.

“Daddy!” Judy squealed again, this time leaning forward, nearly spilling out of her mother’s arms. Fortunately, this time Daddy was there to catch her. Baek kissed his daughter on the forehead a dozen times, while she giggled. Twisting around to face the other party, she greeted him warmly. “Hey, Mr. Andre! Did you guys have fun at work today?”

While Andre was a fairly recent addition to their household, he knew enough about kids not to answer that question honestly, after a twelve hour shift in the emergency room. “Yes, we did, cupcake. How about you? Did you have fun with the sitter?”

“Yes, Felicia was super nice today, and hardly talked on the phone at all.”

‘She better not be with what I’m paying her.’ Song mumbled to herself, before planting a gentle kiss on her husband’s cheek, then one on his beau. “I’m so glad to see you both. I know you just got off, but can you watch them for a little while please? I’ve got to start setting the table, and getting things ready. People are going to start showing up soon, and I haven’t done a thing.

“Of course, of course.” Baek offered a smile. “We can take turns showering. Do what you need to do.”

Andre had been aware of Baek’s unorthodox homelife when the two started dating, after meeting when he transferred to the ER. The proud father was reluctant to introduce his family until he knew it was something serious. A couple years later, Baek realized he had to acknowledge it was, or he was going to lose the first man he ever wanted to actually stick around. It was a blessing that the two loves of his life got along so well, and Judy loved having one more person to paint her nails, and entertain her whims.

Just before Song could find her way to the kitchen, the doorbell rang. With a huff, she paused, forced a smile to her face, and swung it open to find Emery barging past her, with a screaming dark blond three-year-old girl on her hip, covered in what she could only hope was chocolate milk.

“Sorry, Song, gotta deal with this.” the blond in mom jeans barely explained, as she rushed to the bathroom, with a bag in tow.

Followed right behind was her pink-haired partner, carrying an identical child. Mary dropped the kid, who ran off to join her brother, and Judy, both now glued to the TV. Her arms free, the flagship manager gave the Yoons a hug. “Hey, boss lady. Sorry, we’re early. We planned to stop by the house first, but we were closer to here when Eunice decided her cup didn’t need a lid

anymore, and the last time this happened, it took a month to get the sour smell out of the car. Do you mind if I leave Mabel here for a minute, while I go clean up the back seat?"

"Sure, no problem. The boys will watch her." While the mother of three went to deal with that, Song walked to the kitchen. On her way she said, "Hey, Mabel!" with a wave, and got a silent wave in return from the young girl, who kept her eye fixed where they were. Some sentient bulldozer on the tv apparently needed her attention more.

After finally getting the dining room table set for eleven, once again the doorbell rang, and a grin spread across the hostess' face. Emily would tease her friends like nobody's business, and it was time to return the favor.

Swinging the door open, with a perfectly platonic peck of a kiss, Song greeted her longtime friend. You'd be hard pressed to find anyone that could possibly believe the two had ever been anything other than the sisters by choice they grew into, let alone romantic.

The former political figure was back to her naturally curly brunette hair, wearing the cat-eyed professor glasses that had basically found a permanent home on her smiling face, save a special occasion. Song thought the frames just made her look even more like her mother, and much to Emily's frustration, reminded her often.

"Hey, Professor! How is shaping the young minds of today for a better tomorrow going?"

"I teach smug kids who think they're already adults about classic literature, while they try not to fall asleep... but great! I probably get through to a few." Emily squeezed her bestie's neck, poking her in the ribs with one fingernail, just to tickle her a little. It was still funny watching an uptight grown woman squeal, especially in such an expensive ensemble.

Song's attention was then drawn to the man standing half an inch shorter than her friend. For Emily, his height was surprising enough. She could hardly believe the notoriously fickle educator had lasted as long as she had with an average sized guy that actually treated her well. "And you must be Chuck. Welcome to our home."

"Thank you so much for having me. I brought wine." Another hug was given, and Song took the bottle gratefully, and eagerly.

A few months before, Emily ran into Chuck at the grocery store, and surprisingly the two still remembered each other from the angel devil party over a decade before. Chuck had recently moved back to town, and bought a house. After a little chat, it was established that they were both single, both available, and both of them often thought of their previous encounter as the one who got away. It was almost too much pressure for Emily when they started dating, but with the support, and ruthless prodding of her friends, the anxious charmer kept seeing him, and it was actually going well for a change. All green flags except he still listened to ska, but that was something Emily was willing to learn to live with.

After taking their jackets, Song led them into the living room, where Mary, and Emery had returned, while Andre, and Baek finally got a chance to sit down. A freshly cleaned and dressed Eunice, her hair still damp, sat in her mother's lap, while Emery was hesitant to let her go for fear she'd show up in ten minutes, somehow covered in peanut butter, and bird shit. Song could hardly contain herself, she was fiending to dish with Emily so hard about the new romance.

"Bitch, help me in the kitchen. You'll be alright out here on your own, won't you Chuck?"

"Uh... sure," he replied, while a gaggle of children screamed on the floor in front of him, none of them seeming all that distressed.

"Mommy said a bad word." Judy teased.

Realizing her error, Song fought the urge to slap herself across the face. "It's a bad word... but sometimes it's a term of affection. I call Aunt Emily that because I love her."

"Can I call you that because I love you?"

The girl played innocent, but Song knew her child knew exactly what she was doing. "Go watch your builder show."

"Did you cook?" Emily asked, genuinely shocked.

"Bitch, please. I ordered catering." The tiny Yoon twisted her head around, only to be met with a wagging finger, and a vague threat. "Not another word, young lady."

In the kitchen, Song opened the bottle of wine, and poured them both a glass. "Girl, he's handsome. Hasn't started losing any hair yet. Still fit. You've done a lot worse, that's for sure. Does he have a big dick? He's definitely got big dick energy."

Blushing, Emily pushed her glasses up, took a sip, and then giggled. That was enough of an answer for Song. "They don't really say that anymore, I don't think."

Song rolled her eyes. "Well, I do. Speaking of big dick energy, have I told you about the new yoga instructor? I'm telling you, Emily, I know you're straight, but you should let a woman go down on you at least once. So so so much better at eating pussy. It's not even a contest. Just don't think of her as a lover. Think of her like a vibrator. I know the damn thing was expensive enough. You've got to use that vagina to its fullest extent, or it's money wasted."

"I'll take your word for it. Besides, I didn't know multiple orgasms were a thing, until he got hold of me, and if it ain't broke, don't fix it, right? What about Marco though? He disappeared real quick.

“Well, Marco was getting a little too attached, and it was getting weird seeing him at the club all the time. Plus, god forbid Nari ever finds out I was actually fucking the pool boy. Eun called today, by the way. She told me to tell everybody hey, so hey. She’s gonna make it out for Judy’s birthday next week. You’ll be there, right?”

“Of course. Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Song turned the subject to her friend’s mother. “How’s Lauren?”

“Mom’s doing well. Been seeing that same guy for a few years, with no plans to move in or marry. I think she’s already had her fill of that for a lifetime, and what they’re doing right now is good enough for her. Since she doesn’t have to feed me, or pay part of my tuition anymore either, she’s basically rich... or at least she feels rich. I dunno... I mean, she never buys her own clothes, still... I love her, but seriously, I haven’t lived with her for over ten years. How the fuck does all my stuff keep winding up in her closet? Like... you’re fifty... age gracefully, you know?”

“Moms are fucking crazy.” Song said, nodding in agreement.

“Yes they are.”

What they didn’t realize was that in about twenty years, all those little kids watching TV would be having the same conversation.

After the glass, Song and Emily took the tops off the foil pans, and brought them out to the lengthy dining room table. Meanwhile Chuck sat in the living room, trying like hell to learn everyone’s names.

“So Judy is Song’s, I know, and the other three belong to you two, right? Let me see if I get this right. Wilbur is the boy, and the twins are Eunice, and Mabel?”

“That’s right.” answered one of the little girls, with the kind of grin that said she was up to no good. “Which one am I?”

Chuck took a random guess. “Mabel?”

“No, I’m Eunice.” The young girl shook her head vigorously.

“No, she’s Mabel.” Emery interjected. She’d had to make that correction more times than she could count. “I let them watch ‘The Parent Trap’, and since then they’ve been trying to talk us into getting a divorce, and then sending them to summer camp. We’re not even married.”

There was something very humorous about Emery, the most easygoing person to ever walk the earth, being the most exhausted person in the room from dealing with children so much like herself.

While Eunice quietly shimmied out of her mother's lap, Chuck asked, "How do you do it?" It was the polite way of saying I'm genuinely surprised you haven't pulled all your hair out yet.

"I never sleep." came the honest answer.

Mary gave her tired, but still beautiful partner a look. "Wilbur was barely in pre-school, when somehow Emery got an extremely early case of empty nest syndrome, and she begged me for another baby. When I finally broke down, and agreed, I guess neither of us realized we might get a buy one get one special." Turning to her partner, Mary asked, "Still want four?"

"Ha..." Emery's eyes went wide in horror. "Of course I have no regrets. They're my precious little devils... I mean angels... and I wouldn't trade a moment." Just then a loud crash could be heard down the hallway. Emery stood up, and shouted, "I swear to god, Eunice, if I come in there, and you're covered in any liquid, pee, poo, milk, whatever, I don't care - I'm mailing you to Canada!"

An hour later, dressed in her fourth change of clothes that day, Eunice was seated between her moms, while her and the other kids poked at mostly empty plates with a few chicken nuggets remaining. The adults enjoyed the finest French cuisine that travelled, and everyone was stuffed, with only a few scant fork noises filling the air.

"Can I open my present now?" Judy asked, breaking the satisfied silence.

Baek answered, "Sweetie, your birthday is next week."

With a proud smile, Song pulled a wrapped package from under the table. "Actually, I told her she could open just one at the family party if she was good, and she's been pretty good today, aside from the bugs, and even then, she just wanted to be their friend. I think just one is okay... Besides, I don't want her opening this around a bunch of screaming six-year-olds jacked up on birthday cake, and piñatas."

"Mommy says it's okay, so it's okay with me." Baek took the package from his wife, and set it in front of their daughter, clearing all the plates from around the kids, while Song took a seat on the other side. Opening the card, Judy tried to sound out the words.

"H-happy Birthday, Judy! That's me!" With a cheesy grin, the child pointed to herself with both thumbs. "You'll make mu- mu-sis..."

"Music." Song said, offering a little help.

"...music in our her- hearts for- for- ever." After that a little heart, and the words Mommy and Daddy. That was the hint Judy needed as she tore into the wrapping paper to find exactly what she expected. She'd been taking lessons for a few months, using a rental, until her parents were sure it wasn't a passing fancy, and she'd actually stick with it. It was on this summer

evening, bathed in the low hanging sun, that Judy finally got a child's sized violin all her own. "It's what I always wanted! Thank you, Mommy! Thank you, Daddy! Can I play it now?"

"Of course!" Song was beaming. "Show everyone how talented you are."

While most at the table were happy to entertain the blossoming passion of a child, to Song the first three notes of Three Blind Mice, played over and over again, was the greatest melody she'd ever heard. When Judy was finished, everyone politely clapped, and her parents were thrilled to see she'd taken their words to heart. The violin, and bow found their way back to the case like they were supposed to, and then it was locked up securely, put away before she hurried off to brush her teeth with the other kids.

"Help me tuck them in?" Emery asked, standing from the table, and following at a much slower pace.

"Of course." Song, now barefoot, made her way to the stairs, while everyone else helped clean up.

A short time later, after changing all the kids into their pajamas, and tucking them all lined up in the queen-sized guest bed, denying ten request for a glass of water, and then both moms kissing all four children on their cheeks, before reading the first ten pages of 'The Little Engine That Could', all eight little eyes were closed, and off to dreamland. Emery closed the door behind them with the kind of light touch reserved for safe crackers, and for the first time that day properly exhaled. Returning to the living room, everyone was sitting in front of the fireplace, wine and beers in hand.

"Holy shit, adult time!" The blond mom had to stop herself from shouting halfway through. She then mischievously whispered "Who wants to get baked?"

At first the only takers were Emily, and Andre, but Song started feeling a little mischievous, and decided to travel back to her twenties for the evening. Out on the back porch, a small glass pipe had been passed in a circle twice between the four, when Andre tapped out.

"Sorry, ladies, I'm a lightweight." he explained as he coughed out a lung, and headed back inside.

"We'll be there in a little bit." Song announced, before scooting her adirondack chair up closer to her two best friends.

Emery took another hit off the bowl, and passed it to Emily, before looking up at the few visible stars in the LA metro, and asking, "Hey! Do you guys remember that time we had a three-way at my slumber party, and Emily had to hide under my bed so my mom didn't catch her. You used to be so nervous all the time back then... You couldn't kiss for shit either."

Emily took a hit, and then passed it along to Song. “I remember when you thought folding a pizza in half, and calling it a taco somehow made it taste better.”

“I’m telling you, it does.” Emery replied, sticking her tongue out. “What about you, Song? What’s your favorite memory?”

Song gingerly lit the little piece, and held it up to her puckered painted lips, looked at both of her friends, and a smile of pure joy spread across her lips. “This right here, right now. This is my favorite memory. I’ve got everything I didn’t even know how badly I wanted. I love you guys so much.”

