FROM THE AUTHOR OF "CRIMSON STEPS" AND "ANGELS LIKE YOU"



Amala Versus Kimchi



Amala Versus Kimchi is the perfect Nigerian Korean book.
-Readwithbolu

I love how the FMC wasn't naive and how she worked hard to achieve her dreams.
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AN INTERRACIAL ROMANCE BOOK BY

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AMALA

VERSUS

KIMCHI

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Author's Note



K drama in books? Yes please!

Amala Versus Kimchi is such a treasured book, and I can't wait for you to read it. While Dunni may seem like a *Koreaboo*, I want everyone to think deeply on her love for Asian culture. Her love is pure, and she did not plan on making Ha Neul hers in the first place. Adunni is **NOT** a *Koreaboo* and neither am I.

I also received negative comments for making Ha Neul a Korean. Though this does not bother me, I do not want it to change the mindset of anyone who picks this book up. In no way am I promoting a fetish or obsession with Korean men or Asian men in general. It is completely understood that some may find the setting of this book weird or whatever they may feel, but it is wrong to call this book a fetish, and it is unfair to say the entire book is about falling in love with a Korean man. It is also rude to say I am living my fantasy through this book. I have no enthusiasm in such, and judging the book before reading it is unreasonable. This is a fictional book, and the contents are not meant to bring negative thoughts about any individual. This is the first book of the Interracial Ronance Duology, and the second book will be coming in 2026, featuring a Chinese male main character. Keep in expectation!

Happy reading!

To my Kdrama and Kpop girlies,
This one is entirely for you!



- **Beyond The Horizon - TWICE**
- **Last Dance - YOUHA**
- **Cosmic - Red Velvet**
- **Cover Me - Stray Kids**
- **White Mustang - Lana Del Rey**
- **Slow Dancing - V**
- **Ice Queen - IVE**
- **XOXO - NMIXX**
- **Please Please Please - Sabrina Carpenter**
- **Saturn - SZA**
- **Adore You - Miley Cyrus**
- **September - James Arthur**
- **Don't Hurt Like It Used To - Grace Carter**
- **Maze - Alina Baraz**
- **Someone Like You - Adele**
- **Teddy Bear - STAYC**
- **Butterfly - BTS**
- **I Like It - Stray Kids**
- **Cat And Mouse - Blackswan**

BLURB



Adunni knew that her passion for Asia would take her somewhere big. The music, the food, the beautiful sceneries she saw in dramas—she wanted to see it all. She wanted to sit under a cherry blossom tree and feel the petals fall on her cocoa skin. She didn't care about the people, she wanted to go there for the city. Luck was on her side, as her close friend managed to land her a job at a *Dooshirak* company in Abuja, which was, of course, owned by a Korean family.

Ha Neul had just finished college in America and was eager to return to Korea, but he understood his parents' advice and went to a country that he knew nothing of. He wasn't really happy about coming here, but he found everything interesting most especially the newest employee who had just begun working two weeks before he came. They bond in ways they never thought they would, and as two young people in love, they take their relationship to the next level, despite all the harsh treatment that awaited them—Ha Neul's mother.

Day and night, Adunni wondered if her mother-in-law would ever see her as she truly was. And even after suffering multiple near-death encounters, she still wanted to know the reason why. She wanted to know why her mother-in-law despised her.

Is your love strong enough? To travel to the other side of the earth and live in a place you've never been, do things you've never done, and meet people you never thought you would?

Part One



DAEPYO NIM AND I

One

Adunni



"I've told you multiple times, Dunni. This your obsession is getting too much. Look at your room! Chinese books everywhere. What do you even see in these people? See, this is my last warning, Dunni. Look for a stable job and throw out all this garbage. *Mtchew.*"

The same old words each day, does my mom not get tired? I picked up my wuxia novel and put on my bookshelf that contained a bunch of Asian cultural books and history. You can't blame me, I enjoyed it a lot.

Reading about different cultures helped me to see the similarities and differences between people, and it was not just limited to the Chinese books that my parents always managed to find me reading. I loved Asian culture in general, and it had been a part of my life since teenagehood. It so happened that my parents did not believe in my passion and said I was *wasting away my youth*.

I mean, the economical growth in Nigeria was really bad—handling jobs was not an easy task. Most of my friends who got jobs as soon as we graduated were now jobless because their companies went bankrupt or something. I would rather stay home and read books or watch dramas than struggle to submit my CV at a company that wasn't capable of paying their employees.

I went into the bathroom to get ready for church, and I was already prepared for the lectures my parents would give me in the car. They did this all the time. It was always the same talk about my future and it was getting pretty annoying at this point. *I get it!* I wasn't like Shola who worked at the CBN, nor was I like Ifeoluwa who worked at a real estate company in Lagos.

I was just Adunni Olayanju, my father's daughter. Well, having lost my job two years ago, my parents did not see me as their daughter anymore. I was just "an oversized baby that's eating up all the food in the house", according to my father, Mr. Ayobami Olayanju. I wished my eyes could go

to the back of my head and never come out. My parents were already speaking even before I got into the car. Somehow, I had mastered their speaking technique, so I knew exactly when to block them out or let them in. Let's just say, I didn't let them in throughout the journey to church.

Immediately we got to the entrance, I sighted Vanessa and I abandoned my parents to go stay with her. They couldn't do anything, obviously. Or, would they drag a 28-year-old by the ear to come sit with them? *Hell no.*

We sat down together and I admired the beautiful *Ankara* dress that she had on. Vanessa was my childhood friend, and she seemed to be the only one that cared about my dreams. We equally had dreams of our own, and as good friends, we supported each other no matter what. Vanessa hoped to go to the UK for her masters while I hoped to study in Seoul, and we both had these dreams fresh in our minds.

The only difference was that her parents were supportive and were planning to fund her education, whereas my parents thought I was living in a fool's paradise. All in all, we were gonna make it, I knew that for sure. “So, any luck yet? With the scholarship and all?” Vanessa whispered to me and I shook my head.

“Still didn't get it.” I told her.

“It will all go well, don't worry. Listen, how about you look for a job first? You know you don't have enough money to go anywhere—not even South Africa.” She teased and I bumped her shoulder.

“I have money, Vanessa,” I told her in a serious tone, but I softened my voice when she pursed her lips.

“Let's do this. Let's work till our bones break, for just a year or two. Then we can save enough money for school! Don't you think it would be better, rather than rotting in bed all day, waiting for a miracle?”

I saw sense in what she said. Though she wasn't equally unemployed as I was, she definitely needed a stable job that wasn't under freelance. And my parents thought of me as a pushover. I knew for sure that if I got a job that was promising, they would or they might have helped me with funds for my education. They weren't aware of this—that Shola sent me money monthly with regards to my travels.

Our relationship wasn't that great as a younger sister and an older sister duo, but she did her best as the first daughter. Ifeoluwa, my older brother, was the devil's incarnate. He was just two years older, yet he acted like he was my father and he was such a snob.

Thank goodness he's far away. I don't think I'll be able to breathe well in Abuja if my older brother is around. The money Shola sent and my life savings wasn't enough to leave Africa as Vanessa said. Maybe, South Africa, maybe Dubai, but definitely not Korea. Just the thought of getting to see the first snow, or even a tiny speck of the cherry blossoms made my conviction strong, and I agreed to Vanessa's advice. After church, I was in a much better mood than this morning and I went to an internet cafe to sort out some documents.

After getting ready for bed, I sent in my résumé to different companies, applying for office jobs. I hoped to get into any of these companies and I prayed that night. I prayed for a miracle of some sort. I told God that I was sorry for slacking off for two years and I was now ready for an office job, a 9-5 to be precise.

Somewhere in-between the prayer, I fell asleep and woke up on my cold floor. My nose was blocked and I already knew my day would go bad. My father had already gone to work—he was the headmaster of this primary school that I forgot the name, and my mother worked as a midwife at a clinic. Everyone in my family had a job, and I was just a clown, but my story would change, I could feel it. *Or not.*

I had no luck that week. I got rejected by five out of ten companies, and the other five had not responded. “Maybe this is a bad idea,” I told myself after I closed my laptop and I stared into space.

“Dunni, you know what you want, right? You wanna study in Seoul, right? And visit China and Thailand? Then don't give up!” I said out loud to encourage myself, and I sent more résumés to more companies. Just because I didn't get into five, didn't mean I wouldn't ever get in.

I can do this.



“I CANNOT DO THIS,” I groaned and put my head on the table, while Vanessa comforted me. *One month has passed and I still have not gotten a job. Maybe I'm unlucky, who knows?* Vanessa, the person who encouraged me to work, already had a job at this company that dealt with automobiles or something. Her pay was huge, like massive. And if she worked for just a year, she could sponsor her trip and even live there for as long as she wanted to. And here I was, failing interviews like a fool.

I didn't tell my parents about it because I didn't want them to say what they always said when things didn't go my way.

I told you so. No, no you did not "told me so", mom, you had no idea I was gonna do this.

"Hey, don't give up just yet, I'll help you. I promise. My boss is Chinese, he might know a few Asian CEOs in Abuja, who knows? They're always open to new employees. Don't worry, okay? I got you. You wanna go to Seoul, don't you?" She asked me and I nodded.

"And you wanna see your favorite actors and musicians?" She asked again and I nodded with conviction. "And you wanna read the books in the large library, and eat ramen by the Han River, right?" Vanessa asked me again—this time her voice sounded strong, and so was my morale.

"Thanks, Vanessa. You're the best." I told her and took a sip of my cocktail. *I can't give up now, I can't, in fact, I won't. If Vanessa can do it, I can too*. *I won't give up.*

God must have heard Vanessa and I talking. After that day, I didn't lose hope. Though I got a lot of rejections, I still kept a strong face, praying that my story would change, and it did. Vanessa called me over to her workplace.

I arrived at the large company and asked the lobbyist for Vanessa. I think she told me earlier that she was the consultant, but it slipped my mind and I ended up telling her I was looking for Vanessa Francis. I was ushered to a seat.

Vanessa came over and she hugged me, making me get a bit suspicious. "What's this behavior? Did something good happen?" I asked her and she smiled mischievously.

"Come, quick. The CEO wants to see you!"

"CEO *as how*? What did you tell him about me? Vanessa, tell me the truth." I warned and she laughed awkwardly.

"Dunni, just trust me *na*. It's me *oh*." She said and I decided to let my guard down. If *she manages to mess up my chances of getting employed, I will never speak to her again*. We took the elevator and went up to the sixth floor, the last floor. I disliked elevators a lot, and I always felt dizzy after using them, but I had gotten better in the last ten years, otherwise, I would have used the stairs. My knees would hurt, but it would definitely go away.

The chances of the elevator getting stuck like in the Elevator Baby movie are slim, but never zero. We got to the CEO's office and Vanessa

knocked on it gently. A male voice answered, and we walked into this wide office that had a perfect view of the road and other high buildings.

The floors were white, there were Chinese paintings on the walls, accompanied by many vases, a bonsai tree, a bookshelf with a few books that I had at home, two large white sofas and finally, a black desk and three chairs. Behind the desk was a Chinese man in his forties. His hair was slightly gray, accompanied by smooth skin without a single wrinkle. He was dressed in a black suit, and the slate had his name boldly written on it.

Zhang Ming, CEO of Jin Tian Motors.

“Mr. Zhang, this is my Asian loving friend that I told you about,” Vanessa said to him and pushed me forward.

“Ah, Miss Adunni, right?” His *Chinglish* was cute.

“Go-good morning, sir,” I squeaked with a shaky voice and he chuckled.

"I know you can speak Chinese, don't be shy. Vanessa told me that you need a job, and I'm happy to help."

"Really? Thank you very much, Mr. Zhang. I am very grateful."

"Don't worry, it is my pleasure. My Korean friend runs a lunch box company here, and she is happy that you can come. They are looking for a Nigerian who can speak Chinese and Korean."

"Okay, sir, thank you very much for your help."

"No problem, I will let Vanessa know the details so that you can go to the company. I have already informed my friend."

"Okay. Thank you very much, sir. Have a wonderful day. By the way, your office is very nice. I have some of your books at home. I enjoy reading them very much."

"Thank you, Adunni. We will see each other again soon. You can contact me anytime through Vanessa. I hope you enjoy working there."

"Goodbye, sir."

We finally left his office and I squealed, hugging Vanessa immediately. “I love you so much, Vanessa!” I told her and she chuckled.

“It's like you'll teach me Chinese too oh. My colleagues are hard to understand sometimes.” She stuck her lower lip out and I laughed.

“I saw how you were staring at us when we spoke, you're so funny. Don't worry, I'll teach you, *you hear*?” I said to her, and she nodded. She gave me a tour of the company and I greeted some of her workmates before she printed my documents for me. I didn't stop staring at it.

“You'll bore a hole into it if you keep staring at it like that,” she teased and walked me out. I ordered an Uber to take me to the place. My heart was beating fast, really fast. Thank God I wore a corporate outfit today, I could not imagine having to run back home to dress up.

God, you did it. I stood in front of the large, extremely large building with a sign: *BadaShirak.* I was doing it, I was chasing my dream. All I needed to do was go in and sign a contract, but it was easier said than done. I hadn't worked in two years and I didn't want to fail myself or my dreams.

Two

Adunni



I had seen this company before, but I never really noticed it.

It looked a few years old and so many vans were coming out through the second gate, each van having the logo of the company on them. I could only imagine what exactly was in the lunchbox. The guards didn't let me in until they called the secretary of the CEO. A guard then told me to go to the fifth floor. I got on the elevator and slowly approached the CEO's office.

The secretary was a Korean lady, and her beauty was blinding. She looked like she was in her thirties, and she was a bit tan. Her hair was in a ponytail, with long bangs that covered her eyebrows.

“Are you Ms. Adunni?” She asked me in an American accent and I nodded, feeling my cheeks burn. Why? I had no idea. “Okay, the CEO is in, you can go.” I thanked her before I knocked on the door, to which a feminine voice replied.

“Come in.” I slowly walked in.

It was the typical office setting that I'd seen in dramas—renaissance paintings, shelves with books, a safe, two sofas, a fridge, a glass center table and a mahogany desk with two chairs.

An elderly lady was seated behind her chair, dressed in a pink dress that sparkled.

The name slate was on the desk and I read the name:

Han Soo Min, CEO of BadaShirak Nigeria.

“Ms. Adunni?” She said to me, and I was not in control of my body. *I bowed*. **I BOWED**.

“Good afternoon, ma'am,” I said to her. *Why not just say annyeonghaseyo? Ode.*

She smiled after my courtesy, and heat rose to my cheeks from embarrassment. *Why did I do that?*

“Have a seat, Ms. Adunni. I've been expecting you.”

I did as she said and I sat down in front of her, looking away as I could not maintain eye contact. “May I have your documents?”

“Alright, ma'am.”

"Are you shy? You can be comfortable."

"Ah, yes. Thank you."

"You speak Korean well. Did you study Korean?"

"I actually learned Korean."

"Good. Your qualifications are good. We are planning to send more Korean-speaking staff soon, so we need at least three employees who can speak Korean. You also have good experience. You will be an analyst. Is that okay?"

"Yes, that’s right. Thank you very much, CEO."

"Here is the contract. Payment will begin at the end of the month. You can start working tomorrow. Welcome aboard."

"Thank you. I look forward to working here."

"Alright. You can talk to Secretary Min outside."

"Alright."

I was shaking with excitement as I read through the contract and signed immediately. A job, finally!

All I wanted to do was to go home and rub it in my parents' faces. And I did just that. They couldn't believe it, literally. I had to show them my contract and they read carefully, obviously ignoring the Korean writings above each English sentence.

“So you managed to get a job at your Chinese people place, *abi*?” My mother asked and I rolled my eyes.

“No, mom. At a Korean company in Nigerian. They make pre packaged lunchboxes for students and people who are too tired to cook. All they can do it to microwave the lunchbox, and it's ready for consumption. No need to cook or stress yourself.”

“I must say, that is quite impressive. So that when your mother is not around, I can use it. Bring some over when you start working, let me *analyze* it.” *Analyze it abi eat it?*

“Yes sir,” I told him, and he said he would send me pocket money. My mother, surprisingly, said she would get me some work clothes during the week and I had to smile at their offers. It was actually funny to see them switch as soon as I got a job. Morning finally came, and I was so ready to leave home. It was about thirty minutes away from home, so I got up by 7,

and was out of the house by 8:30. I was five minutes late on my first day of work.



“GOOD MORNING,” I SAID to the female worker sitting opposite me, and she greeted me with a smile.

“Morning. I'm Tessa. Nice to meet you.”

Damn, it's been so long. I hope I don't mess up this work. It's safe to say that nothing bad happened that day, and I didn't go out for lunch. There was a lot of work and research to be done and I wanted to, at least, finish one-third of it.

I was able to finish it all at the end of the day, and my stomach was growling fiercely after I was done.

“You did well for your first day,” a man, who had been sitting by my right all day, said to me.

“Thank you.”

He stretched out his hand for a handshake. “I'm Joshua, but Josh is fine. I just started working here last month. You'll like it a lot, I promise.”

He introduced me to the other seven workers who were equally as nice. Two were Korean, and one was Chinese. I was given two lunchboxes as a souvenir for my first day. I received it with cheeks red from embarrassment. I didn't deserve anything because I had just started working. The CEO thought differently however, as she noticed me working on the company during break time. I honestly did not want an award for it, I was only doing my job.

However, Tessa said it was a courtesy of the company and I humbly took it. I went home and presented it to my parents who were astonished by the fancy packaging and after heating it up, they were delighted to find rice in it.

“That's one thing we have in common. Rice.” My father commented as he looked at the dish. Rice, vegetables, salmon, seaweed, avocados, eggs and chicken filled the box, and they didn't bother to keep a single bite for me.

“Sorry, Dunni. Looks like you'll have to eat *that* your Indomie in the kitchen.” My mother said to me and I rolled my eyes.

“Mom, you know I have to order those from Lagos, so I don't eat it anyhow. And it's not “Indomie”, it's ramen!” I whined and went into the

kitchen to make some *Buldak* ramen.

“That's the fifth one, now I have to order again. How annoying.” I stayed in bed and watched the C-drama that I barely had time to watch.

Today was a bit stressful, but I managed to scale through. I needed to go on trips around the company, visiting every single section. I didn't think my job was this tiresome.

It was fascinating seeing the machines make the boxes from hot plastic, and watching how the workers assembled each food item was quite impressive.

“Work etiquette, check. Precautions, check. Cleanliness and hygiene, check. Fire extinguishers and other safety measures, in handy.” I ticked off the boxes and stretched my arms. *What a hectic day.*

I was in charge of handling the minutes the next day. The CEO listened well and gave corrections when she needed to. I admired how she spoke. She wasn't exactly fluent, but she was obviously trying, even if her accent slipped out.

“Ms. Dunni, any suggestions?” She turned her attention to me and I was flustered.

“Me? Oh, uh. So, uhm from my research. I think it would be better if the packaging came in different colors the way the food flavors differ. And adding the allergy labels to the top instead of the bottom will help a lot, I guess.” I said in an embarrassed voice, and she nodded in approval.

“That's a good suggestion, write it down and submit to Mr. Sim in the packaging department.” She said to me and I nodded.

“Now everyone, I want to make an announcement. I will be returning to Korea to handle the company there. It's been ten years working with the Nigerian branch and it's been such a pleasure to be amongst you all, but I must return and take care of things.”

I heard groanings in the room and everyone had a long face.

“Mrs. Han, please don't leave. We love you here, we don't think we can handle things without you.” Mrs. Rosa said to her and she laughed.

“Rosa, you've worked with me for eight years, you're the most diligent worker I know. And I know for sure that you will do fine without me. Look at your *hoobaes*, they have you to look up to. I know you'll do your best, I have full confidence in you. And you all, don't slack around, okay?” She said to us and everyone nodded.

“Ma'am, who'll be in power when you're gone?” I asked.

“My son is coming. He will be your new CEO. My husband wants to hand over the company to him, but we want him to gain experience. And what better way to get full experience than to work in a country like Nigeria? Personally, I think Nigeria is a country that will help you develop serious business strategies, ones that you never thought you could come up with. In Korea, he can get anything done with the snap of a finger. But here, here isn't like there. You have to work hard for everything you do. This is the only place where he can be treated as an equal. The staff in Korea treat us like gods, they act like robots—no emotions or feelings.

That's what's annoying, you know? When you just want to be a normal person, but you can't. All because of the status that you hold. So, I told my husband to send our son to Abuja and let him handle the company here first. By the end of two years, I'm sure he'll be able to work in Korea better.”

Mrs. Han left with Secretary Min after two weeks, and we received five more Korean employees the same week. All of them seemed to be pompous and didn't speak to any of us, not even the fellow Koreans working with us.

Tessa wanted to curse them out so bad, but I told her it wouldn't be a good idea. She rolled her eyes. “*What are they feeling like please?”*

“Just be nice, Tessa,” I told her and she scoffed. The next day, the new secretary came in. He was wearing a suit and he had large glasses on. On his employee badge was his name: *Kim Hyeon Sook*. He didn't bother to say a greeting to us. Instead, he ordered the janitors to dust the former CEO’s office. Three large boxes from the storage room were moved up as well. That was when I knew there was trouble, serious trouble.

“Are we about to enter a K-drama?” Tessa whispered to me, and I laughed.

“I think it's a C-drama, honestly.” Er Duo, our only Chinese staff, added.

“The CEO is coming,” the secretary said before he left and we all stood up, waiting expectantly for this so-called *CEO*. The minute the elevator pinged, I knew hell wasn't far away. The most beautiful man I had ever seen in my life walked in wearing an Armani suit and boy, was he disgusted.

“Your new CEO, Mr. Han Ha Neul.” *Welcome to Nigeria, I guess.*

Three

Ha Neul



"Why are we here again?"

"Mr. Han, we're here because your parents want you to gain experience in a country that is not biased. You just got back from America, so you need to learn how to manage the company before you can go."

I rolled my eyes in the car and checked out the scenery. "Not bad. What part of Abuja is this?" I asked.

"It's called the Central Business District, sir. There are lots of Asians here."

"I see. *Joha*. Let's hope the employees are exactly as my mother said they would be."

I closed my eyes for a few minutes before the car stopped and then, I saw the company for the first time. It looked exactly like the one in Korea, and I was actually surprised. I expected it to be a little bit different, but no. It was equally as busy. A lot of vans passed by as well and the new driver, Mr. Caleb, soon parked the car.

"Mr. Han, this way leads to the elevator," he informed me and I thanked him for a smooth drive. The driver who had brought me from the airport was rough, and I was utterly scared. I thought it would be my first and last day in Nigeria.

"I'll get everything ready, sir." Secretary Kim said to me and went up first.

"Sir, I noticed you two are not speaking Korean. Mrs. Han always spoke Korean with Ms. Min, so I expected you to, you know, speak in Korean. Sorry for disturbing *sha.*" I chuckled at his accent and found it intriguing. He was an elderly man with a few strands of gray hair in his afro and when he smiled, wrinkles formed on his skin.

"Mr. Caleb, I lived in America for eight years. Secretary Kim studied English in college. I prefer to speak English honestly, and he understands. I

just want to blend in well, you know? And, if I may ask, what's *sha*?"

He chuckled at my question and turned to face me. "See *ehn*, Mr. Han. When you are saying a sentence that you're not too sure how the person is going to react, just add *sha*. It makes them understand that you mean no harm. For example, if someone says: Mr. Han, will you live in Nigeria for long? You say: I don't know, maybe. But if things go well, fine. I'm not too sure *sha*. Say *sha* when you're uncertain. Was that a good explanation?"

I was amused. "I don't know...*sha*." I said to him, and he laughed.

"Is tipping considered rude in Nigeria? I like you for some reason, you're cool." He smiled sheepishly.

"I have a tip box, sir," he gestured to the blue box that was beside him. I brought out my wallet, giving him a few notes that my mother had prepared beforehand.

"*Ah*! Mr. Han. Twenty thousand naira? No *na*. It's too much sir. Take back eighteen sir, two thousand is okay for me." He said humbly and pushed the money back to me.

"Now, you're being rude. Mr. Caleb. It's from my heart. Take it."

"It's just because you said it *oh*. If not, I wouldn't leave until you take it back. Thank you so much, sir. Secretary Kim is coming now."

"How is the office?" I asked Secretary Kim as we entered the elevator.

"It's good sir. Good enough for you."

I nodded in approval. He never sugarcoated. If it was good, it was good. "We're greeting the employees first," he said to me as soon as we arrived.

I took off my sunglasses and slowly walked into the large office space. Cream walls, a TV, bookshelves, a water dispenser and a coffee machine, large windows, and of course, multiple desks with employees who were staring at me oddly.

"Your new CEO, Mr. Han Ha Neul." Secretary Kim announced, and I stared at each and every one of them.

They all bowed.

"Welcome to Abuja, Mr. Han. I am Rosa, the team leader. We've been expecting you. This is Yasminee, the assistant team leader. Our social media manager, Mark. Our consultant, Josh. This is Tessa, our Graphic designer, and this is Habib, the content manager. Er Duo, Tae Oh and Chae Min are our software managers, or the tech people." She introduced them, and I nodded in approval.

"Then the other five Koreans?" I looked at them, and they bowed again.

"Hello, *Daepyo Nim*!"

"*Aigoo*."

I quickly waved them off. This is why I chose to speak English. I sounded awkward.

“They're full of energy! They just joined yesterday, so they're still getting used to the work.” The team leader said in enthusiasm.

I finally took notice of the only woman that seemed to be absent-minded. “And who's this?” I asked, gesturing to the Nigerian woman by my left. She was wearing a purple dress and white heels, and her natural afro was in a bun.

“I'm so sorry, I forgot about our analyst. This is Ms. Adunni. She will be submitting the reports to you every Friday, and she handles the minutes during the meetings.”

I met the lady's eyes and something in them screamed interest. I must have misunderstood her—she wasn't absentminded. She was staring at me intently, like she was trying to read my mind. I looked away immediately.

“Uhh, I hope we can all work together peacefully, I guess. You can always speak to Secretary Kim regarding important matters. I'll be out now.”

I quickly got into the elevator, leaving Secretary Kim to get acquainted with everyone. The office was quite nice—it was my mother's style. Some of my paintings from America were here, and it felt good to be able to see them while in this unknown place. I walked to the glass windows and stared outside, watching the vans come in and out. You could literally smell the aroma from the packaging buildings. I chuckled. Maybe living here wouldn't be bad at all.

I had spent an hour on a few research papers, and I was ready to rest. Suddenly, Secretary Kim came in without knocking and he dropped a large binder containing paperwork on the desk.

"What's this?"

"Contracts, paperwork and taxes."

"Ah, Hyung! The work is too much."

"I know. Now, CEO, get to work!"

"I dislike you, Hyung."



"ARE YOU DONE?"

"Yeah. It was so tiring."

"*Aigoo*, our Ha Neul is all grown up."

"Hyung, are you crazy? I'll wait for you downstairs."

"Okay."

I went downstairs and the elevator stopped at the third floor. The analyst walked in after bowing and I did the same. She was quite awkward and I cleared my throat, looking away so she wouldn't stare at me with those big brown eyes of hers. It made her look like a doe—something so innocent, yet ready to kill.

“Mr. Han, your suit looks really nice,” she said to me, and I slowly looked at her.

She was smiling—a smile that was sincere. Not the type of smiles I got in America or Korea. They were either flirty or forced, and I hated both. But, that was the first time a Nigerian lady smiled at me genuinely, and it made me feel flustered.

“Is it from Armani?” She asked me while staring at my chest, and I fake coughed.

“I'm surprised you know Armani,” I muttered and went out of the elevator.

“Why, sir? Is Armani a brand that I can't know, sir?” *Why is this lady following me to the garage?*

“I don't know, you tell me. Now, unless you're trying to come home with me, I suggest you find your route.” I said to her and she looked around, feeling embarrassed immediately.

“Apologies, sir. I came to the wrong floor. Have a lovely evening.” She bowed again, a bow that was perfectly 90°. I was impressed. Either she was familiar with Korean culture or she had picked up the gesture from the other colleagues.

“Our driver's licenses will be available in a month. Until then, Mr. Caleb will drive us.”

I was informed after I got into the car, and Mr. Caleb greeted me. “Good evening, sir. You still look bright despite the long day.”

“Do all Nigerians know how to sweet-talk, or is it just you, Sir Caleb?” I teased, and he chuckled.

“I wonder,” he said before driving off. I saw the employees standing by the road, including the analyst whose name I had long forgotten. I would need to ask Secretary Kim later on.

“We aren't staying at the hotel any longer, sir. This is an estate where many important people in Nigeria live. I've forgotten the name.” Secretary Kim said to me, and I asked Mr. Caleb about it.

“Mr. Han, this is Walter Hills estate. Many senators and ministers live here. It is like the second Aso Rock, honestly.”

“Who lives in this...Aso Rock?” I asked him.

“The president, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, and a few other important people, I guess. I'm not so familiar with it.” He replied.

“That's great. Really great. Nigeria is such an interesting country. I can't wait to see what it has to show me.”

I went on social media to text my friends. When I told them where I was, they were intrigued. They didn't believe me at first, but after I sent them images of me at the airport, their smiles fell through the video call. Jonathan, an African American, joked about me getting a Nigerian name and I was appalled. *Chinedu* or something like that. It didn't suit me at all.

The next few days were cool, but my wrists hurt a lot from signing all day. During lunch, Secretary Kim got us Thai food. “I thought it would be a little bit different, but it's the same, and it's so nice.” I said to him, and he chuckled.

“I'll get us Japanese food tomorrow. There are so many restaurants I wanna try. Let's have a company dinner, what do you think?”

“This isn't Korea, bro. However, if there's a good place that has good *Hanwoo* and *soju*, maybe I'll consider it.”

“I got it,” he said to me.

“I trust you.”

I was ready to clock out when there was a knock on the door. The analyst came in. “Mr. Han, I have the reports.” She stood before the desk, and I groaned inwardly.

Four

Ha Neul



“Why are you bringing it during closing hours? You had all the time in the world.”

She smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry, sir. There was a lot of work, and I completely forgot."

"This is part of your work, isn't it? I don't want to hear excuses next time, Ms... what's your name?" I asked, noticing a flicker of irritation cross her face before she quickly masked it.

"Adunni. But Dunni is fine."

"Dunni, nice name. So, Ms. Dunni, can I have the reports?"

She hesitated before finally handing them over. I scanned through the pages, everything appeared acceptable—except for a few glaring issues.

"Why are some employees arriving at 10? Isn't the workday supposed to start at 9? And others are leaving as late as 7? What kind of report is this? Do you think it's acceptable to submit something like this to me? And here —out of the 3,000 lunchboxes that are supposed to be delivered daily, only 2,970 made it. What happened to the missing ones?"

She nervously twisted the fabric of her dress, her expression growing anxious. "They were damaged in transit, sir. The driver said there was a minor accident. He apologized and promised to be more cautious in the future."

"Fire him," I said flatly.

Her eyes widened in disbelief. "Fire him? Sir, it was just a small accident. Isn’t that a bit extreme?" She dared to challenge.

“This is crazy,” I muttered. “Ms. Dunni, I don’t think you’re in a position to give me advice. You’ve also failed to do your own work properly. I don’t need you telling me how to handle my employees. Now, inform the department manager to fire the worker in charge. Understood?”

She didn’t meet my gaze, simply nodded, and left the office in silence. The moment the door closed, a sharp headache pulsed through my temples.

Secretary Kim, always attuned to my mood, noticed my irritation without a word. He quietly adjusted the AC, a gesture I appreciated about him—his tact.

We'd known each other since high school, where he was my senior. Even after I left Korea, we stayed in touch. When I returned, he agreed to be my secretary and took care of everything, leaving me free to remain idle. I didn't lift a finger. I only showed up to one of my mother's charity events, where her friends flocked around me, reminiscing about how they carried me as a baby or let me stay at their homes when my parents worked late. How was I supposed to remember any of that?

Politely, I excused myself, finally escaping their chatter. Just as I thought I was free, a young woman approached me—and I couldn't believe my eyes.

"Hey! Kim Dam! It's been a long time! You look so different!"

"Good to see you too, Oppa. You've grown taller. I heard you came back last month."

"Yeah. How's your dad? My mom told me your mother is in the hospital, is she okay?"

"My parents are good. My mother had a heart attack, but she's doing well now."

"I'm glad. Hope to see you around."

"Thanks a lot. I'm gonna go meet your mom now."

Dam walked over to join my mom, and I couldn't believe how much she'd changed in the eight years since I'd last seen her. Her dad had been my father's best friend, and together they owned Wol Hotel. Growing up, we spent a lot of time together, and I still remember how hard she cried when I left.

In high school, everyone knew her as my younger sister, though some liked to spread rumors that we were dating. I'd always seen her as a sister, so I was uncomfortable with those rumors and told people to stop. To my surprise, she got upset and didn't speak to me for a week. I couldn't figure out what I had done wrong.

When her family came over the following week, I tried to talk to her, but she kept ignoring me. Eventually, she broke her silence and admitted that she didn't see me as just a friend—she had feelings for me, and had liked me since middle school. When I gently rejected her, she cried, but she understood. Afterward, we went back to being friends.

Six months later, I had to leave, and she was devastated. But she understood, and I promised her I would never forget her.



THE NEXT MORNING, I tackled the stack of paperwork Secretary Kim had cleverly tucked into my suitcase without my knowledge. As I worked my way through the files, I reached the newest records. One name in particular caught my eye, and I paused to read it carefully.

Adunni Jillian Olayanju, born March 3rd, 1997.

“She didn't work for two years? How nice.” Something about her personal life was interesting—it said here that she could speak Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Yoruba and English, but she didn't mention it to me. Or was she supposed to? It wasn't important information. “Did she understand what I said in the office?” I wondered. “Well, it doesn't matter. She doesn't know that I know she understands Korean, so I’ll just act like nothing happened.”

5'4? No wonder I could see the top of her head. At 6'2, I couldn't help but feel a bit disappointed. I had read online that Nigerian women were usually between 5'6 and 5'11, but she was closer to the average height of a Korean woman.

"She only started last month, and my mother’s already left a glowing review on her file. ‘Great working skills.’ Please. I’ll decide for myself whether she’s a good worker. So far, she’s not doing a great job." I tossed the files aside and stepped out for some fresh air.

As cars drove by, a few people waved at me, and I waved back. It felt oddly refreshing. In America and Korea, no one paid you any mind, but here, people actually seemed to care. I stood outside, watching the sun set behind the palm trees, their leaves swaying gently in the breeze. The sprinklers were watering the flowers in front of the house, adding a sense of calm to the moment.

Still, I couldn't help but feel a little annoyed that there were no snacks in the pantry. I quickly texted Secretary Kim, asking him to bring some over when he had the chance.

He didn’t live far, and, true to form, he arrived in less than two hours.

"Hyung, did you run?"

"No, I was actually at the supermarket when you called. There were lots of Korean snacks too. And there was *soju* too, but I forgot to buy it. Sorry,

Ha Neul."

"Don't worry. It's okay, Hyung. Anyways, thanks for the snacks. It feels like I'm in Korea again. I'll see you on Monday, bye Hyung."

"Okay. Goodbye, CEO."

I waved Secretary Kim off and went inside to check out everything he'd brought. "Thank goodness they have *Binch*," I muttered in relief, snacking on a few before stashing the rest in the pantry. Afterward, I made some *Shin* ramen and settled in front of the TV for the evening. I hadn't planned anything for the next day, but the idea of going out and sightseeing crossed my mind.

The next morning, Mr. Caleb showed up sooner than I expected. "Good morning, Mr. Han. Sorry for coming earlier; my church is nearby," he explained, catching my attention.

"Oh, no problem at all," I said. Then, on a whim, I added, "How about I join you? I used to attend church a few times in America. My parents are regulars, but I'm not that strong in the faith. I'd like to go for the experience."

He gave me a look like I had just grown another head, but quickly recovered and took the car keys from me. "I'll get the car ready, sir. Just give me a few minutes."

Once I got into the car, he complimented my outfit. I was dressed simply in a brown Burberry suit and had my Cartier watch on. "Thanks. I like your... what's it called?" I asked, gesturing to his traditional attire.

"It's called an *agbada*, sir. It's popular among Yorubas and other West African countries," he replied. "Would you like me to get one for you?"

I chuckled, "I don't know, *sha*." He laughed too, and I asked, "So, where are we headed?"

"The Glory Dome, sir. It's a popular church, just about twenty minutes from here," Mr. Caleb informed me.

"Okay, sounds interesting. I can't wait," I replied, and he chuckled as we drove through streets unfamiliar to me. Along the way, I noticed many people dressed in traditional attire, and for a moment, I tried to picture myself in one. I'd probably look out of place.

"We're here," he announced, pulling up to an enormous building that resembled an egg yolk. Cars filled the parking lot, and loud music blared from the speakers, nearly vibrating the air around us. I put on my AirPods for some sound protection.

"My family is already inside, sir. You're welcome to sit with us if you'd like," he offered. I nodded and followed him, keeping my sunglasses on in hopes of blending in. Despite that, I could feel the stares—mostly from little kids and a few older folks. *What's the matter? Never seen a Korean-American before?*

"Damn," I muttered under my breath as we entered the auditorium. It was massive, easily the largest I'd ever been in. A man was preaching, and the booming sound of the speakers almost made me wince. How were people sitting here so calmly? Mr. Caleb led me to a row with two open seats, and I sat down cautiously, suddenly feeling self-conscious in the midst of so many people.

Claustrophobia soon crept in, but I refused to show it. Instead, I slowed my breathing and focused on calming my racing heart. Once I did that, the chaos around me seemed to fade, though the blaring speakers were still a headache. When the service finally ended, I wasted no time making my way out before the crowd could trample me in their post-sermon excitement.

"I survived, thank God," I muttered to myself as I stepped outside, relieved to have escaped. Just before I reached the end of the steps, a voice called my name. I looked up, and standing there, to my surprise, was Ms. Dunni, the analyst.



"MR. HAN! WHAT ARE YOU doing here? This is such a surprise."

Before I could respond, she grabbed my hand and pulled me downstairs, just before a large crowd was about to crush me. We reached the parking areas and I realized that her small hands were around mine, holding me tightly.

"Ms. Dunni." I gestured to my hand in hers and she immediately let go, apologizing immediately.

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't want you to get hurt."

"It's fine. You saved me. So, you can speak Korean, I see."

"Ah, yes. A little."

"Is that so? Okay. I didn't think I'd see you here. Guess this place is actually popular. But, is it always this noisy? I can still feel my feet vibrating."

She laughed. It was such a beautiful melody and I wanted to hear it again. It was at this point that I noticed that she was wearing a traditional

outfit as well—one that was completely different from her normal English work clothes.

"Pretty."

I muttered under my breath without thinking, only realizing I'd spoken aloud when I saw the confusion on her face. Embarrassed, I tried to recover. “Were you talking to me?” she asked, still perplexed.

“No, no, I meant the church,” I said quickly, feeling my cheeks heat up. “It’s nice—kind of shaped like a *gyeran*. I might come back if they dial down the noise a bit.”

She laughed, and I quickly looked away, trying not to say anything else that might embarrass me further. That's when I noticed two older people approaching us.

“Hello, young man,” the woman greeted me cheerfully. “We saw you talking to our daughter. Are you her boyfriend, by any chance?”

I was taken aback, not expecting that.

“Mummy! What are you doing? This is my boss!” Ms. Dunni quickly pulled them aside, mortified. I cleared my throat, trying to maintain my composure.

“Oh, our apologies!” the woman said hurriedly, clearly flustered.

“We didn’t mean to intrude. It’s just... we’ve never seen Dunni talking to a man before. But Dunni, didn’t you say your boss was a woman? *Abi* am I losing my memory?” her father chimed in, his tone lighthearted.

I chuckled, appreciating his sense of humor. “No, sir. I’m her new boss—her previous boss is my mother. Nice to meet you both. I'm Ha Neul, Han Ha Neul.” I extended my hand, and they seemed pleasantly surprised by my fluency in English.

“What a fine voice you have! Dunni, your boss is better than that witch you worked for two years ago,” her mother remarked cheerfully. “Mr. Ha Neul, did I pronounce that correctly?” I nodded, a small smile forming on my lips.

“Would it be okay if we invited you for lunch? You must be feeling lonely in this unfamiliar place. Please don’t say no.” Her enthusiasm was comforting, but Dunni jumped in, clearly embarrassed.

“Absolutely not, Mom! He's a busy man; let him be.” She glanced at me, flustered. “I’m really sorry for my parents' abrupt behavior. We should be going now.”

Despite her disapproval, I felt determined to make the most of the day. Her parents seemed genuinely nice, and I was interested in chatting with them a bit longer. “Don’t listen to her, ma’am, sir. I’m totally free and would love to join you for lunch. Thank you so much for the invitation.”

Dunni’s eyes widened in disbelief, and she quickly masked her shock. “Good! Did you come with a car?” her father asked. I nodded again.

“Okay, let’s do this! Dunni, ride with him, and we’ll meet you at home. How’s that?” he suggested, and I was all for it.

“Alright then, let’s get going! See you soon!” They waved as we made our way, and I returned the gesture.

“Sir, you really didn’t have to accept,” Dunni said, a hint of annoyance in her tone. “My parents can be nosy sometimes, and I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable.”

For some reason, I found her adorable. “Ms. Dunni, it’s fine,” I reassured her. “I’ll call my driver now; he should be with his family. Let’s go to the car.”

When we reached the car, she gasped in awe. “Am I going to enter a Range Rover today?”

“You’ve never been inside a Range Rover before?” I asked, surprised at her reaction. She shook her head vigorously.

“Not at all, sir. I’m so excited! And this is the latest version, if I’m not mistaken.” Her eyes sparkled with amazement as she took in the car, and I couldn’t help but smile. She had this infectious enthusiasm that was hard to resist.

As soon as she turned to meet my gaze, I quickly looked away and called Mr. Caleb. He arrived soon, but unfortunately, he relayed that he wouldn’t be able to drive me back home because his daughter was having a medical emergency.

“Mr. Caleb, if it’s very important, you can just go, and I’ll drive him. I have my driver’s license with me,” Ms. Dunni offered, her determination clear. Both of them turned to me, seeking my approval.

“No way! What if she kills me? I don’t trust women with the wheel. They drive with aggression,” I protested, cringing at the memory of Stella wrecking my Chevrolet three years ago. But as Mr. Caleb received a call from his wife, urging him to come home quickly, I had to relent.

“Fine, Ms. Dunni can drive,” I finally conceded, feeling a twinge of regret already. *Let’s just hope she doesn’t kill us both.*

“Thank you so much, sir!” she exclaimed, her face lighting up with joy as Mr. Caleb handed her the keys. “Are you ready, sir?” she asked once we were both in the car. I nodded, my stomach twisting with worry.

Five

Adunni



I was actually driving a Range Rover, and Vanessa wasn't here to see it. Mr. Han looked nervous as if he was scared I might wreck his precious car, but I had it under control. Even though it had been two months since I last drove, I hadn't lost my touch. I made sure to drive carefully; after all, this car was worth millions.

As we cruised through the streets, he looked out the window, a slow smile spreading across his face as he took in the different buildings and people lining the road. Not gonna lie, he was dreamy, but he had a knack for acting like a jerk sometimes.

Today, however, Mr. Han was in a surprisingly good mood, and I was planning to tell him about the fired worker later on.

"Stop staring at me," he suddenly said, breaking my train of thought.

I glanced up through the rearview mirror, but quickly looked away, feeling heat rise to my cheeks. How could I have been so obvious? "I was just looking back for oncoming cars," I lied, gripping the steering wheel tightly.

"Really? So why are you flustered? I mean, you're even blushing. I can see it even if I can't see it," he teased, and I wanted nothing more than for the ground to open up and swallow me whole.

"The weather is hot, sir," I quickly retorted, turning on the AC, but he shivered immediately.

"I think not, don't you, Ms. Dunni?" he replied, and goosebumps formed on my skin from the way he said my name.

I am a fool. Dunni, you are not in a K-drama. This is real life, stop thinking about your boss!

"Sorry, sir," I said, quickly turning off the AC. The car fell silent. When we arrived, he stepped out of the car just as I was about to open the gate.

"Sir! You're not supposed to come out until I've taken the car inside!" I whined, and he looked at me, confused. My neighbors were notoriously

nosy, and I didn't want them flooding our house the moment they caught sight of him.

"Why? What's wrong?" he asked, his eyebrows raised.

Without answering, I pushed him gently into the house, and he stumbled a bit. "Hey!" he yelled, half-laughing at my urgency. I flashed him an apologetic smile as I opened the gate and parked the car beside my dad's Hilux.

He stood with his arms folded, a curious look on his face. I walked towards him slowly, head down. "You pushed your boss. Care to explain?" he asked, a grumpy tone coloring his words.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Han. My neighbors are quite nosy, and I didn't want them to see you. Nigerians can be frustrating at times, you know?" I said with an awkward smile. He looked away, clearing his throat.

"Whatever. Let's go in."

I led him inside, where he looked around the house, nodding in approval at every turn. It was a basic Nigerian household—nothing extravagant. We were middle class, so I hoped he wouldn't expect anything too fancy. The living room featured four sofas arranged around a black rug, a TV mounted on the wall, a refrigerator in the corner, and four black dining chairs surrounding an enamel table.

"Mummy! Daddy! Mr. Han is here!" I called out as we stepped inside. My mother, who had been busy in the kitchen, came with a warm smile on her face.

"Welcome to our humble abode, Mr. Han," she said, beaming at him.

"Thank you so much for inviting me. This is the first time I'm in a Nigerian household; you have such a nice place," he replied, bowing slightly, which made my mother chuckle softly.

"My husband is getting ready. Just sit, and let Dunni show you around," she said, her eyes sparkling with hospitality.

Me? Why me? I rolled my eyes and went to the bookshelf to get our family album.

"So, when you visit a Nigerian house, they sometimes show you their family album so you can see old pictures. I'm not sure if I have any embarrassing photos in there, but if you see anything, pretend you didn't see them, sir." I told him, and he chuckled.

"Yes, ma'am," he said in a teasing voice, and I hid my embarrassment.

"I'll go get changed," I told him before heading to my room.

Once I was inside, I flopped onto my bed, letting out a sigh of relief. It had been a long day, and my nerves were still tingling from having Mr. Han in my house.

After a few moments of relaxation, I changed into my house clothes, but with Mr. Han visiting, I opted for a cute pink sundress instead. Picking up my phone, I decided to tell Vanessa about my surprise guest.

"Your boss is in your house and you're in your room? Are you okay, Dunni? Get to know him, try to be his friend. Pretty sure the only person he knows is his secretary. You're the first person that he's ever gotten this close to, you know. Who knows what rewards await you if you become his friend? Think about it!"

"Vanessa, do you think this is a K-drama or what? Why on earth would I want to be friends with my boss? I'm not interested in doing so, okay? He only came over because he was curious, nothing more. You know he's all alone here, he needs people around and I'm just being nice. I don't want to be his friend."

"Okay, well, suit yourself. I'm getting along with my boss quite well, he introduced me to his younger brother a few days ago. *E no go bad if I follow am, abi?* He can take me to China."

"Vanessa, you're sick in the head. Goodbye, *abeg*."

"Bye. Dunni. Say hello to your hot boss."

"My boss is not hot!"

"I like to think I am," I heard his voice from my door, and I sprang up from my chair in shock.

"Mr. Han, did you hear anything?" I stammered, my heart racing. He stepped into my room, his gaze wandering over my K-pop posters and merchandise. Heat flooded my cheeks, and I wished I could vanish into thin air to avoid whatever judgment was about to come.

"I'm definitely not surprised," he said, gesturing toward my wall of colorful posters. I bit my lip, feeling utterly embarrassed. "Wow, you read wuxia too? Impressive." His comment caught me off guard, and I blushed even deeper.

"Can I borrow these sometime? I'd love to read them," he asked, and I nodded, still processing his unexpected interest.

"Thanks a lot, Ms. Dunni," he continued, looking genuinely pleased. "So, yeah. I eavesdropped, but it wasn't on purpose. Your mom said I could use your bathroom, but upon hearing you say those things, I lost the will to do anything." He shrugged, a hint of disinterest in his voice.

I picked at my nails, unsure how to respond. "Mr. Han, I didn't mean it that way. I just didn't want my friend to get the wrong idea. She was just messing around."

He sat down on my bed, holding a novel in his hands.

“Ha Neul,” he said softly, his friendly eyes locking onto mine, causing a whirlwind of butterflies to flutter in my stomach.

“What?”

“When we’re not at work, it’s Ha Neul. Not sir, not Mr. Han. Just Ha Neul. But that’s only if you didn’t mean what you said about not wanting to be my friend. It wouldn’t hurt to know someone other than Hyeon Sook *Hyung* and Mr. Caleb,” he continued, a hopeful tone lacing his words. “Ms. Dunni, do I not look friendly? Or do I seem like those terrible bosses in K-dramas—ones that are so insufferable and annoying? Is that how you view me?”

Was he seriously asking for my opinion now? He didn’t seem like the CEO at all; he felt more like a person, a man who was showing his vulnerability. In that moment, I could see his loneliness. He was afraid.

But he had agreed to come to my house. He had allowed me to drive him, and now he was here in my room, seeking my approval to be his friend.

“No, Mr. Han, I don’t know you that well, so I can’t say for sure. But from the way you dismissed the worker last week, it says a lot about your personality. Everyone deserves a second chance, don’t you think? I’m not going to ask you to take back what you said, but I want you to know that where you came from isn’t the same as this place. We care for one another here—we are a family at *BadaShirak*. Mrs. Han has said it many times. It was foolish to think that you would be like your mother.”

I felt a pang of regret as I spoke, wishing I hadn’t said so much. “And I’m sorry for asking you to reconsider. My opinion doesn’t affect your work in any way at all, so I don’t know what came over me. We should go back out.” I turned to leave, eager to escape the heavy atmosphere, but then he suddenly held my hand, and I froze in place.

I turned slowly, my eyes drawn to where our hands were joined, feeling the warmth radiating from his grip. He swallowed hard when I looked back up at him.

“Ms. Dunni. You didn’t give me an answer. But I understand. I’ll leave first. Sorry for coming into your room without permission.” He released my hand, and a hint of disappointment washed over me at the abruptness of his departure. His eyes, however, seemed to linger on my face, wanting to say more, but his lips remained sealed. He walked past me, the heavy scent of his perfume almost overwhelming as he made his way to the living room.

I stood there for a moment, staring at my hand where his warmth still lingered. A smile crept onto my face, a mix of giddiness and disbelief. It felt surreal to have shared such a close moment with him, and now, the feeling of his hand in mine echoed in my mind, igniting a rush of emotions I hadn't expected to experience.



MY PARENTS WERE ENGAGING in serious conversation with Ha Neul in the dining room. That wasn't the most shocking part. Mr. Han, a Korean man, was eating *amala* and *ewedu*, and the speed at which he was eating was concerning. He ate it as though it was some new ramen that *Samyang* had just released. He was also using his hands.

"Why are you standing there like *mumu*? Join us. See how your *oga* is eating with joy." My mother commented, and Ha Neul blushed.

"Mummy, how could you give him this to eat?"

"Is he complaining? Please, shut up. Don't make any noise for us, *abeg*." I kept silent and didn't look at him for the rest of the meal, heck, I couldn't even eat well after what had just happened in my room.

I was embarrassed—my cheeks and ears were hot. I wished the day would end quickly so I could take him back. They soon forgot I was in the room and I took their dishes away. I stayed in the kitchen, wondering if he was hurt by my words. My mother soon came in to wash her hands.

"He's a good man. Very intelligent too, and he's just 26. Wow, I'm so impressed."

I couldn't believe my ears. He was 26? How? I was older? Older than my boss? *Goodness me.*

"Mummy, he said he's 26?" I asked, and she nodded.

"He said he turned 26 in May, a month before he came to Nigeria. I actually thought he was older than that, but I was wrong. See, your junior is your boss. *Nawa for you oh.* Anyways, he says he wants to get going. *Do fast and finish what you're doing so you can drive him back."*

"We can't wait to have you in our house again. I noticed you enjoyed the food, so I will send Dunni to you every week so she can give you some of the delicacies I cook. Hope it's okay, Mr. Han?" My mother offered. I was dumbfounded.

What did she mean by "every week"? *This woman sef.*

“Thank you so much, ma'am. And Ha Neul is okay; please speak comfortably.”

He smiled at her, and she gave him a bag containing extra food. He was flustered to say the least—his cheeks were red.

“Okay, Ha Neul. Thanks for coming again. Dunni, take him home.”

I opened the gates and took the car out. “Your parents are such nice people. I really enjoyed my time with them.” I smiled softly at his comment.

None of us spoke until I realized that I didn't know his house. “Where do you live, sir?” He pointed to the GPS.

“Right. Walter Hills estate. That's a very expensive place to live in. I could never even dream of going there, not even to stare.” I commented, and he chuckled deeply.

“You're funny, Ms. Dunni.”

I finally brought it up. “Mr. Han, how old are you?”

“I'm 26, why?” He responded, and I was in disbelief.

“You're 26? Wow. So I'm older than you.”

He folded his arms. “I believe so too. You're 28, right?”

I nodded. “Great.” He kept his eyes on me.

“Do you know what that means?” I asked, and he smirked.



"WHAT DOES IT MEAN?"

"I'm older, so I'm Noona. But you talked down on me the first time we met."

"**Noona**? Don't be ridiculous."

"I thought we were friends. Right, Ha Neul?"

He stayed quiet, his cheeks flushing slightly. “Why is it so hot today?” he asked, clearing his throat and rolling down the windows.

I chuckled softly, not saying anything until I finally dropped him off at his house.

As he handed me a thick wad of cash, I was taken aback. “I don’t know how much the taxi fare is, so here,” he said.

“Sir, this is too much,” I said, genuinely shocked. “I can find my way home; you don’t need to worry about it.”

He shook his head, a playful smirk appearing on his lips. “No, you brought me home, so I should be the one to handle your taxi fare, right,

Noona?”

Six

Adunni



I almost didn't believe my ears. “**Noona**?” I asked in surprise and he grinned at me, revealing a dimple that I never knew he had.

“Yeah, we're friends, aren't we?” I slowly nodded.

“Good. Then, as friends, you should take this. Thanks for today. Have a safe trip back home, Dunni **Noona**.”

I got home and plopped onto my bed, still catching whiffs of his perfume lingering on my sheets. I couldn't help but take a moment to sniff the fabric, lost in thought.

The next day at work, Tessa and I were deep into research on the new product list that had just come in the mail. The CEO needed to sign off on them, and I planned to head to his office soon. Following his request, I had gathered some of my wuxia books along with a few bookmarks and a highlighter, thinking they might come in handy for him.

Maybe he already had these things, but honestly, I didn’t care.

When I walked into his office, he was on the phone. From his tone, I could tell he was speaking to a woman. He gestured for me to sit and wait, and I tried to ignore the words drifting into my ears. Somehow, I caught him saying he missed her, and an unexpected wave of upset washed over me. Why? I had no idea. All I wanted was to drop the box and leave, but he motioned for me to stay.

Once he finished his call, he sat across from me, smiling as if he had just spotted a beautiful flower. At least that’s how it felt to me. “Ms. Dunni, good morning. Sorry about that, my friend called.”

“That’s fine, sir. I wanted to submit the new product list that came from headquarters. You need to authorize it for us to proceed with the arrangements,” I said in a moody tone. His smile faded, but he didn’t say anything as he stamped the documents.

“And the bank says you have to come in for an affidavit as the new CEO,” I added, and he nodded.

“What’s that?” he asked, his brow furrowing slightly.

I brought the box closer to him. “The books you wanted.”

“Wow, I didn’t expect you to actually bring them. I’ll give them back to you soon. Thanks a lot, Ms. Dunni,” he said with genuine appreciation.

“It’s fine. I have to go now. Enjoy your day, Mr. Han.” I couldn’t help but notice the smirk on his face as I addressed him. He stood up and moved closer, towering over me with his height.

“Why do you sound so grumpy?” he asked, his piercing brown eyes making me blush. I looked away, feeling flustered.

“Nothing, sir. I’m just not feeling well,” I replied, and he immediately placed his palm on my forehead.

“It’s the same with mine,” he said, putting his other palm on his head, but I pushed his hand away.

“It only affects women.”

“Oh, I understand. Sorry about that. You can leave now,” he said, and I bowed my head slightly before stepping out of his office.

Once I sat back in my chair, my eyes began to hurt from staring at the screen for too long. I could feel my temperature rising, and I hurried to the bathroom to throw up. This was all my period's fault. After cleaning myself up, I returned to my desk.

“Are you okay, *Jiě*?” Er Duo asked, concern in her voice.

I nodded. “Yes, I'm fine. Just cramps. I'll be okay,” I assured her, trying to sound more confident than I felt.

After work hours, I bumped into Ha Neul in the elevator.

“Are you sure you’re fine, Ms. Dunni?” he asked, his brow furrowed with concern.

I nodded a bit too quickly. “Yes, I'm fine. Just cramps. It’s nothing serious.”

“That doesn’t mean you should look like a car ran you over.”

The elevator doors opened, and I realized I had gotten off on the wrong floor again.

“Aren’t you getting out?”

“Sir, I’m on the ground floor, not the first floor,” I explained, a little embarrassed. He rolled his eyes.

“We'll take you home instead.”

“Mr. Han, I’m fine. I’m not dying; it’s just my period. I’m not helpless,” I insisted. He tilted his head, a hint of confusion in his eyes.

“I didn’t say you were helpless. I just want to help,” he said softly.

“I’m fine, sir. Goodnight.” I smiled, trying to lighten the mood, but I could see he was a bit upset.

“Fine then. Bye,” he replied, walking away as the elevator doors closed behind him.

As I stepped out, my head spun, and I felt nauseous, but I suppressed it when I saw Tessa waiting outside. She beamed when she spotted me.



“TESSA, COME WITH ME to the supermarket,” I urged. She agreed immediately, but when we arrived, the supermarket was closed, and I felt a wave of annoyance wash over me.

“Tessa, do you know any other supermarket in this district?” I asked, frustration creeping into my voice.

She shook her head, then her eyes lit up. “Wait, I know one!”

Oga, *abeg carry us go Gana Street*.” She said to the taxi driver.

“Which supermarket is in Maitama?” I asked.

“So you're a K-drama fan and you don't know about Charme? It's a Chinese restaurant, but it also has a store for dumplings, ramen, boba tea and all that. My friends and I visit once a month; it's a good place. They also have this green bottled drink that I've seen in a K-drama once. What's the name again?”

“No way. They have *soju*?!” I exclaimed, and she snapped her fingers.

“Yes, that's it. That thing can make someone tipsy *sha*. Let's go there, hopefully they have it.”

How have I lived here for 28 years and I didn't know about this so-called “Charme”?

We passed by Dalema Supermarket—the one I had in mind to visit. Then, the driver stopped by a large building and with an eagle's eye, I was able to see ramen from the entrance of the store.

“Tessa, I love you!” I squealed, and she laughed.

“Hope you have money *sha.*”

“I believe so. Let's go.”

“Where's *soju*?” I asked the attendant, and he pointed to a long fridge that sparkled with green bottles. I couldn't believe it. “Tessa!”

She was busy looking at some skincare products. I rolled my eyes. I went to the fridge and as I was about to open it, a masculine hand beat me

to it.

“**Noona**?” Ha Neul was in front of me, staring in surprise.

I saw Secretary Kim putting paper towels into a cart full of stuff. “So, you fancy places like these?” I teased, and he chuckled.

"What about you, Noona? You drink *soju*?"

"I'll drink it later. I just found out that a place like this exists. Tessa Unnie brought me here. She's over there."

I pointed to Tessa whose ears were alert at the mention of her name. Her eyes widened when she saw him. “Mr. Han,” she rushed to us with the cart.

“Ms. Chijioke, right?” He asked slowly, and she nodded. “Nice, and your cart is quite...interesting.” He gestured to the cart full of extremely weird things—pads, feminine wash, skin care items, even tampons.

I glared at Tessa, and she chuckled nervously. “Anyways, don't let me interrupt your shopping. We were leaving either way.”

He opened the fridge and took out three bottles of *soju*. I waited until he left before I grabbed five. Tessa asked if I was okay. “*Nne, hope nothing?*”

“I won't drink it all at once *na*.” I smiled at her, and we went to checkout.

“*Jesus*,” I exclaimed when I saw them waiting in line. Before I could tell Tessa to go back, Secretary Kim noticed us.

"Ms. Dunni, what a surprise to see you here!"

"Ah, yes, hello, Secretary Kim."

"Ms. Dunni, you must like *soju* a lot."

“It's time for you to check out,” I changed the subject. My cheeks were hot with embarrassment. Ha Neul seemed amused, but he stayed silent.

“₦85,380,” the attendant said to them. I gasped at the large bill, despite their things not being much. As Tessa and I approached, I knew we were in trouble. The attendant had only gone halfway, and our bill had passed ₦50,000.

“Tessa, I don't have this much money, *o*.” I whispered to her when we saw ₦106,599 on the monitor.

“Can we drop a few things?” I said in embarrassment, and the attendant nodded.

“There will be no need for that,” Ha Neul, who was nearly at the door, said out loud. He handed his card to them.

“Mr. Han, the bill is much! We could have reduced a few things!” Tessa said, and he chuckled.

“Don't worry about it.”

He winked at us and received his card. I stood there, dumbfounded. “Goodbye, ladies.”

“Tessa, what just happened?”

“Our hot boss just paid for our items, that's what happened. So...can we get bubble tea?”

I glared at her, and she smiled sheepishly. “I will never forget today in my life.”

“Me neither,” I replied, and she called the *Bolt* driver.

“I still can't believe it! I should send him a text to thank him.” She entered the *Kakao* group chat.

“Should I send him one too?” I asked, and she nodded. I blushed when I saw his display photo. *Focus, Dunni*.

“He just replied to my message. He said that it was nothing. Should I seduce him? So that he'll take me to Korea?”

“Tessa, you're insane.”

“Bye, Dunni!”

“Why did you buy all these things?” My mother asked after I walked in.

“Mr. Han got them for me.”

“Really? Wow, he's generous *oh*. Or does he like you? Is something going on between the two of you?”

“Mummy, he was just being nice, and no, he doesn't like me.”

“Are you sure about that? I mean, he smiled when he saw your childhood pictures. Maybe he admires you. Having him as a son-in-law wouldn't be bad, I like him.”

How did this conversation turn to a marriage talk?

“Mummy, I'm not marrying him, nor does he like me. He's just being a good boss. Don't get ahead of yourself.”

She rolled her eyes before leaving the kitchen. Finally, I went to my room and after showering, I sat on my bed.

Scrolling down to the group chat, I clicked on his name.

“Hi, Ha Neul. Thanks a lot for today, I honestly appreciate it. I'll do my best as your employee, and I won't disappoint you again.”

“Noona, you never disappointed me.”

“Really? I thought you were disappointed in my work.”

“You're diligent, just like my mother said. I know you'll do a good job. I'll come in late tomorrow because of the bank visit. Also, the dismissed worker will resume work tomorrow. You were right, everyone deserves a second chance.”

I stared at the text, smiling. Maybe being his friend wouldn't be that bad.

Seven

Adunni



I hadn't seen much of Ha Neul due to his packed schedule; Secretary Kim had taken over leading the meetings in his stead. After one such meeting, I went to submit the minutes to an empty office, knowing Ha Neul was out for a lunch meeting. I placed the files on his desk and noticed a wuxia novel lying open, a bookmark resting near the end at page 115.

Some passages were highlighted, drawing my curiosity. Even though I had already read the book, I felt a sudden pull to see what had captured his attention. As I skimmed the pages, I noticed his faint fingerprints. Without thinking, I traced my fingers over them, imagining his large hands carefully turning the pages. I could almost picture his eyes scanning the words, pausing now and then to mark a passage, perhaps with a quiet chuckle when something amused him.

Maybe he read the book at home—on his bed, sofa, or even in his car. And perhaps, in those quiet moments, he thought of me. After all, I was the one who gave it to him. My signature was on the front page, and I had scribbled notes in the margins. I imagined him smiling as he noticed my handwriting, perhaps even catching a faint trace of my scent on the pages. *What am I thinking?*

"Ms. Dunni?"

His voice startled me so badly that I nearly dropped the book. I hurriedly put it down and stepped back, only to collide with something solid. A hard, masculine wall. His presence surrounded me, the warm scent of his cologne flooding my senses. His breath, tinged with wine, brushed my ear as he spoke in a deep, husky voice. "What are you doing in my office?"

I turned, heart racing, to face him. The office was empty—everyone had probably left for the day. It was just the two of us on the fifth floor, and I realized with a sinking feeling that I'd been caught invading his privacy.

"I-I came to drop off the meeting minutes, sir," I stammered, struggling to keep my composure. He stepped forward, closing the distance between us, forcing me back until I was pressed against the desk. He was too close, far too close. I kept my eyes fixed on his tie, swaying as he bent toward me, his face inches from mine. I couldn't bear to look up, knowing he'd see the heat rising to my cheeks.

"**Noona**," he whispered, and I boldly met his gaze. His dilated eyes locked onto mine, and my breath hitched.

"Yes, Ha Neul?" I whispered back, my throat suddenly dry. My palms were sweaty, and I couldn't predict what would come next.

But what I didn't expect was for him to pick up the book and hold it in front of me. "You were reading this, weren't you? But it's yours... or didn't you read it before you gave it to me?" His voice was calm, almost teasing, though the space between us had grown. The distance felt strange, awkward. I cleared my throat, trying to find the right response, but nothing came. I just went along with whatever he said.

"Yes, I didn't read it," I blurted out, surprising even myself. He looked baffled for a moment before nodding slowly.

"I see. Well, I'm almost done with it, so I'll return it soon. Is that okay?" His voice was polite, professional, even. I nodded quickly.

"I'm leaving now. Goodnight, sir," I said softly, turning to go. He didn't respond, and that silence followed me all the way out.

On the way home, I fumed, though I couldn't pinpoint why. Was I angry with myself? Angry for imagining him reading the book, for thinking about his hands on the pages? And why did my heart pound so hard when he stood so close?

Gosh, Dunni, what are you doing? You can't like him.

It was a Saturday, so I spent the morning doing laundry and tidying up my room. Later, I headed over to Vanessa's place and was immediately struck by how different everything looked.

Apparently, she had been dating her boss' younger brother, who owned an interior decor company, and much of the new furniture—plants, portraits, curtains, and wallpapers—were all gifts from him. "So, how on earth did you end up dating a Chinese man?" I asked with a teasing smile as we sat down for lunch. She laughed, her face lighting up.

"He fell in love at first sight. He was so cute the first time we met," she said, clearly smitten. "He's 32, been living in Nigeria for six years, so he

knows a lot about us. He called me the day after we met, and we went out a few days later. Just last week, he asked me to be his girlfriend. I like him so much, more than I thought I would. My parents even like him! I'm supposed to have a video call with his mother this week, though, and I'm a bit nervous. You know how mothers can be."

I reassured her, confident things would go well. She showed me their photos together, and I couldn't help but smile. I was genuinely happy for her. After all the pain she went through with that idiot Nonso, who she had dated for three years only for him to marry someone he met a year into their relationship, Vanessa had never quite gotten over him. She had sworn off men for the longest time, but here she was, glowing as she talked about Cheng.

As we continued chatting, my phone pinged with a new message. I glanced at it and couldn't help but exclaim, "Vanessa, my company's having a dinner tomorrow evening—sponsored by the headquarters!"

She leaned over to read the message. "To properly welcome CEO Han to Nigeria, we have made reservations for a company dinner. Secretary Kim will handle the arrangements. We hope you all enjoy it." Vanessa's eyes widened as she read it.

"Wow, your company is really generous *o*! Nigerian companies can never!" She exclaimed, and I laughed hard.

"What does one even wear to a company dinner?" I asked, feeling unsure. Without a word, she disappeared into her room and came back with two dresses: a sexy red one and a more professional white one. I immediately gravitated towards the white, but she whined.

"Wear the red one so you can go home with Mr. Han tonight," she teased with a mischievous grin.

"Vanessa, are you alright? You want me to seduce my boss?" I asked, horrified. She nodded enthusiastically.

"You showed me his picture, and he's hot! So, why not?" she said, as if seducing him was as simple as ABC.

"*Your head is not correct.* First of all, I don't like him, and he doesn't like me either. Second, I have no intention of seducing him. And lastly, it's a company dinner, not a private one!" I yelled, but she just rolled her eyes dramatically.

"Oh, please, Dunni. You like him, don't even try to deny it. You were so upset when you told me about yesterday's incident. And if he didn't like

you, would he call you *Noona*, buy you things, or come to your house? Don't be foolish, abeg. This man could take you to Korea—he's a millionaire, for goodness' sake! Your dream is standing right in front of you. Follow it!"

She was getting carried away now. "Just because you found Cheng doesn't mean I have to find someone too, Vanessa. I'm not interested in a relationship right now, and you know that. Besides, I don't even like my boss," I said, my tone growing grumpy.

Vanessa snorted. "Okay, okay. But if you fall for him, don't say I didn't warn you. And if you do, I'll never speak to you again," she joked, causing me to chuckle.

"Yes, ma'am," I replied, shaking my head. "**In fact call me a dog if I ever date him."**



THE DAY WAS GOOD SO far. *Makeup done, dress snatched. Their dads.*

After a quick glance in the mirror, I snapped a picture and sent it to Vanessa for approval. She loved it. I made my way to the restaurant in town, relieved to see cars parked outside. I hoped I wasn't late, but as I entered, I realized I was—thirty minutes late, to be exact.

As I walked in, the team leader greeted me warmly and offered me a seat beside her. Tessa, sitting next to me, was happy to see me. "You're late, Dunni," she chided, and I explained the traffic jam I had encountered.

"I think your beauty must have mesmerized someone," she teased, nodding toward Ha Neul, who was seated across from us, seemingly lost in thought.

"Mr. Han, welcome to Nigeria!" Mrs. Rosa announced, raising her wine glass. Ha Neul raised a glass of water instead.

"Thank you so much, everyone. I'm sorry for being late; I recently got my driver's license, so please bear with me," he said with a lighthearted smile. "My mother was right: Nigeria is a fantastic place to learn the basics of work. You're all hardworking and truly value your jobs, producing excellent results. So, to reward you all, the company has decided to give each employee a 10% bonus!" Cheers erupted around the table, with applause echoing in response to his speech.

"Mr. Kang, I trust you've spoken with the company's account managers? Tomorrow is payday, right?" he asked Mr. Kang, who nodded

affirmatively.

“Everything is set, sir. Everyone will be paid tomorrow,” he confirmed. A chorus of delighted “oohs” erupted from the employees, and I couldn’t help but chuckle.

I couldn't believe my eyes. Somehow, some staff had managed to sneak in *soju* bottles, and they were being passed around the table. No one seemed surprised—except for Ha Neul and me.

“Tessa, why aren't you surprised?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

She laughed lightly. “You don’t know this restaurant? They don’t allow external drinks in here. Didn’t they search you when you came in?”

I nodded, a little embarrassed at my naivety. “Tessa, can we go to the restroom?”

“Sure! Let’s go.”

I was doing my business when So Hyang and Yu Mi entered and began chatting in Korean. Their voices dropped slightly, but I could still make out their conversation. I knew it was rude to eavesdrop, but I couldn’t help myself.

"So, when are you going to tell him?"

"Today is not a good day. I'll tell him during the workshop."

"Okay. But what if he rejects you?"

"It's okay, I'll get over it. I just want to tell him."

“Hi, Tessa Unnie,” Yu Mi said as Tessa stepped out. It was my time to shine. I came out after she did.

“Ms. Dunni, I didn’t know you were in,” So Hyang remarked, her cheeks flushing red. “Did you hear us?” she asked, and I nodded.

“Please, keep it a secret. I don’t want him to find out,” she pleaded.

“It’s fine; it’s not my place to interfere either. Good luck,” I replied, dragging Tessa out with me. I was in a foul mood as we returned to the table.

“Let’s go and play darts!” Tessa suggested, but I declined.

She went alone instead, and I poured myself a small glass of *soju*. The atmosphere buzzed with activity; everyone was either drinking, chatting, eating, or singing with the karaoke machine.

Suddenly, So Hyang approached Ha Neul, blushing as she spoke to him. I felt a wave of disgust wash over me at the sight, prompting me to stand up and make my way toward Tessa.

“Changed your mind?”

I nodded, deciding I needed a distraction. Tessa stepped away to answer a phone call, and in her absence, I glanced back at Ha Neul and So Hyang. They were getting along too well—too comfortably.

Tessa had left her wine glass on the table, so I grabbed it and finished it in a flash. Tessa was not happy. “There was vodka inside, Dunni. It was meant for me only. A hot Yoruba guy downstairs gave some to me, and you just finished it. *Mtchew*.”

I quickly apologized to her, and she went back down while I felt a wave of dizziness wash over me. My legs wobbled as I made my way back to the table, where I took a long sip of water. Ha Neul glanced at me with concern.

“Why did you drink so much?” he asked, and I giggled, feeling lightheaded.

“I’m fine,” I slurred slightly, checking the time on my phone. “9 P.M?! I have to leave!”

I stood up, but I nearly staggered, and before I knew it, Ha Neul was beside me, gripping my hand firmly. I could see So Hyang's irritation flaring at the sight. I pushed his hand away.

"I'm really fine. I'm just a little bit drunk. I have to go home now. Goodbye, everyone. *Daepyo Nim*, goodnight."

I searched for Tessa downstairs, but she was nowhere to be found. I ended up bumping into an old Igala man. “Fine girl, I can see you are lost. Why don't you come with me to the hotel? Sexy lady, look at your figure.”

He licked his lips and I pushed him away. “Are you crazy? How dare you touch me!”

He looked at me in anger. “See this ugly prostitute *oh*.

You are not even fine. *My friend, will you leave this place? Nonsense*.” He pushed me, and I fell on the floor.

I started to cry silently, my head spinning as a wave of emotions crashed over me. I felt stupid and ashamed for being upset that So Hyang liked Ha Neul. I was the one who insisted I didn’t like him, yet I couldn’t shake the annoyance at how close they were. He was smiling at her, a genuine smile that made it clear he enjoyed her company. It stung to think that he might not feel the same way when he was around me.

“**Noona**, what are you doing on the floor?” Ha Neul’s voice broke through my haze, and I slowly raised my head to meet his gaze.

“Mr. Han,” I whispered, and he gently pulled me up. I wobbled, nearly falling back, but he caught me, and my face pressed against his chest. His

heart raced, matching the frantic beat of my own.

"Ms. Dunni!" So Hyang's voice made me groan inwardly, wishing she would just disappear for once.

"I'm taking her home. Tell Secretary Kim I'm leaving," Ha Neul said firmly, and she nodded, though I could sense her disappointment.

"You okay?" he asked, concern etched on his face, and I nodded, though it felt like a lie.

I caught a brief flash of jealousy in So Hyang's expression before she masked it with a smile and went off.

Ha Neul led me outside, the chill of the night air biting at my skin. "Wait here, okay?" he instructed, and I shivered.

Eight

Ha Neul



“What’s so funny?” I asked, glancing over with a smirk. She turned to me, her eyes shining mischievously.

“Nothing,” she said, voice tipsy and amused. “You’re just so handsome right now, Mr. Han.”

“Oh really? Funny, I thought you said I wasn’t that attractive,” I teased, and she gasped dramatically, her hand flying to her mouth.

“Of course not! You look just like my favorite actor...what’s his name again? Ugh, I forgot. Oops!” She giggled.

I couldn’t help but laugh at her antics, and then she suddenly started humming. “Do you know this song? It’s by Dua Lipa,” she said, her voice slightly off-key. I recognized the melody and raised an eyebrow.

“I thought you were a K-pop fan? How come you know Dua Lipa?” I teased again, but her mood shifted as she crossed her arms, pouting. The sight of her cute, sulky expression nearly made me miss a red light. She looked so beautiful, even when grumpy.

“K-pop isn’t the only genre in the world, you know,” she huffed. “That’s an assumption.”

“Alright, alright, I’m sorry,” I quickly apologized, not wanting to upset her further. She just huffed again, turning to press her forehead against the window.

The rest of the ride was quiet, but her eyes remained open, gazing at the city streets. The soft glow of streetlights reflected in her deep brown eyes, casting a luminous glow on her warm skin. She shone brighter than the city lights themselves, and for a moment, I found myself mesmerized by her beauty. The night felt like it belonged to her alone.

“I used to have a boyfriend when I was in college. We dated for two years, and then I caught him with a girl he introduced to me as his cousin just a week before. Can you imagine?” she suddenly spoke, breaking the silence, and I turned to her, surprised.

“He said she was his cousin?” I asked, still processing her words.

“Yeah, I had the same look on my face when I saw them together. Nolan—he was such a bastard, honestly. Tried to make me believe I was seeing things. I nearly beat him up. His excuse for cheating? That I wouldn’t let him touch me until we were married.” She shook her head in disbelief.

“We broke up on the spot, and guess what? He married her a year later. But before that, he had the nerve to text me, apologizing for ‘following his lustful desires’ and begging me to take him back. Can you believe that? After betraying my trust, he really thought he could fool me again.”

“He was an idiot to cheat on you,” I said, and she smiled.

“Do you have any exes?”

“There was this girl I met in college. She was Korean, but she grew up in America. I bonded with her because, at the time, I didn’t have many friends. But it turned out she only wanted my money—never really liked me at all. She knew about my family’s background and targeted me when I was struggling with the language and school. She even tried to isolate me from my friends, but when I didn’t fall for it, she ghosted me. I later found her at a college party and overheard her telling her friends she could never date a Korean guy. She was just after my money, hoping for a luxurious life.”

I paused, remembering how blindsided I’d felt. “I broke up with her immediately. I bought her things, gave her money—I even got her a car,” I admitted, feeling a little foolish now.

Dunni gasped, her eyes wide. “It’s a lie!”

I shook my head. “Nope. I was 19, and she was 25. She tricked me good. But I got the car back, thanks to my friends. They helped me a lot, and I gained some real friends after that. But it’s been, what, five years? I’ve stayed away from relationships since then. I just don’t want to go through all of that again.”

Dunni looked at me with gentle, almost maternal eyes. “You’re a good person, Ha Neul. She missed out, big time.”

I smiled. She closed her eyes as we continued the ride, and the peaceful silence wrapped around us like a comfortable blanket.



WE SOON ARRIVED AT her house. She stretched lazily, her movements slow and tired. She shoved my coat into my chest, catching me off guard.

"Thanks for the ride, sir. Sorry, I don’t have any money to pay you. What should we do?" she asked with a hiccup.

"You don’t need to pay me, ma’am," I replied with a small smile. "You’ve already done more than enough."

She giggled, her eyes sparkling under the soft glow of the streetlights. "Even your voice is sexy. How can a man be so beautiful? You look just like Paul Ahn, you know," she said dreamily, squinting at me. "I must be dreaming, seeing my favorite actor standing in front of me. Is this a dream?"

Before I could respond, she threw her arms around me and pinched my cheek. "I’m not dreaming? Paul? Is that you?" She grabbed my face, running her fingers over my lips, and I felt a wave of awkwardness wash over me.

"**Noona**, you should head inside now," I said, gently pushing her hand away.

She shook her head. "You're not Paul, are you? Who are you then? Why do I feel strange when you look at me? Tell me, where did you pick me up from?"

It was getting late, and as much as I was enjoying this odd moment, it was time for me to leave. "I'm leaving. Goodnight," I said, walking back to the car.

"Okay, bye, Mr. Leaving!" she called out, waving at me. I chuckled as I waved back and got into my car. But just as I was about to leave, I noticed her standing in front of the vehicle, her eyes half-closed with exhaustion.

I sighed and got out again, walking over to her. "What is it, **Noona**? Do you have something to say?"

She nodded, motioning with her finger for me to come closer. Intrigued, I leaned down, wondering what kind of secret she had to whisper in my ear. But she didn’t whisper.

The moment I was within reach, she grabbed my face and kissed me.

I was stunned. I tried to push her away, but she held onto me with surprising strength. Her soft lips were pressed against mine, carrying the faint taste of alcohol mixed with her red lipstick. After a moment, I finally managed to pull away, and she blushed furiously.

"Bye," she whispered with a shy smile, touching her lips before skipping toward her gate.

I leaned against my car, completely flustered and confused, heat rising to my cheeks. It had been five years since my last kiss, and now, out of nowhere, it had happened like this. The sensation was unfamiliar—strange, but also something that lingered. I cleared my throat, looking around nervously for any nearby CCTV cameras, but to my relief, there were none in sight.

As I drove home, the kiss kept replaying in my head. Even as I lay in bed, I couldn't get it out of my mind. I wondered if she would even remember it in the morning. I imagined her waking up, realizing what she had done, and hitting herself in embarrassment. I could see her covering her mouth in shock, groaning at the memory. Then, she'd probably touch her lips, remembering every detail, and her face would flush all over again.

I shook off the thoughts, trying to focus on getting ready for work. Yet, there was a part of me that felt oddly excited about seeing her again.

When I arrived at the office, Secretary Kim greeted me in the lobby, and we both entered the elevator. Just as the doors were about to close, he stopped it. I was about to ask why when I saw her—Dunni—rushing toward us. My heart skipped a beat at the sight of her. She wore a white floral top with a black maxi skirt, her low shoes making soft sounds. I caught myself staring. She stepped into the elevator, but didn't look at me.

"Thank you, Secretary Kim," she said softly.

"White really suits you, Ms. Dunni," he complimented her, and she laughed.

I frowned, sulking at the lack of attention. She was complimenting him, and here I was, standing in my best Armani suit, hoping she would notice. But she didn't. It felt like I was invisible as she continued to chat with Secretary Kim, not even sparing me a glance. When we reached the research and development floor, she left quickly. I went up to my office with Secretary Kim, feeling oddly irritated. Why was I so bothered by this?



I AGREED TO VISIT THE cafeteria today, and it turned out to be a mistake. There Dunni was, sitting with Tessa, Er Duo, and of course, Tae Oh—who seemed to be the cause of her constant laughter. I completely lost my appetite but didn’t want to be rude, especially with so many employees greeting me as I walked in. I reluctantly sat down at a table that was far enough from theirs, four tables away to be exact.

Our eyes met briefly, but she quickly looked away, smiling awkwardly at her friends. I scoffed quietly, feeling irritated.

“You'll let everyone know you have a crush on Dunni if you keep staring at her like that,” Secretary Kim, who was sitting beside me, commented with a teasing smirk. I rolled my eyes, but I knew he was right. Still, I couldn't help it. Her laughter echoed in my ears, as if it was the only sound in the room, despite the chatter of hundreds of employees around us.

I gave up on eating, leaving before Hyung could finish his meal. I headed back to my office, trying to drown myself in work. After finishing up some paperwork, I went to my window to get some fresh air, hoping it would clear my head. But the moment I looked down, I saw her again—walking into the building with Tae Oh, still smiling at something he said.

“Is he really that funny?” I huffed in irritation, turning away from the window just as there was a knock on my door. Hyung entered with my schedule for the rest of the week, but all I could do was sit on the sofa, my head in my hands, trying to calm down.

I closed from work without seeing her. I didn’t make an effort either, growing increasingly frustrated at how much she had been occupying my thoughts.

On the way home, I asked Mr. Caleb if he knew any good gift shops around, and he drove me to a mall with beautiful stores filled with merchandise and accessories. I wasn’t exactly sure why I was doing this, but I couldn’t resist. The shop owner, a kind woman, immediately sensed what I needed.

“These are real red roses, sir. If you want to know how she feels, get them,” she said, showing me a bunch of stunning roses. They were beautiful, though not as beautiful as Dunni. I wanted the other men at work to know that someone else had his eyes on her.

So, I made arrangements with the owner to deliver the roses to her the next day, anonymously. Before the delivery arrived, I made an excuse to visit her department.

Dunni looked completely baffled, and when the delivery guy said the sender was anonymous, everyone around her became curious. “Ms. Dunni, seems like you have a secret admirer,” Mrs. Rosa teased.

“Real roses? Dunni, do you know who sent them? They smell so nice!” Tessa whispered to her. I could barely contain my smile.

“Nice roses,” I said curtly, watching her bite her lip in embarrassment. *Why is she so cute?*

Later, after a meeting with the transport manager, work finally came to an end. I took the elevator down, and when it stopped on the third floor, Dunni walked in, hesitating at first. I couldn’t help but ask, “Why did you hesitate?”

"Nothing, sir," she responded, her voice distant, which left me feeling a little disappointed. She clutched the flowers tightly, almost as if she were embarrassed to be holding them.

I tried to break the silence. "How was work?"

"Fine, sir. And you?" she asked, still avoiding eye contact. Her lack of warmth stung, but I answered anyway.

"Good," I muttered, watching her turn slowly to look at me.

I noticed the slight sheen of sweat on her brow and how her lips parted ever so slightly. Her eyes flicked to my lips for a split second, but just as quickly, the elevator doors slid open, and she hurried out. "**Noona—**" I started, but stopped myself. I let her go.

Later that night, I sent her a message, asking if she had submitted the overview for the machineries. But the truth was, it was just an excuse to start a conversation. Unfortunately, her response felt like she was putting distance between us.

“The files will be submitted tomorrow, sir. I'll give them to Mr. Kim.”

“Good. I hope you're doing well. We haven't really spoken since the company dinner.”

“Yes, sir. I'm fine. Thanks again for driving me home. Sorry for the inconvenience.”

“You don't need to apologize. I was just trying to help. Just... make sure you don't get too drunk in unsafe places.”

“I won't. Thanks, Mr. Han. Goodnight.”

Nine

Ha Neul



I barely saw her for the rest of the week, and it hurt more than I cared to admit. Why was she acting like we were never close? Maybe she remembered the kiss and didn't want to face it. Whatever the reason, she was clearly avoiding me, going to great lengths to stay out of sight—she submitted the minutes and weekly reports to Secretary Kim instead. I never caught even a glimpse of her, not even her silhouette.

On Sunday, I went to church, hoping to see her. I waited until the service ended, but no matter how hard I looked, she was nowhere to be found. Frustrated, I decided to leave, thinking luck wasn't on my side—until it was. On my way out, I ran into her mother.

"Ha Neul!" she greeted me with warmth, spotting me first. I removed my sunglasses and smiled as she pulled me into a hug.

"Are you here alone?" she asked, still holding onto me.

"I am today, yes. What about you?" I asked in return, and she nodded.

"Baba Dunni isn't feeling well. Dunni stayed back to take care of him, but I'm rushing home now to make lunch. He vomited the food she made earlier, and I'd rather not deal with that again," she said, exasperation in her voice as I chuckled lightly.

"Let me give you a ride home then," I offered, and she accepted graciously. As soon as she got into my car, she began admiring the interior.

"Mr. Han," she began, "is Dunni doing well at work?"

Her question caught me off guard. "Yes, ma'am, she's doing just fine. Why, is something wrong at home?"

She sighed softly and nodded. "She's been coming home looking a little down. When I asked her what was wrong, she just said it's stress from a new project or something like that. I was worried she might be under too much pressure at work. Dunni likes to work when she's stressed, and it's not good for her health. I don't want her to get sick when she's already happy where she is. You know, she's loved Asian culture for such a long time and

she wants to study there. We were not really supportive of it, but now that she works for you, Baba Dunni and I decided that we would support her dream. Her obsession is taking her somewhere, we can see. Please, I want to ask you to take care of her. It's shameless, but you understand, right? She has always thought she isn't as good as her siblings, but she doesn't know how smart she is. Please don't fire her until you see it as the only option."

I could sense her sincerity, and it made me realize I had underestimated Dunni. I never knew she had such big dreams for the future. "Don't worry, Mrs. Olayanju. I'll help her as much as I can," I reassured her, and she gave me a warm, motherly smile.

"Your family must be proud of you, Ha Neul. You're such a brave and intelligent young man. I'm sure you'll learn a lot from being here. I wish you and your company nothing but the best," she said kindly, and I could feel the heat rising in my cheeks.

"Thank you, ma'am. We've arrived."

"Why don't you come inside? Let me pack some food for you," she offered. I politely declined, but she insisted. She opened the gates, and I drove in, but as I did, my heart started racing. My hands were trembling, and a nervous feeling settled in. I wasn't ready to see her.

When she finally saw me, her eyes widened in shock, and without a word, she quickly pulled her mother into the kitchen. Left alone, I sat on the sofa, taking in the surroundings and smiling at the framed photos of her on the walls.

Her father appeared from the hallway, looking surprised to see me. He seemed a little pale, so I asked if he was feeling alright. "Just a touch of malaria," he said, brushing it off.

Throughout the meal, I felt Dunni's eyes on me, watching intently, but every time I glanced her way, she quickly averted her gaze. She looked beautiful in her casual hoodie and sweatpants, a side of her I hadn't seen before, and I found myself wondering if I'd ever have the chance to see her this relaxed again.

After lunch, her mother took her father to their room for his medication, leaving Dunni and me alone.

"Why did you come to my house, Ha Neul?" she asked bluntly. It stung a little.

"Am I not welcome here?"

"I need to do the dishes," she mumbled before gathering the first tray and heading to the kitchen. I grabbed the second tray to help her, but when I brought it in, she bumped into me.

"You shouldn't have," she said, taking the tray from my hands. I followed her into the large, cozy kitchen.

"Is everything okay, Dunni?" I asked as she stood at the sink, scrubbing dishes. She nodded without looking at me.

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"It feels like you're ignoring me," I said, stepping closer.

"Impossible. I barely see you. You're always so busy," she replied, her hands working harder on a plate that was already spotless.

"Okay... are you upset by any chance?"

"I'm not upset, sir," she answered curtly, still avoiding my gaze. I moved behind her, taking the plate from her hands before she could scrub it any harder.

"Then why are you acting this way?" I whispered in her ear.

"Wh–what way?" she stammered, her breath uneven. I placed my hand over hers, feeling her small palms tremble under my touch.

"Like you don't want to see me anymore, like you want me gone. Or... is this about the kiss?"

In an instant, she pushed me away and resumed washing. "Why are you bringing that up? It was a stupid, drunk mistake. I thought if I stayed out of your sight, you'd forget all about it."

Anger flared inside me. I grabbed her hand, forcing her to turn and face me, her wide eyes locking with mine.

"So this is about the kiss? That's why you've been acting like this?" She tried to pull her hand away, but my other hand was already on her waist, holding her firm against my chest.

"Was it really just a mistake to you? Is that what you think?" I asked, my frustration spilling out. She nodded slowly, refusing to meet my eyes, her gaze fixed on my chest.

"Look me in the eye and say it."

She shook her head. "It was a dumb mistake, Ha Neul. Don't bring it up again!"

I let go of her. "I see that now. I'm sorry for touching you. And for coming to your house when I obviously should have stayed away. I'm

leaving. Please tell your mother I had an emergency," I said, my voice flat as I turned and walked out of the kitchen.

When I reached the gate, she was already there, opening it for me without meeting my gaze. I scoffed.

As I drove away, I glanced in the rearview mirror and saw her standing, watching me leave. Her words echoed in my mind, and though I was furious, I knew I had to let her go. If she truly hated me, then I had to move on.

I called Hyung to meet up, but he was out playing golf. Needing a distraction, I joined him. He noticed something was off, but didn't say anything until I swung the club so wildly that it flew out of my hands.

"Sorry, I'm just stressed out. Too much work to handle before the workshop," I muttered, but he saw right through me.

"It's about Adunni, right?"

"How did you know? Well, it is about her. I was just at her house and we talked, but she hates me and it's making me upset."

"Well, isn't that a good thing? Now you know that she doesn't like you, so you can move on. It's that simple."

"I guess so. But why does it feel so frustrating?"

"Love is like that, Ha Neul. Just forget it and let's play. You have a lot on your mind right now."

"Love? Don't be ridiculous. Let's play!"

I went home feeling somewhat better, but the moment I laid eyes on the books she had lent me, she invaded my thoughts all over again. Her smile, her eyes—those eyes haunted me every time I closed mine.

In a futile attempt to clear my mind, I stayed in the shower for thirty minutes, letting the water run over me, hoping it would wash away the memories. But it didn't. Nothing worked.

Frustrated, I went to the fridge and grabbed a bottle of *soju*. One bottle wasn't enough to numb me, so I drank another. Then another. Three bottles later, I was still painfully sober, so I turned to the whiskey on the wine shelf. That did the trick. Five glasses in, and I blacked out, passing out on the sofa.

I woke up the next morning with a splitting headache that felt like my skull was about to crack open. I stumbled into the kitchen, found some leftover doenjang in the fridge, and made a quick pot of doenjang-jjigae.

The savory stew helped with the migraine, though it did little to fix the ache in my chest.

Dragging myself to work, I found Secretary Kim waiting for me in the lobby, holding a hangover drink.

"How did you know I would need this?"

"I just knew it. I did good, right?"

"*Eung*. Thanks, Hyung."

He didn't come with me to the elevator because of work, leaving me to sigh in frustration. Just before the doors could close, Dunni slid her hand between them and stepped inside. She hadn't noticed I was there at first, but when she did, she gasped in surprise.

"Good morning, Mr. Han," she greeted formally. I rolled my eyes.

"Did you drink?" she asked unexpectedly. How did she know? I hadn't smelled like alcohol, and yet she saw right through me. I denied it, wondering what had given me away.

"Your tie is crooked," she pointed out. I fumbled to fix it, but my hands weren't cooperating. Before I could ask, she stepped forward, softly saying, "Let me help."

She stood on her toes, gently adjusting my tie, her eyes avoiding mine. I could feel the heat between us as her fingers brushed the fabric. When she finished, she finally looked up, meeting my gaze. I was lost in her eyes, and before I could stop myself, I reached out, brushing my fingers against her cheek. As soon as I touched her, she pulled back, and the elevator doors opened.

"Sorry," I muttered, feeling foolish. She walked out without a word, leaving me standing there with my hand still raised. I facepalmed myself, heading to my office with a long face.



SO HYANG WALKED INTO my office two days later, holding a bag of Chinese takeout.

"What's all this, So Hyang?"

"You didn't come out for lunch, so I ordered Chinese food for you. Is that okay, or did I do too much?"

"No, not at all. There's a lot of work to do, so I didn't have time to go out to eat. Thanks a lot, So Hyang."

"Does Oppa need help with the files? I'm done with my work and I can help."

"Are you sure? Well, okay, be my guest."

"Okay, thank you, Oppa."

After about an hour of work, So Hyang had dozed off, her soft snores breaking the silence. I couldn't help but chuckle quietly at the sound. I picked up the last wuxia novel Dunni had lent me, and without thinking, I brought the cover closer, inhaling the faint scent of coffee that lingered on it.

Her fragrance was intoxicating, and it stirred something inside me—a longing for more, for the source itself. As if summoned by my thoughts, Dunni entered the office after a gentle knock, carrying the monthly reports. She placed them neatly on my desk just as So Hyang had gone into the bathroom, unaware of the other's presence.

"Thank you," I said, placing the book down. She glanced at it and asked how I was finding the wuxia series.

"This is the last one," I replied. "I'll return them all tomorrow."

To my surprise, she insisted I keep the books, but I politely declined. Just as she was about to say something else, So Hyang came out of the bathroom. Dunni's eyes flickered in surprise at the sight of her, but she quickly masked her reaction, her expression neutral as she shifted her attention back to me.

"Oppa, you've run out of hand wash."

"Oh, Ms. Dunni, good day," So Hyang said, her voice tinged with embarrassment as she glanced at Dunni.

Clearing her throat, Dunni responded, "I'll take my leave now. I didn't realize you had company," her tone formal, and I couldn't help but wonder if she had misunderstood the situation. Regardless of everything, despite my better judgment, I still had feelings for her. It was foolish, but I couldn't deny it.

"Ms. Dunni," I called after her impulsively, not wanting her to leave like that. I quickly thought of an excuse. "Please inform the janitor about the hand wash issue," I said, watching as she nodded before walking out.

As So Hyang sat back down to finish the paperwork, I felt a brief moment of awkwardness settle between us, but it soon faded.

"Oppa, are you looking forward to the workshop?"

"I guess. This is my third workshop, I attended two while in college. I'm looking forward to this one."

“Me too. I've only been on one though. I can't wait.”

"That's good."

At the next meeting, I asked for everyone's opinion on the new packaging design displayed on the screen. The room remained silent, with no one willing to speak up. Finally, So Hyang raised her hand, and I gave her the floor.

“I think we should go with the first design,” she said confidently. “It displays all the ingredients on the front label, so customers can see it right away and know what they’re buying. We can include the calorie information on the back, and categorizing each box by name or type would also help.”

I nodded in agreement, and most of the room followed suit. However, I noticed one person who seemed less convinced. “Ms. Dunni, do you disagree with Ms. Park’s suggestion?”

“Well,” she began, “I don’t think it’s necessary to put all the ingredients on the front label. People might skip over it because they’re in a hurry. We should keep the front simple and leave the detailed information on the back. This is Nigeria—people are drawn to designs that catch their attention, so the second design is better.”

I noticed So Hyang wasn’t pleased. Dunni, on the other hand, kept her eyes down, focused on her journal.

“And what happens,” I asked, leaning forward, “when someone absent-mindedly picks up a lunchbox with ingredients they’re allergic to, because they didn’t check the back? Who’s responsible for that?”

Dunni gulped and answered, “They can look at the back.”

I laughed coldly. “Ms. Dunni, what if that person is distracted—on the phone, talking to someone, or simply assumes it’s the same lunchbox they always buy? Worse, what if it’s a halal customer? What happens when they sue the company for improper labeling?”

Her head lowered in shame. “I’m sorry, sir. I wasn’t considering the consequences. Ms. Park is right, the first design is better.”

“Good,” I replied, turning to Mrs. Yasmine. “You know what to do.” She nodded, and the meeting concluded.

Back in my office, I loosened my tie, feeling suffocated and irritated for reasons I couldn’t quite place. As I sat down, Secretary Kim entered and

stood by the door, arms folded, watching me closely.

Ten

Ha Neul



“What are you looking at?” I asked, feeling irritated.

He chuckled slowly, pressing his lips into a firm line. “Why did you do that during the meeting?” He said calmly.

“What did I do?”

“You yelled at Ms. Dunni in front of all the research employees.”

“I didn't yell, Hyung. I was simply trying to understand what she was saying.”

“Your tone was harsh, and other employees noticed. I understand that you're upset about everything, but please, when it's time to work, you have to work, okay? Don't bring your personal feelings into this. You're the CEO; you don't have time to mope around because you got rejected.”

“I did not get rejected. I never asked her out. Don’t get it twisted,” I said, trying to maintain my composure. Secretary Kim found my defensiveness amusing.

“Alright, alright. But you really should apologize to her. She doesn’t even want to come in here anymore; she asked me to deliver the minutes myself. I told her I couldn’t do that. When she comes, please don’t yell at her,” he urged.

My heart raced when Dunni finally walked in. I couldn’t bring myself to look her in the eye as she placed the minutes on my desk. “Here are the minutes, sir,” she said, barely meeting my gaze before turning to leave.

“Ms. Dunni!” I called out, and she hesitated, turning back to face me. I noticed the sadness in her eyes.

“Do you need anything, sir?”

“Right, uh, how’s your dad? Is he okay?”

“He’s good now,” she replied, her voice softening slightly. “They were a bit upset that you left, but they understood. They want you to come by soon.”

I smiled at the thought, but it quickly faded. “Alright, then. Thanks for letting me know,” I said, watching her leave my office.

As soon as the door closed behind her, I slumped back in my chair, pinching the bridge of my nose in frustration. Guilt ached my heart, and I felt stuck, unsure of how to address what had happened. I tried to push the feeling aside, and by the next day, I focused on the upcoming workshop.

“Everyone, we’re visiting Kindred Farms in a few days, so make sure to wrap up any pending work. We’ll be spending one night, so pack accordingly. And for the best part—” I held up the company card, and the room erupted in cheers. I handed it to Mrs. Rosa.

“Just don’t max it out,” I teased, and she laughed in response. “Anything you want for the trip, feel free to use the card. And also, can you grab some *Hanwoo*? And *shin* ramen? I’m really specific about the kind of ramen I eat,” I whispered my request to her. She gave me an approving OK sign.

While the rest of the team buzzed with excitement, Dunni remained indifferent, packing her things without paying much attention to the conversation. “See you all tomorrow,” I said, waving them off as I stepped into the elevator. Just as the doors began to close, So Hyang and Dunni walked in beside me.

"Mr. Han, please, can you give me a ride home? I'm on a budget this week."

So Hyang suddenly asked me if I could take her home. I awkwardly agreed, glancing at Dunni for any sign of a reaction, but all I got was a wince from her as she prepared to exit the elevator.

"Are you okay?" I asked, noticing her looking down at her feet. My heart sank when I spotted blood seeping from her ankle.

"I'm fine," she whispered, trying to brush it off as she walked past me. I grabbed her hand, stopping her in her tracks.

"What are you doing?"

Ignoring her question, I knelt down and pulled out a band-aid from my pocket. With careful precision, I removed her white stiletto, which seemed far too tight for her foot. As I wrapped the band-aid around her ankle, her hand rested lightly on my shoulder, and I could feel her awkwardness radiating off her.

Once I stood up, she put her heel back on, nodding gratefully. "Thank you," she said, her voice softer now, before she walked out of the lobby. I

couldn't help but watch her leave, feeling a mix of relief and concern.

"Mr. Han," So Hyang interrupted my thoughts. I turned to her, quickly apologizing for keeping her waiting. We made our way to the parking lot, and she climbed into the passenger seat.

The drive started in an uncomfortable silence. Just as I thought we might coast through the ride quietly, she broke the tension with a question that caught me off guard.

"Oppa, do you like Dunni Unnie?"

"What? Me? No, I don't. She's just...a good employee."

"But just now, you two looked close."

"Yeah, I guess. She's a kind **Noona**. Her parents are nice too."

"Oh, I see. You've met her family, nice."

She didn't say a word until I dropped her off, bowing slightly before I drove away. I hoped she would forget about what she had witnessed, but my thoughts drifted to Dunni and how uncomfortable she must have felt in those heels. Why wear something you're not comfortable in?

The next day at work, I spotted her and noticed she bowed without uttering a word. Relief washed over me when I glanced down and saw she had opted for low, comfortable shoes. "Thank you for yesterday, sir."

Later, I called her into my office and handed her the box of books. "Thanks for lending them to me, Ms. Dunni. They were really nice," I said, handing it over. Our hands brushed slightly when she took it from me, sending a small jolt through me.

"I'm glad you liked them."

"**Noona**, were you upset about the meeting?" I asked, watching her expression change.

"No, I wasn't. You were doing your job as my boss, nothing more," she replied curtly, but her eyes told a different story.

"Then why don't you smile at me anymore? Why are you so distant? Did I do something wrong? It's like I don't know you anymore, **Noona**."

"You never knew me in the first place, Ha Neul. You only met me a few months ago. It's not possible to know someone in that short time. If you have nothing more to say, sir, I'll take my leave," she said, turning away without looking back.



THE REST OF THE WEEK flew by, and finally, the day of the workshop arrived. "This place is enormous," I remarked when we arrived.

"Yeah, I can't wait to explore," Hyung chimed in. Just then, we spotted a large white bus approaching. "They're here!" he squealed, rushing toward it, while I stood back far enough to catch a glimpse of Dunni as she stepped off the bus, clad in a long-sleeved jumpsuit that hugged her figure and accentuated her curves. When she noticed me, I quickly looked away and put on my sunglasses.

I was called over to join the group, and we exchanged greetings before heading to the reception. There, I met the farm's owner, whom I had previously spoken with over the phone. He was pleased to see me. "Mr. Han! What a pleasure to finally meet you. I've only ever seen your mother, and your presence here brings back memories of her first visit. Welcome once again," he said warmly.

Two staff members then led us to our accommodations. The females were in a separate building, and two employees shared each room. I was paired with Hyung, who immediately collapsed onto the bed when we entered. The room reminded me of my college dorm—cream walls, a bunk bed, a closet, a desk, a dresser, blue curtains, an AC unit, and a bathroom.

When I discovered that our first stop was the poultry farm, my heart sank, and I pushed Hyung aside to ask if I could back out. "Hyung, I can't do this. I hate chickens!" I pleaded.

He laughed, teasing me, "But you didn't hate the chicken we got from Chicken Republic, did you?"

"Help me!" I begged, but the tour guide noticed we had fallen behind, leaving me with no choice. As soon as we entered the poultry building, I felt lightheaded. I almost dry-heaved at one point.

"Here we have the layers, and over there are the broilers. How about we hold one to feel the weight difference?" the guide suggested.

"Why?" I squeaked in horror, but thankfully, the clucking chickens drowned out my voice.

"Oh my God, no!" I exclaimed as a chicken was handed to me. I quickly looked away to avoid making eye contact with the creature, and when it flapped its wings, I almost fainted. Luckily, Hyung snatched it away before I could lose my composure. Then, I had to hold another chicken that felt like it weighed a ton. I couldn’t handle it for long. At least the first one had been light, but this one? No way.

They really needed to stop feeding them. I thought the tour would end there, but it was just beginning. Each participant was given a basket and instructed to collect three eggs from under the layers. My face went pale. "Hell no," I muttered, trying to make my escape, but So Hyang suddenly appeared in front of me. I decided to muster some courage.

"Which chicken are you going for?" she asked, and I gulped.

"Uhh, this one," I said, pointing to a brown hen as I cautiously approached it. It seemed simple enough: just reach under and grab it. Yet, I hesitated, even with the animal asleep. That made me even more nervous; what if it woke up and pecked me?

“Mr. Han, why aren’t you getting your eggs?” the guide asked, and all eyes turned to me, making me feel mortified. "I'm doing it," I mumbled, closing my eyes and sliding my hand under the hen. I quickly pulled out the eggs. "I did it!" I exclaimed, surprised by my own success.

“Nice job,” Hyung said, giving my shoulder a supportive tap. I couldn’t help but smirk; it wasn’t so bad after all.

Before heading to the fish farm, I received a phone call from my brother. When I arrived, I noticed everyone already had a partner except for me.

“What do I do now?” I muttered to myself when Mrs. Rosa said, "Oh, here comes Dunni. You can partner with her."

Just then, Dunni walked into the building. "Sorry, I had to answer my mom's call," she said apologetically.

"Alright, everyone has a partner now, so grab your fish food, and let's head to the tanks," the guide announced. Dunni glanced at me awkwardly as she handed me a jar.

We walked behind the crowd to our assigned tank. Slowly, I sprinkled the flakes into the water, and the fish quickly surfaced to eat. "So cute," Dunni whispered. She looked adorable as she smiled back at a fish that swam close to her, feeding it carefully.

"Hey! Don’t bite my finger!" I yelled when a fish nearly nipped me. I had forgotten my hand was in the water, too distracted by Dunni’s presence. If there had been a shark, I would’ve lost my arm by now!

After the tour ended, we moved on to the grape vineyard, where we were given containers to collect grapes.

I caught a few employees sneaking bites of the grapes without washing them. After shooting them a disapproving glare, they bowed in apology and

stopped.

"These are so beautiful," Dunni said as we filled our containers.

"What's your favorite fruit, **Noona**?"

"Apples," she replied. "What about you, Mr. Han?"

"Honeydew. It was in my cart at the supermarket the other day."

"Oh yeah, I remember! I hope to try it one day."

"You will."

We returned to the group, where everyone showed off their harvest. Suddenly, I noticed Dunni was missing. "Where's Dunni?" Tessa asked.

"I'll go find her," I said, dropping my basket with Hyung. I headed back to the vineyard and spotted her empty basket, knowing she hadn't gone far.

"**Noona**!" I called out, but there was no response.

Just then, I heard her voice calling, "Ha Neul!" She had wandered off to a distant hill, far enough from the farm that no one would notice if she got into trouble.

"What are you doing over there?" I asked, seeing her standing at the edge, trembling. Her jumpsuit was dusty, and there were bloody scrapes on her pants.

"It's dangerous! Don't come any closer!" she warned from the edge of the hill, too scared to move because of the large gap between us.

"It's okay, **Noona**, just jump," I urged, but she shook her head, panic evident in her eyes.

"I'll fall if I move," she replied, trembling with fear.

"I promise I won't let you fall."

Eleven

Ha Neul



Looking into Dunni’s eyes, I asked calmly, “**Noona**, do you trust me?”

She nodded slowly, uncertainty still lingering.

"Then come to me," I encouraged, watching as she took a deep breath and leaped into my arms. We both tumbled off the hill. When we finally landed on the ground, I let her go, and she found herself on top of me, tears strolling down her face.

"Hey, stop crying. We made it," I said softly, brushing my thumb against her cheek to wipe away her tears. She sat up, her expression filled with regret.

"I was chasing a rabbit and lost track of the path. The erosion is so bad here; the ground just gave way when I stepped on it. And now, you’re hurt because of me." She gestured to the scratches on my arm, her voice trembling with guilt.

I chuckled gently. "It’s fine, **Noona**. It’s just a few scratches. But look at your legs; your pants are torn and bloody." I pointed to her scraped knees, and she grimaced, clearly in pain.

"I hit them on a rock, but I’m okay," she insisted, trying to stand but hissing at the sting of her injuries. I couldn't let her go on like this.

"You can’t be serious," I said, scooping her up. She squealed in surprise.

"What are you doing, Ha Neul? What if the others see us?" she exclaimed, her cheeks flushing with embarrassment.

"I’m just carrying you; I’m not doing anything wrong, am I?" I teased, but she fell silent, the embarrassment clear on her face.

"Tessa is going to tease me," she muttered grumpily, and I smiled at her cuteness. As if on cue, Tessa appeared, her eyes sparkling with mischief as she stood by the vineyard with Dunni’s basket in her hand.

"Don’t say a word," Dunni warned.

"Tessa, not a word to anyone," I said firmly, and she zipped her mouth shut.

The tour finally concluded, but I felt a bit dizzy from everything that had happened. I decided to skip the dinner preparations and rest instead.

Making my way to the infirmary, I treated my wounds and received some painkillers. So Hyang came in shortly after. "Are you okay?" she asked gently.

"I'm fine," I assured her, managing a smile despite the day's events.

"Why did you risk your life for her? You could have called for help."

"There was no time to do so. I had to make a decision quickly."

"What if she intentionally got hurt so she could skip dinner preparation?"

"How can you say such a thing? Why would she do that? Didn't she explain what happened? Don't say such things again."

"I was joking. I didn't mean it. I'm sorry."

I excused myself and headed to my room. Her tone earlier hadn't felt like a joke, but I brushed it off, convincing myself it was just my imagination.

After sleeping for two hours, I woke to the night's stillness. My first thought was to check on Dunni, so I made my way to her room. Tessa answered the door, her expression friendly.

"Hey, what's up? Is Dunni better?"

"Yes, she's in the bathroom showering. Her wounds have been treated."

"That's great to hear!" I said, smiling. But then Tessa surprised me with her next question.

"Sir, if I may ask, do you have feelings for Adunni?"

Heat rushed to my cheeks. "Uhm, no. Why'd you ask?" I stammered.

"Nothing, really. It's just the way you look at her and all. My assumptions were wrong, I guess. We'll see you at the bonfire," she said, a teasing smile playing on her lips as she closed the door. I quickly got ready for the bonfire, grabbing my coat to ward off the chilly wind.

As I arrived, the air was filled with the sizzling sounds of barbecue, and the enticing aroma of ramen and *tteokbokki* wafted towards me. The sight was beautiful: everyone gathered around the fire, laughing and enjoying the evening.

The owner came over to thank us for joining, and some of the workers offered us fried eggs, barbecued fish, and fruits we had picked earlier. I thanked him profusely, appreciating the hospitality.

I took a seat close to the fire, feeling the warmth seep into my bones. Hyung handed me a can of soda, and I smiled in gratitude. "Thanks, man."

"Your *Hanwoo*, sir," Mrs. Yasmine said with a warm smile as she approached me with a plate filled with beef.

"You're too kind, Mrs. Yasmine," I replied, grinning at her generosity. She set a camp stove before me, placing a pot filled with hot water on it.

With a playful laugh, she added five packs of *Shin* ramen. "What do you expect me to do with all this?" I joked, watching as the water began to bubble.

"Eat, of course! You need to keep your strength up!" she laughed, her eyes twinkling.

"You really took my words seriously."

"Of course, sir. You sounded serious, so I had to fulfill your request."

"Mr. Han, we have *ssamjang* and lettuce wrap *oh*," Tessa announced, and I finally set my eyes on Dunni.

She was wearing a hoodie, black sweatpants and a beanie. I once again saw her wearing that combo.

"Thanks, Ms. Tessa."

"Would you like to give a few words, Mr. Han?" Mr. Josh asked.

"*Aigoo*, what do I say?" I was flustered.

"He sounded just like Mrs. Han!" Tessa laughed.

"Alright, I just want to take a moment to say how proud I am of everyone here. You all are doing an incredible job, and this is honestly the best research team I've ever worked with. Here's to many more successful and happy moments together. Cheers to the research team!" I raised my soda, and the air was filled with cheers. I watched Dunni eat *tteokbokki.*

"How about we play truth or drink?" Tae Oh suggested, instantly sparking everyone's interest. The chairs were pulled closer, and all eyes turned to me for approval.

"Why not? Go ahead."



"HAVE YOU EVER LIKED anyone in the company, *Jiě?*" Er Duo asked Dunni. She immediately drank her alcohol, leaving them in suspicion.

"Ooh, who is it?" Chae Min asked, and she bumped his shoulder.

"Shut up," she muttered.

Tessa's turn came up. The minute she was asked if she liked any of the current employees, she drank without hesitation.

"Tessa," Dunni squealed, and she grinned at her. Mrs. Yasmine got asked if she ever hated my mother. She drank water instead, but everyone said it wasn't fair, so I agreed to drink for her. Secretary Kim was asked if I was ever hard to deal with. The shock on my face when he drank could not be explained.

"Mr. Han, do you have a crush?" someone asked playfully. Drinking didn't seem like an option, especially when my crush was right there, sitting across from me. I liked Dunni—a lot. Even though I knew she didn't feel the same, I wasn't going to hide how I felt.

"Yes, I do."

"Who is it?" I overheard someone whisper, while Yu Mi speculated that it was So Hyang. I ignored the chatter as my phone buzzed. My brother was calling, so I excused myself from the group.

After catching up for a few more minutes, I hung up. But before I could rejoin the group, So Hyang stood in front of me, looking slightly tipsy.

"Oppa, who was that on the phone with you?"

"My brother, why?"

"Oppa, who is the woman in your heart?"

"It's none of your business."

"You were looking at Dunni Unnie when you answered the question. You like her, right? That woman is in your heart?"

"So? So what if I like her? What are you going to do? Please, don't speak to me about this again. I don't want to hear it."

"Do you not see my feelings? I like you, Oppa. I've liked you since high school, and I came to Nigeria because of you, Oppa. So why her? Why do you like her instead?"

"Are you drunk? If so, don't say anything else. You might regret it later on. Goodnight."

I left So Hyang by the building and headed toward the bonfire, but before I could reach it, she suddenly wrapped her arms around me. I froze as everyone turned to look, including Dunni.

"Please, don't push me away. I'm sorry for confessing my feelings. I won't come close to you again, Mr. Han. I'm so sorry," she whispered, clinging to me from behind. I stood still, unsure of how to react. If I pulled

her off, she'd be humiliated, and I didn't want to do that to her. I turned to face her instead, and she immediately stepped back.

"You're a good person, So Hyang, and a great friend. Let's not let this ruin what we have, okay?" I said gently. She nodded, looking embarrassed.

"I'm so sorry. I need to go," she mumbled before hurrying off to the restroom. I walked back to my seat, catching Dunni's gaze for a moment. She looked at me with sadness in her eyes but quickly glanced away.

"So, is So Hyang your crush, Mr. Han?" Mark asked, grinning. I laughed it off.

"Nah, she's just drunk, that's all," I said, and thankfully, no one pressed the issue further.

After dinner, I headed back to my room, took a quick shower, and realized I had left my coat outside. As I approached the chairs, I spotted Dunni sitting alone, drinking *soju* straight from the bottle.

"Hey," I greeted, and she looked up at me with a faint smile.

"Hi," she whispered back.

"Why are you drinking all by yourself?"

"When you're heartbroken, sometimes all you want to do is drink your heart out."

"Heartbroken? Why?"

She stood up, swaying slightly, and met my eyes.

"This is stupid," she muttered, dropping the bottle with a heavy sigh.

"What's the matter, **Noona**?" I asked softly, noticing the tears she quickly wiped away.

"You're going out with So Hyang? Really? Then why did you confuse me and make me like you? I hate you. I hate you so much," she whispered, her voice trembling with emotion as she lightly hit my chest twice.

"**Noona**, it's not like that," I said, gently holding her hand as she whimpered.

"Then what's it like?" she demanded, her frustration clear. "I've known about her feelings for you for a while now, and you two are always close. She even calls you *Oppa*," she spat the word out with disgust, and I couldn't help but smile inwardly at her jealousy.

"Today, you saved me, and I thought you did it because you liked me. But now, you've told everyone you have a crush, and then I see you and So Hyang coming out of a corner together. What am I supposed to think?" she finished, her voice breaking with hurt.

“**Noona**, you’ve got it all wrong. Let me explain.”

“Who knows what you two might have done there. You two are disgusting.”

She said in jealousy and tried to walk away, but I held her close, taking away all the space between us.

"Are you jealous of what I did with her?"

"And what if I am? It doesn't change the face that you played with my emotions. You acted so mad when I told you to forget the kiss, but I never knew that you were with her. You broke my heart; you're a jerk. Let go of me."

She wiggled in my arms, but I held her tight. "Why did you say she and I are disgusting? What do you think we did?"

“Many things that couples do—kiss her, hug her, touch her.”

I caressed her cheek. “**Noona**, why must you be so cute?”

"Why are you touching me with the same hands you used to touch another woman? Let go of me!" She pushed her lower lip out.

"I didn't touch her, and I didn't do anything with her. I'm not dating her, **Noona**. I like someone else." I kissed her cheek softly.

"I like you, **Noona**."

Her eyes widened, and she bit her lip. "But you told Tessa that you didn't like me. I overheard you and her at the door."

"I didn't want to confess when I didn't know about your feelings. But now, I've confessed. And I am 200% sure that I like you, **Noona**." She laughed.



“200% DOESN'T EXIST, HA Neul.”

I grazed her lips with my fingers. "Really? Does it not exist?"

"Maybe, maybe it does," she whispered, and I chuckled.

"I like you too. I really like you a lot."

l could barely control my excitement. My grip around her waist tightened. “**Noona**, are you drunk?”

“Not at all, are you?” She asked. I touched her face with the back of my fingers, grazing her lips again.

“Not even a little bit.”

“Will you regret it this time?”

"Never, I will never do that," she whispered and caressed my cheek.

"You're so beautiful," she whispered again.

"You're radiant," I said to her before I leaned in to kiss her. It was just as I had remembered—soft, sweet and mesmerizing.

"You look so funny right now," she wiped my stained lips. Her lipstick was smudged across her face.

"It's all your fault. You shouldn't have tempted me." I teased, and she intertwined our fingers.

"You shouldn't have given in," she smiled, and I couldn't resist kissing her again.

"Ha Neul, stop," she squealed and got out of my embrace. "It's past midnight; we have to go to bed."

We walked together, and her laughter was the only sound I wanted to hear for the rest of my life. “I'm the one who sent the flowers to you at work.”

“I knew it! You were acting funny when I got them, and how were you in your department at that exact moment? You're really something, Ha Neul. How did you even think of it?” She asked, and I laughed.

“Mr. Caleb told me about a gift shop. Did I do well? Don't lie, you were moved, right?”

“For a second, I thought it was my ex, but I remembered that he moved to the UK. My friend said it was probably from you, but I didn't believe her. Not until now. Oh God, she said she'd never talk to me again if I ever fall for you. I even told her to call me a dog. I can't lose my friend because of you, Ha Neul. So, you will speak to her yourself.”

“Yes, ma'am. Your wish is my command. Sleep well, okay?”

"Goodnight," she said.

"Goodnight, pretty angel."

"Oh please, don't be cheesy. Sleep tight." She kissed my cheek, but I was fast enough to kiss her on the lips.

"You sly fox," she narrowed her eyes. "Bye!"

"Bye, **Noona**."

I was disappointed to find out that the males ate lunch separately. I could barely see her. Still, she noticed me and smiled—a smile that melted my heart.

“What’s going on here?” Hyung's voice broke through my thoughts as I quickly focused on my food.

“Why is Ms. Dunni looking at you with loving eyes? What happened?” he pressed. When I stayed silent, his eyes widened.

“Don’t tell anyone.”

“Your secret’s safe with me,” he grinned.

I stole glances at her throughout the rest of the meal. Soon, we made our way to the stables for horse riding.

“Who can ride horses? Please raise your hands,” the instructor called out.

Sixteen hands shot up, leaving only one down—Dunni’s.

“You can't ride a horse?” So Hyang said to her in bewilderment.

“Did you drop a horse in my house for me to ride on? *See this one oh, mtchew*.” She hissed, glaring at So Hyang.

“Okay, who will teach Dunni how to ride?”

“I'll teach her,” I said, and she blushed.

“Alright then, let's get started. Put the saddle on the horse.”

“Are you scared?” I asked, and she nodded. “Don't worry, just breathe. Show the horse that you're not an enemy.”.

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Twelve

Adunni



I followed his instructions, and before I knew it, the saddle was on the black stallion. The animal intimidated me, but when I saw everyone enjoying themselves with their horses, I pushed myself to be brave. It was time to get on the horse, and that was the real test of my courage. While the others mounted swiftly, I hesitated. Ha Neul waited for me, his eyes soft but teasing.

"Don't be scared, **Noona**. I got you," he whispered in my ear, sending a shiver down my spine. He knew exactly what he was doing.

Finally, I managed to get on. In a blink, he was behind me, and my back was pressed against his chest.

"You look so cute right now," he whispered again, wrapping his arm around my waist when no one was looking. I swatted his hand away.

"Okay, giddy up and let's go," the instructor called, and the horses began to move.

"Are you ready?"

I took a deep breath. "Yes, I am."

The horse moved beneath me, and although it felt strange at first, having him close made me feel a bit more at ease. His arms were around me as he held the reins, but I knew he was using it as an excuse to be close.

"You're so brazen," I whispered.

"I agree."

Before I could react, he leaned in and kissed my cheek when no one was looking. I was too flustered to respond.

"Try to go faster," the instructor announced.

"Ha Neul, slow down. I don't feel so good," I said, my head starting to spin.

Immediately, he slowed the horse. "Are you better now?" he asked gently.

I nodded, grateful for the change in pace. We made our way to the fields, where everyone was admiring a mini waterfall up ahead. The view was stunning, but before I could fully take it in, the instructor called out, "Alright, everyone, let's head back."

The group moved forward, but Ha Neul didn't. He kept the horse still, wrapping his arms tightly around me and letting out a long, contented sigh.

"What's wrong? Let's go, Ha Neul."

He shook his head, holding me even closer. "That's more like it."

"Why are you so cheesy?"

"I am not cheesy," he muttered, and I turned to look at him.

Out of nowhere, his expression turned serious. "Will you be my girlfriend, **Noona**?"

My heart warmed at his words. He didn't need to ask; I had already made my decision last night. "Yes, I will," I replied, smiling back at him.

His face lit up, but before he could get too excited, I added with a teasing tone, "But you have to stop being clingy."

"I'm not clingy."

"Yes, you are," I said, laughing. "You should keep your hands to yourself, Mr. Han."

In response, he gently caressed my cheek, his thumb brushing lightly over my skin. "I'm afraid I can't do that," he whispered.

He kissed me suddenly. Out in the open, with our colleagues not far away, and worse—we were on a horse. But we didn't care. In that moment, we forgot where we were, forgot everything except each other. We should have run out of breath, but instead, we were filled with a rush of energy, and his arms felt like home—a place I never wanted to leave.

When we finally pulled apart, breathless, he lingered close, smiling against my lips before planting a soft kiss on my cheek. We separated reluctantly, and he turned the horse around.

"Stop blushing," he teased, and I couldn't help but giggle.

We hurried to catch up with the group, exchanging mischievous glances when we realized no one had noticed we were gone. What we didn't realize was the evidence left behind—Ha Neul had lipstick smeared on his lips, and mine were equally stained. Thankfully, Tessa noticed. She whistled softly to get my attention and discreetly handed me a handkerchief.

The slight swelling of our lips was still noticeable, but it wasn't enough to raise suspicion. As soon as we dismounted the horses, Tessa pulled me

aside, her eyes flashing with frustration.

"We'll discuss this later," she whispered sharply.

I nodded, brushing the mane of the horse we had just ridden. "Gemini, what a beautiful name."

"He likes you," the caretaker commented with a smile.

I laughed, stroking the horse's neck. "I like you too, Gemini. Don't tell anyone what you saw, okay?" I whispered to him.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Ha Neul watching me.

He is going to expose us if he doesn't stop looking at me like that.



"*Oya,* start talking. Your lipstick was on our boss' lips. What the heck, Dunni?" I sat Tessa on the bed, smiling apologetically.

"Tessa love, promise you'll keep it a secret?"

"Is this a K-drama *abi wetin*? How can this happen in real life? Dunni, how did you get him to like you? Are you sure he likes you? Cos he denied it when I asked him last night, and now, he's giving you loving eyes. Or is he bipolar?"

"No, Tessa. It's because he didn't know I liked him too. I was upset last night, but he came to me, and we confessed."

"So, you're dating our boss now. Really? I'm jealous. Or should I just go out with Chae Min? He has been crushing on me for more than a year now, but I turned him down."

I opened my mouth in shock. "Chae Min likes you? It's a lie!" I squealed.

"Please, shut up. Yes. He likes me, but I was new that time. I didn't know him, and he wasn't really fluent in English. I like my man at least five years older, but he's 31—just two years older. I felt he couldn't understand me emotionally, so I told him it couldn't work. He's still nice to me *sha*."

"It's well. All my friends are following foreigners, what's happening? My friend, Vanessa, is dating a Chinese man, and from the looks of it, she wants to marry him *oh*. She was to become *Zhang Fū rén*."

"And you'll become *Han Samonim*?"

"*Abeg*."

There was a knock on the door, and I rolled my eyes when So Hyang came in. *What does this witch want again?*

"Hi, Unnie." She said to Tessa.

“Do you need something?”

“Mr. Williams and Mr. Han are asking for you.”

“I'll be back, Dunni,” she left me in the room with that witch.

“Shouldn't you be leaving?”

“You're dating the CEO?” She asked, and I got up from my bed.

“That's none of your business.”

“But in the bathroom last night, you said you didn't have feelings for him. You denied it and told me I could be with him, so why did he look at you that way? And why did he kiss you? You lied. You love him and you knew he didn't like me, so you wanted me to feel ashamed, right?

“Can you hear yourself? Don’t be ridiculous. You chose to tell him. No one forced you.”

“No, Unnie. You stole Oppa. You could have backed down, but you wanted something you couldn't have. A woman like you doesn't deserve him. He needs someone that can relate to him a lot, but you two are from two different places. You are Nigerian, and he's Korean. How can it work? Give it up, Unnie. Or I will tell his parents about your relationship and you'll get fired!”

“Do you have evidence? No, I guess not. Sure, you saw us together, but would anyone believe you? You're just an employee like me; both of us will get fired if you say anything. Don't be stupid, So Hyang. Also, don't call me Unnie, it disgusts me. I can't believe you even address the CEO as *Oppa*. Aren't you ashamed? All because he was your senior at school? He's still your boss, don't call him Oppa. It's gutter behavior.” I said to her, and she clenched her fists.

“You have no right to say that to me, Ms. Adunni. You're just an employee like me too. Don't feel special. I'll make sure you regret stealing him.”

She walked out of the room, and I slumped on the bed.

“*Werey*,” I whispered and remembered what she said to me in the girls' room last night.

“What is it? Is it important?”

“Maybe. You like the CEO, right?”

“Me? No, I don't. What made you say that?”

“The way you look at him is suspicious. Maybe I'm overthinking it, but you looked jealous when you saw me in his office. And he told me he has met your parents before. Do you two have some sort of history together?”

“I honestly don't think that's something you should know about. But you're wrong. I'm not jealous of you and him at all. You like him, don't you? So, you can be with him. No one is stopping you.”

“Geurae? Okay. Thanks, Unnie. Sleep well.”

“The nerve of that crazy girl!” Tessa exclaimed as we packed to leave. “See, don't let her steal your man *abeg*. Tell him to tell her to stop calling him *Oppa*. Is she mad? *Make we gather guys go beat her sef. Kinni?* Will you tell him about what she said?”

“No, I'll leave it.”

“Why?”

“I don't want to be that kind of person, Tessa. If I take a step, she can use it against me. I'll leave her for now.” Tessa seemed unconvinced, but she didn't say anything. We soon joined the others at the bus stop.

“Ride home with me,” Ha Neul whispered to me, and I shook my head.

“Are you trying to tell everyone about us? No!”

“You're mean,” he sulked, and I laughed. I looked ahead and saw So Hyang glaring at us. I eyed her in spite. If I had the chance, I would have poked her eyes with my fingers.

“Tessa, how many pictures have you taken?” I asked her for the seventh time in 24 hours.

“*See this one*. In fact, come and see you and your man.”

I was surprised when I saw pictures of Ha Neul and I on the horse. “When did you take these?”

“I'll send them to you, don't worry,” she winked at me.

Ha Neul watched me get in the bus, his eyes full of sadness.

“This your boyfriend *nawa o*. So he cannot wait for two days before he sees you?” Tessa commented in amusement.

I waved at him before he got into his car, and I heard a scoff from behind me. “That witch will soon eliminate all of us with her jealousy,” Tessa added after she glared at her.

“Forget her.”

When I finally got home, I was tired. I gave the souvenirs to my parents, and I was baffled when I saw my older sister in my room. “Missed me?”

“Wait, you're pregnant?” I noticed her stomach, and she nodded.

“Surprise!”

“So, you and Deji finally decided to have a child. Congratulations, sis.”

We spoke for a while, talking about life.

“Is the company treating you well?” Shola asked seriously.

“Yes *na*, why'd you ask?”

“Mummy said you've been down lately, so she told me to speak to you and know if everything is fine at work.”

“I was down, but I'm fine now,” I gave her a smile, and she got suspicious.

“What's with the smile? What's happening at work? Is it that great? I hate my workplace, I won't lie. I can never be happy there. But this one that you are smiling, hope it's not about that your handsome Korean boss that Mom told me about?”

Mummy, why must you always be the first to ruin a surprise?

“She couldn't even wait for me to tell you myself. *Chai*. Anyways, yeah. My boss is nice and handsome, and he's a very supportive and kind person. I admire him a lot.”

“You sound like you're in love, Dunni. Is there something you're not telling me? There is a missing piece somewhere, definitely. *Oya*, start talking.”

“Well...”

“Well?”

“I like him. I like him a lot, Shola, and it's definitely not because he's Korean or anything. I don't care about that at all. Ha Neul's a great man; he cares for others, he's a good person to talk to, makes me smile, has good people around him, and he's hardworking. He also respects others, and he goes to church too. He's everything.”

“And he just had to be Korean.” Shola said, and I sucked my teeth.

“A bonus, maybe?”

Thirteen

Adunni



My mother gave me six containers of soups, stews, semovita and *amala*. I almost wanted to ask if she was being paid to do all of this. "Follow your sister as she's going, then drop these off at Ha Neul's house."

"But, Mummy, you didn't cook like this for us when we were in school *o*." I muttered, and she glared at me.

"You can't enter the kitchen and cook? Can Ha Neul cook *egusi* soup? Or *ewedu*? Please, don't even start. He enjoys my cooking, does he not? *Abi* did he say my food tastes bad?"

"Sorry, ma."

"Tell him that we'll be expecting him on Sunday," my father added.

"Should I wait for you?" Shola asked as she parked, and I shook my head immediately. "Dunni, are you well in the head? You want to be alone with a man by 6 in the evening? You better do fast and come back."

"Shola, shouldn't you be in your husband's house by now? I can go home by myself *na;* I'm almost 29. See, before I even get into the estate, I have to call him to come out. It's getting late, and I don't want you to be driving at night." I said grumpily, and she looked at me from head to toe.

"I'll be waiting outside," she said, bringing her laptop from the backseat. "What are you standing there for? Go in!" She yelled, and I gave up.

I could hear the excitement in Ha Neul's voice when he told the guards to let me in. As soon as I walked into the estate, he was sprinting towards me, wearing a white t-shirt and gray sweatpants.

"Ha Neul-*ah*," I waved, and he grinned before he pulled me into a tight hug.

"C-can't breathe."

"Sorry, **Noona**, I'm just so happy to see you. You didn't say you were coming."

"Do I need a reason to visit my boyfriend?"

“Definitely not,” we went into his house, and I marveled at the interior decor.

“It really looks like a house from a K-drama,” I commented, and he chuckled.

“Is this from your mom?”

“Yes. She cooked a lot.”

“Aww, your mom is the best! I have to come see her soon; I miss her jokes.” He said, leading me to his black-themed kitchen, which I immediately fell in love with.

“They’re expecting you on Sunday, by the way. Will you come to church?” I asked as I brought out the containers.

He nodded. “But if there's a stampede, I'm running away.”

“Why are there so many soju bottles in here?” I asked when I opened the fridge.

He chuckled. “Let's not talk about that, okay?”

“Stop looking at me like that.”

“I'm not doing anything, am I?”

“How many siblings do you have?” I asked him as we walked to the gate.

“Just one. I have an older brother. His name is Han Ji Min, and he’s four years older than I am. He studied in China, and he’s the director at the headquarters.”

“But isn’t he supposed to be the CEO if he’s older? Why did your parents give the company to you?” I asked, curious.

He chuckled. “Oh, my darling **Noona**. What am I going to do with you? I’m just the CEO of the Nigerian branch, and I’ll also be the CEO of the Korean branch. But my brother? He owns the most shares and is in charge of all ten branches in Asia. I don’t hold a candle to him; he’s the boss.”

I was baffled. “Well, that’s good, I guess. Does he know about me?”

He nodded. “I told him about you today. He can’t wait to see you. Let’s talk to him through Skype later.”

“I don’t want you to go,” he whined as we stepped outside the gate, and I could feel my sister’s gaze on us.

“I have to, Ha Neul. But we’ll see each other the day after tomorrow, okay? And we have five days of seeing each other after that.” I tried to make him feel better, but he looked grumpy.

“My schedule is packed for the week. The headquarters organized a departmental competition, and Secretary Kim wants me to plan it according to my style. Why should I? We have hundreds of employees who can handle it, so why me? I’m the CEO! He mentioned something about gaining experience or whatever, but I’m tired. I don’t want to gain experience; I just want to go to the beach and relax.”

I chuckled softly. “I’ll take you to the beach soon, don’t worry.”

Suddenly, he wrapped his arms around me. “My sister is watching!” I squealed.

“Let her watch,” he replied with a chuckle. *No, please.*

“That's enough kissing for today. We have kissed three times in less than 24 hours.” I said to him, and he chuckled.

“This is only the beginning, my love.” My cheeks were hot from the pet name.

“I wanna say hello to your sister.”

“*Hello ke*? After you kissed me in front of my sister, you want to say hello to her? Hello? ‘Hello, I'm your sister's boyfriend, and I apologize for kissing her instead of introducing myself’? Please, Ha Neul. Turn back, right now.” I objected, but he was already making his way to the car.

“I was thinking you went to Egypt to drop the food,” she said in sarcasm, and he laughed.

“Good evening, I'm Ha Neul Han,” he shook her hand.

“Shola Adebayo, Dunni's older sister. I didn't expect you two to be that kind of couple.” I blushed in embarrassment, and Ha Neul scratched his head. “It's fine, really. Who am I to judge? I mean, look at me! I'm pregnant. I'm not innocent either.”

“It's great to finally meet one of **Noona’s** siblings. I must say, you really look like your mom.”

Shola looked dumbfounded. “Thanks. I get that a lot. So, you call Dunni *Noona*? As in, older sister? Am I correct? I've watched a few dramas with Dunni.”

We were beyond embarrassed. “Well, I've gotta go. My husband's looking for me, and our mum asked if we were on our way to Kaduna or something.” She got in first.

“I'll see you later,” he kissed my forehead and pulled me into a hug.

“Yeah, you'll see me. Goodnight, Ha Neul.”

“Sweet dreams.” He put his hands in his pocket and watched us leave.

“You two are acting like two teenagers in love. *It's well*. Love is wonderful.”



“SO, YOU STOPPED COMING to this church because Cheng is attending a different one in Wuse? You are something else. All because of a man? *Ehn* Vanessa? You have fallen my hand!” I teased Vanessa after church ended, and we took pictures in the parking lot.

“See this one. I am in love *o*. I can do anything for him. Attending his church is nothing, I can even change churches if he wants me to.” She boasted, and I rolled my eyes. “You wouldn't know what being in love feels like, would you?”

“Oh please, don't even start,” I said, and she excused herself to answer a phone call.

“Dunni!” Ha Neul was beside me in an instant, wearing a sharp blue suit and a gold watch on his left wrist, a wide smile lighting up his face.

“You only ever call me *Noona* or Ms. Dunni. What’s with the sudden change?” I narrowed my eyes at him, but he simply wrapped an arm around my waist.

“We're in public; I have to address you properly, right sweetie?” he whispered in my ear. “I missed you so much,” he added, taking in my appearance. “You look so beautiful, my love. You never cease to amaze me.”

“Stop being so cheesy. Oh no, my parents are here!” I pushed him away just as my parents approached the car.

“Ha Neul! It's so good to see you again!” my mother exclaimed, pulling him into a hug. He blushed hard as he greeted them.

“Good afternoon, sir, ma'am. I'm sorry for last time. I hope you weren't too upset with me,” he said.

They shrugged it off. “Don't worry about it at all. I hope you'll join us today.”

“Thank you so much for the meals, ma'am. I'm still enjoying them a lot,” he thanked my mother before they headed off.

“Sweet, I get to ride in the Range Rover today!” I squealed, and he laughed.

“Let’s go to the car,” he said, and I decided to take pictures of him.

“What are you doing?”

“Nothing, my love,” I teased, hiding my phone.

“Say it again. Call me my love,” he urged, intertwining our fingers. I leaned closer, bringing my lips near his ear.

“My love,” I whispered, and he squeezed my hand lightly.

“Today is a good day, isn’t it?” he said as we reached his car, and I nodded in agreement.

“Am I seeing this clearly?” Vanessa’s voice cut through the moment, and I quickly pulled my hand away from Ha Neul’s.

“Babe, who’s this?” Ha Neul asked, his brows furrowing as Vanessa stared at us in shock.

“Babe? Dunni, I hope it’s not what I’m thinking. Wait, you’re dating him? The same man you said you didn’t like? The one you swore you wouldn’t be with? You want to get into the Range Rover and go where? *If I slap you...* Come here!” She grabbed my hand, but Ha Neul caught the other.

*“*What is this one doing*?”* Vanessa glared at him, and he looked upset.

“Excuse me, can’t you see I’m trying to talk to my best friend?” she said, her tone dripping with disdain.

“And I’m taking my girlfriend home, so I’m not letting her go,” he shot back, and she let out a humorless laugh.

She yanked me closer, and he held me back, making me feel like a tug-of-war prize. “Enough!” I finally broke free from both of their grips, and they flinched in surprise.

“Nessa, get into the car. We can’t talk here. Babe, take us to a restaurant or something.”

Part Two



HA NEUL AND I

Fourteen

Adunni



Vanessa narrowed her eyes. “**You are a dog, Dunni.”**

I put my head down in shame. “Vanessa, please *na*.”

“Don't speak to me, you bad friend,” she said in anger and glared at Ha Neul.

“I can explain, Nessa. I didn't mean to keep it away from you. I was going to tell you, I promise!”

“Save it, I don't want to hear it. You're giving me a headache. And why is this your boyfriend driving like he's afraid of the road?”

Ha Neul cleared his throat before increasing his speed.

We arrived at the restaurant, and Vanessa immediately dragged me out of the car, leaving Ha Neul behind. He soon joined us at the table, sitting across from us.

“Alright, Adunni. Explain yourself,” Vanessa said, her eyes narrowing. "Why is the man you swore you hated now your boyfriend?"

I took a deep breath as Ha Neul ordered cocktails for us. I took a large sip. “Listen, Nessa, I know I lied. I’m sorry. I didn’t want to admit that I liked him, so I kept it from you. We started dating during the workshop, but we didn’t tell anyone. I promise, I was going to tell you, eventually.” I turned to Ha Neul for support. “Right, Ha Neul?”

He nodded, backing me up immediately. “Yes, I was planning to tell her soon. I apologize for not introducing myself earlier. But yes, I’m dating **Noona**, and I care about her very much.”

Vanessa sighed, a mix of frustration and concern on her face. “I see. I just worry about her, that’s all. Dunni’s only ever been in one relationship, and I’m afraid she jumped into this without really thinking it through. Love isn’t everything when it comes to dating. I’m sure you understand that, Mr. Han.” She directed her gaze at Ha Neul, who nodded.

“I do, but I’m serious about **Noona**," he said, looking her in the eye. "I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t care deeply for her. Please don’t be upset with

her for keeping it a secret."

Vanessa exhaled, finally relaxing. "Well, since you've put it that way, I trust you'll take good care of her. Just make sure you don't make her cry. I'll keep my threats to myself for now." A smile tugged at her lips. "But seriously, I'm happy for you both. You two make a great match."

"Thanks a lot, sis," I said, giving Vanessa a side hug as she laughed.

"Can I come home with you, Dunni? I haven't seen your parents in a while," she asked, and I immediately nodded. As we got up, I noticed Ha Neul trailing behind me with a grumpy expression.

"What's wrong?"

"I wanted to spend some time with you, but your friend is third-wheeling," he mumbled, making me giggle.

"Sharing is caring, Mr. Han," I teased, but he rolled his eyes playfully.

"I'm not sharing you with anyone, Ms. Adunni. You're mine," he whispered in a low, possessive tone that sent a chill down my spine.

We got into the car, but Vanessa quickly monopolized my attention, chattering about the latest K-dramas she'd been watching. Through the rearview mirror, I could see Ha Neul glaring at us with mock annoyance, and I gave him an apologetic smile.



AS USUAL, MY MOM WAS preparing a feast, and Vanessa and I offered to help her in the kitchen. Meanwhile, my dad handed Ha Neul a task—blending peppers. He obediently took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves, and started washing the peppers. It was amusing to watch him and my father working side by side.

"Is your boyfriend secretly Nigerian? He's giving serious Yoruba man vibes," Vanessa teased, and we both burst out laughing.

As Vanessa and I chopped vegetables for the chicken stew, my mom was busy with the vegetable soup on the other cooker. Everything was running smoothly until Ha Neul suddenly called for my attention. His hands were red and irritated, and he looked uncomfortable.

"What happened?" my mom asked, concerned when she saw his hands.

"It's just a skin irritation, I'm fine, ma'am," he replied politely, but the redness said otherwise. My dad quickly suggested I take him to soak his hands in cool water.

“Come,” I said, leading him to my bathroom. I filled the bathtub with water, and he sat down, dipping his hands into the soothing coolness.

“I’ll get some ice.”

When I returned to the bathroom, ice in hand, I found Ha Neul absentmindedly playing with the water, swirling it around. I shook my head, smiling at the sight. “Really, Ha Neul? You’re like a kid sometimes.”

“**Noona**, your underwear looks cute,” Ha Neul teased, gesturing toward the underwear hanging nearby.

“Don’t look!” I yelled, quickly grabbing them from the hanger as he chuckled. I tossed them into my closet and rejoined him in the bathroom, dropping the ice into the tub.

“That feels so good,” he sighed in relief, making me laugh.

“Do you want a massage?” I asked, and he nodded eagerly. I gently took his hands and began massaging them, watching as he closed his eyes, visibly relaxing.

“Do you think it’s an allergy?”

“It’s always been like this when I touch fresh peppers.”

Hearing that, I immediately felt guilty. “Why didn’t you tell them you couldn’t do it? You’re allergic, and yet you still touched it.”

He gave me a soft smile. “It’s no big deal, **Noona**. It’ll go away soon. See? My hands are already looking better,” he reassured me, though I could still see traces of irritation.

“Next time, if you're uncomfortable with something they ask, speak up. Don’t stay quiet,” I insisted, crossing my arms.

“Is my beautiful princess upset?” he teased, and I stuck my lower lip out in a pout.

“No.”

“Yes, you are,” he said, pulling his hands out of the water and placing his ice-cold fingers on my cheek. I flinched at the sudden cold.

“Don’t do that!” I warned, standing up, and he followed, towering over me.

Ha Neul sat on my bed. “Did Vanessa say anything about me? It feels like she doesn’t like me that much.”

“Don’t worry, she likes you more than you think. She’s just teasing you,” I assured, sitting beside him. He gently removed a speck of dust from my hair, his fingers lingering.

“Your eyes are so beautiful,” he whispered, his gaze drifting to my lips.

“My eyes are up here.”

Before I could say anything else, he suddenly wrapped his arm around my waist. “What are you doing?! Vanessa and my parents could come in at any moment!”

“We won’t waste time,” Ha Neul whispered, leaning closer, but I quickly placed a finger on his lips.

“Just a kiss,” I warned, raising an eyebrow.

“Just a kiss,” he promised softly. He lied.

The door swung open suddenly. Vanessa stood there, her eyes wide with shock.

“Lunch is ready,” she mumbled, still flustered, and Ha Neul practically bolted past her, disappearing down the hallway. I buried my face in my hands, mortified, as Vanessa’s burning gaze drilled into me.

“Dunni, seriously? Can you two try to keep your hands off each other? This is your parents' house! What if your mom had walked in? Are you even thinking?” she scolded, her voice full of exasperation. I slowly made my way towards her, trying to manage a sheepish smile.

“Vanessa, love, can you please just forget what you saw?”

She rolled her eyes dramatically.

“Ha Neul, see all these delicious foods you have been eating? If you marry a good Yoruba woman, you can enjoy these every week. Make a wise choice now *o*. I'm not saying you cannot go back and eat your rice *abi* ramen, but see food *na*. You'll enjoy it.”

My father advised, and Ha Neul turned red.

“But know that you have to be bringing plenty of money *o*. All of these cost a lot and Baba Dunni knows exactly the amount I need to cook all these, so he doesn't complain. When your wife asks for money to cook, give her plenty. Don't complain, *you hear*?” My mother added.

“Of course, ma'am,” Ha Neul replied with red cheeks.

A few weeks later, I found out I would be working on a project with So Hyang, and I couldn't believe my bad luck. We’d both been doing everything to avoid each other, using colleagues as intermediaries just to avoid direct contact. Talking to her felt like drinking poison.

But I couldn’t avoid her forever. I had to confront her about the project in the cafeteria. “We’re working together,” I said, forcing the words out.

“Great,” she replied with heavy sarcasm, barely looking up.

“Glad you’re as thrilled as I am. How about this—you send me a draft of your ideas, and I’ll work on them?” I suggested.

“Sure, whatever,” she muttered dismissively. I didn’t bother with a response and headed back to Tessa.

“So, what did the witch say?”

“‘Great.’ That’s all. Maybe God’s touched her heart.”

Tessa burst into laughter. “Serves her right. Maybe now she’ll stop trying to steal other people’s men. Good riddance!”

We continued our lunch, but I couldn't shake off the tension from the upcoming project. Afterward, I had to visit the packaging department and decided to drop by Ha Neul's office. To my surprise, he was there, deep in conversation with Secretary Kim about something related to an anniversary. When they noticed me, they paused. Secretary Kim gave Ha Neul a sly grin. “I’ll take care of this, Mr. Han,” he winked and left, closing the door behind him. Before I could say anything, Ha Neul lifted me effortlessly, placing me on his desk. I squealed in surprise, my heart racing. His arms wrapped around me, and I breathed in his familiar, musky scent.

“Baby.”

“I missed you so much, Ha Neul.”

Fifteen

Adunni



So Hyang surprised me by actually handing over her proposal in person. "Here's my draft," she said curtly, dropping the file onto my desk before heading back to her own workspace. I blinked, a little taken aback by her lack of hostility.

Tessa noticed and asked, "Are you speaking to her now?"

I shook my head. "No, it's just the project. I'll review what she's come up with and add my own ideas."

"Sounds like a good plan," Tessa agreed.

I skimmed through So Hyang's draft, and to my surprise, it wasn't bad. I added a few of my own notes and finalized everything by the end of the day. As I headed to the printer, I caught a glimpse of something that made me pause. From the corner of my eye, I saw Tessa and Chae Min standing a bit too close in the coffee room. They were laughing, and then Chae Min touched her face lightly before Tessa playfully swatted his hand away.

I couldn't believe what I had just witnessed, but I trusted Tessa. She would tell me if something was up.

During the weekly meeting, Ha Neul turned to the room and asked for opinions on which strategies seemed most effective for our target customers. I raised my hand, ready to contribute.

"Bab—I mean, Ms. Adunni. Ms. Dunni, tell us what you think," Ha Neul stammered.

My eyes widened in shock. Did he just call me "Babe" in a work meeting? My mind went blank as I felt my face heat up with embarrassment. Both of us were flustered, but thankfully, no one seemed to notice. At least, not Tessa or So Hyang.

The meeting ended, and Tessa wasted no time pulling me aside to the stairwell. "Tessa!" I squealed as she locked the door behind us, her face smug with amusement.

"What?"

“Babe? Seriously? Are you two trying to reveal your relationship to the whole office? Be careful, oh. Secrets can't be hidden forever,” she warned, but I smirked.

“Oh really? So, when will you and Chae Min's relationship be revealed?”

“How did you know? I thought we were being careful! *Ooooh*, this Chae Min *sef*.”

“So, you finally decided to date him. What made you change your mind?” I asked, grinning. She blushed, glancing away.

“I bumped into him at the Roving Heights bookstore, and we talked for a while. After that, we started chatting more, and I guess I developed feelings for him. After two dates, he asked me to be his girlfriend, and I said yes. Honestly, dating isn't so bad. I get free food and constant attention.” She giggled, and I couldn’t help but squeal with excitement for her.

“Aww, Tessa’s in love!” I teased, and she playfully rolled her eyes.

“*Abeg*. Have you met Ha Neul's mother yet? You know, as his girlfriend.”

I shook my head, and she gave me a puzzled look. “Why not? Hasn't it been like five months since you started dating? Or is it too soon? I’ve already met Chae Min’s family through Zoom.”

“Tessa, I’m scared. What if she doesn’t like me? I’m just an employee, and he’s her son. It never ends well in dramas. What if she tells him to break up with me?” I said, half-joking but still worried. Tessa just laughed.

“Dunni, you're not living in a K-drama! You're a real person. If his mother doesn’t like you, do you honestly think Ha Neul would break up with you? No way! He loves you, girl. His mother’s opinion shouldn’t be your main concern right now. What you should be focused on are your future plans. You still want to study in Asia, right?”

I nodded, feeling a little more reassured by her words.

“Good, so you see? There’s no time to worry about rejections right now. You’ve got bigger things to focus on. Leave the old lady out of it and concentrate on your future.” She whispered the last part, making me laugh.

“That’s our boss you’re talking about, Tessa.”

I was finally going on a date with Ha Neul, and I wanted to make sure I looked absolutely stunning for him—different enough that he’d do a double take the moment he saw me. Earlier, I had gone to the boutique and picked out a red silk dress. I paired it with white heels, and after doing my makeup,

I tied my fresh braids into a sleek ponytail. Grabbing my white purse, I stepped out of my room.

My mother was lounging on the couch when I walked in, her eyes instantly catching my appearance.

"Where are you headed to?" she asked, eyeing me suspiciously.

I laughed nervously, trying to keep my cool. "I'm going out with Vanessa, mummy."

"So it's Vanessa that's making you dress up like this, *abi*? Anyways, you look beautiful," she said with a smirk. "Your father and I are going out as well. We may come back late, so don't wait for us. Enjoy yourselves, and drink responsibly."

Smiling, I replied, "Okay, mummy. I'm going now. Please tell daddy I went out."

I hurried out before she could ask any more questions. Ha Neul's car had just pulled up in front of the house. "You're so ethereal," he whispered in awe, his voice breathless. "I'm speechless."

My cheeks burned as I blushed. "Thank you, Ha Neul. You look handsome—too handsome," I said, admiring his maroon suit. "Let me guess, Armani?" I asked, playfully raising an eyebrow. He nodded with a grin.

"I can't believe you thought I wouldn't know Armani. You're such a wicked man," I teased, shaking my head.

Laughing, he responded, "I'm sorry, my princess. I should never have underestimated you. Shall we?"

I nodded, and with that, we hit the highway. I took a secret photo of his hand on my thigh and sent it to Vanessa.

Whhhatt?
Who owns this red gown?
Post the man, don't post the hand.
Omo, God when!!
But Dunni, you are cunning o.



VANESSA'S COMMENTS had me laughing so hard that I momentarily forgot I was in the car with Ha Neul. He glanced over, curious. "What's so funny?"

I grinned, still chuckling. "Vanessa is being goofy again."

“Your friend still scares me, though,” he remarked with a chuckle, and I couldn’t help but giggle in agreement.

“She scares me too,” I admitted, shaking my head.

We soon arrived at the restaurant, and Ha Neul opened the car door for me this time. My cheeks flushed at the chivalry. He took my hand, and we strolled inside, making our way to the VIP section.

“Are you comfortable sitting here?” he asked, his voice filled with genuine concern.

I nodded, appreciating the privacy. After we placed our orders, Ha Neul pulled out his phone and began snapping pictures of me, setting one as his wallpaper. I raised an eyebrow, a playful frown forming on my face. “Ha Neul, you can’t have my photo as your wallpaper!”

He chuckled, unfazed. “It’s my phone; I can do whatever I want. Besides, you look so cute right now.” I blushed.

Our food arrived, and as we began to eat, Ha Neul kept the mood light with his jokes, making me laugh so hard that I almost choked at one point. Between bites, we reminisced about our childhoods and teenage years. I listened intently as he spoke about his dreams for the future—his desire to travel and explore the world. But with the demands of being a CEO, those dreams had been put on hold, sacrificed for his responsibilities as his parents’ son.

“Let’s explore Nigeria when we have some time,” I suggested, and he smiled brightly at the idea.

“Sure, let’s do that.” We clinked our wine glasses together, sealing the promise.

After dinner, he drove me back home, and we lingered in the car for a moment, enjoying the comfortable silence. “I want to introduce you to my brother, Noona. When would you like us to talk to him?” he asked, looking at me expectantly.

“How about I come over tomorrow morning? I can tell my parents I won’t be going to church with them.”

“Okay, babe. Let’s do that.” He smiled, leaning in to give me a soft kiss goodnight. I felt a warmth spread through me as I watched him drive away, my heart racing with anticipation.

As soon as my head touched the pillow, sleep claimed me, and the next morning, I was ready to visit Ha Neul’s house.

“Where are you going?” my father asked as I opened the door to leave.

“Daddy, I have some unfinished work for my project tomorrow. I’m going to the library for research,” I lied, sensing his skepticism.

“Hmm, okay. Just don’t be late,” he warned, and I nodded, feeling guilty for deceiving him. But I wasn’t ready to share my relationship with Ha Neul just yet; I feared how they might react and how it might change things between us.

When I arrived at Ha Neul’s house, he was already waiting by the gate. He pulled me into a tight hug, kissing my forehead before leading me inside. The tantalizing aroma wafting from the kitchen made my stomach growl.

“What are you cooking?” I asked, my curiosity piqued by the bubbling sound coming from the pot.

“*Kimchi Jjigae*,” he replied, a proud smile on his face.

“Wow, it smells amazing! I've always wanted to try this,” I said, my excitement evident as he lifted the lid off the pot, releasing a wave of spicy and sweet aromas. He took a spoon, blew gently on it, and offered it to me. When I tasted it, I gasped at how incredibly delicious it was.

“Does it taste good?”

‘Let me have another spoon.”

“No.”

Sixteen

Adunni



“Are you ready?” he asked, and I nodded.

"Okay," he said, opening the Skype app and calling his brother. My heart raced.

"Relax, it's just my brother. He's a cool person," Ha Neul reassured me, and for a second, I calmed down.

“Hello, hello. What a lovely sight.” Great.

"Hello, Mr. Ji Min. Nice to meet you. I'm Dunni."

"I already knew that, Ms. Dunni. It's nice to meet you too. Ha Neul has told me a lot about you and I'm finally meeting you. You're pretty, just like he said."

"Thank you so much. You really look like your mom. I'm guessing Ha Neul looks like your father?"

"I do not look like my father at all. Hyung, isn't she lovely? My **Noona** can speak Chinese too. She's perfect."

"Don't embarrass me like that, Ha Neul. Don't listen to him, I barely know the language."

"Why are you lying? Even my mother knows you can speak Chinese, and I've seen you speaking to Er Duo in Chinese."

Ha Neul kept embarrassing me in front of his brother, and I wanted him to stop, but he didn’t get the hint. His brother, however, didn’t seem like he was going to let it slide. He spoke in Chinese, and I grudgingly replied in Chinese.

"Have you been to China before?"

"No, I haven't. I only learned Chinese."

"Impressive. I lived there for ten years. Nice place. You should visit sometime."

"I surely will. Thank you so much."

“Hello? Korean here?” Ha Neul chimed in, wanting to join the conversation, and I couldn’t help but giggle as I looked at him.

“Why do you have to ruin the fun?” I teased, and his brother laughed.

“I hope Ha Neul isn't causing too much trouble over there,” he asked, to which Ha Neul looked offended.

“He's doing just fine, don’t worry, Mr. Ji Min.”

“Please, you’re making me feel old. I’m only 30, so feel free to speak casually,” his brother said, and I smiled shyly in response.

“*Geurae*, Oppa.”

“That’s it!”

Ha Neul’s jaw dropped in surprise.

“You wish that was you, right? You wish that was you!” he teased, causing Ha Neul to turn away on the sofa, sulking.

“You should have been born earlier, Ha Neul. Bad timing. Anyway, it was great to meet you, Dunni. I look forward to seeing you soon. Please take care of this rascal for me, okay?”

“Bye, bro,” Ha Neul said, waving him off. When the call ended, I let out a sigh of relief.

“He’s nice; I really like his vibe.”

“That’s good to hear. You seemed nervous during the call; I thought he might have scared you or something.” He gently caressed my hair, and I smiled back.

“Not at all,” I replied. We watched a movie later on, and I fell asleep. I woke up in the evening to find Ha Neul missing from the house. When I stepped outside, I saw him watering the plants. I smiled and approached him, wrapping my arms around him. He returned the smile and placed an arm around my shoulder.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked, and I nodded.

“Why stress yourself with all this? It’s really not necessary.”

“I was bored and didn’t want to disturb your sleep. Now that you’re awake, I can focus on you.” With that, he scooped me into his arms, causing me to scream in surprise.

“Put me down!” I said, laughing, and he smirked at me. After putting me back on my feet, he continued watering, clearly trying to avoid any interaction.

“Ha Neul?” I called out, but he remained silent. My irritation grew as the sun began to set. “Answer me!” I stomped my foot in frustration, and instead of a reply, I was unexpectedly sprayed with water. Stunned, I wiped my face and glared at him.

“Sorry, didn’t see you there,” he said with a smirk, and I fumed.

“I’m going to deal with you!” I exclaimed, rushing at him, but he just sprayed me more, laughing mischievously. “Jacob Ha Neul Han, when I get my hands on you!” I threatened, but he had the hose as his weapon. I decided to play dirty.

“Ouch! I stepped on a nail!” I shouted as I fell to the ground, and he was instantly by my side.

“Sweetheart, are you okay?”

As soon as he let go of the hose to check on me, I aimed it at him. “Arghhh!”

However, he used his strength against me, causing us both to tumble onto the lawn, where he managed to wrestle the hose away from me.

“You’re a cheater,” I pouted, jutting out my lower lip, and he laughed.

“You are too, baby.”



ON THE WAY HOME, OUR conversation turned to work, and I was furious at the news he shared. “We have a *kimchi*-making contest on Tuesday, and the person you're presenting with will be your partner.” I was shocked.

“Wait, so I have to team up with her? That crazy woman? No way! I’d rather back out.”

“**Noona**, don’t be like that. She’s still your coworker. Just put your differences aside and work with her. Plus, you’ll have another partner, so you’ll probably be working with Tessa too.” That didn’t make it any easier for me to accept teaming up with that witch.

“Do you know what that stupid girl said? She claimed I’m not right for you and threatened to tell your parents about our relationship to get me fired. Is that the kind of person you want me to make *kimchi* with? Am I crazy or what?”

“**Noona**, this is work. You need to remember that. I know you’re upset, but you have to fulfill your duty as an employee.” I was incredulous. He sounded more like a CEO than my boyfriend. I scoffed.

“Why aren’t you saying anything?”

I hissed. “Say what again? Haven’t you said enough? Are you speaking to me as an employee or as my boyfriend?” My voice rose, and I could see him grip the steering wheel tightly in anger.

“Adunni, I don’t appreciate your tone. Lower your voice, and let’s have a normal conversation. Stop acting like a child.” That was the first time he’d spoken to me condescendingly. I was seething with anger, and tears began to flow. Just as we reached my house, I started crying.

He sighed. “Baby, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to get upset with you.” He touched my shoulder, but I flinched.

I opened the car door and stepped out, but he quickly followed, grabbing my hand just as I reached for the gate. “Let go of me! I don’t want to talk to you,” I cried, and he looked at me with sad eyes.

“I’m sorry, Dunni. I really am.”

“Are you? Are you actually sorry? Sorry that your obsessed fan threatened me? Or that you actually want me to bond with that pretentious snake? Which one?” I asked, and he was silent.

“Sorry indeed,” I closed the gate in his face.

“Who were you arguing with? We heard voices,” my mother asked as I walked into the house. I brushed it off, telling her it was just a group of drunkards hanging around outside.

Once in my room, I called Vanessa and cried as I told her everything that had happened.

“Why didn’t he warn that Soo Hang girl? Or whatever her name is, *abi* So Hyang. She must be crazy. Let me catch her in the area first. Stop crying, Dunni. Ha Neul clearly cares about her; that’s why he didn’t say anything. Maybe you should talk to her after the presentation. If you miss your boyfriend, talk to him, but I can’t tell you what to do.”

“I’m upset with him, Nessa. It’s not about him caring for So Hyang. He was irritated with me—angry, even. All because I said I wasn’t comfortable working with the woman who harassed me. At that moment, he chose his job over me. He spoke to me like I was just another employee, not his girlfriend. And now, he’s calling me.”

“Do you want to talk to him?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Then don’t force it.”

“Thanks, Nessa. You’re the best. Goodnight.”

I put my phone on DND and went to bed, ignoring the five missed calls from Ha Neul. The next day at work, I didn’t speak to anyone. I was in a bad mood and just wanted to get through the presentation. So Hyang seemed equally uninterested, barely paying attention as we sat in the conference room.

When Ha Neul entered the room, I kept my eyes on my document, resisting the urge to see his reaction to my tired, upset expression. Eventually, So Hyang and I made our way to the front of the room for the

presentation, and I finally glanced at him. He looked just as exhausted and troubled as I felt.

I almost wanted to run to Ha Neul, wrap my arms around him, and apologize for last night. But that feeling vanished the moment So Hyang and I were asked for the name of our product. We had no idea we were supposed to come up with a name, so I suggested *Pyeong Hwa* while she came up with *Areum*, which instantly led to a debate. No one favored my choice; the room clearly leaned toward So Hyang's suggestion.

Tension rose between us, and we started arguing right there in the conference room. I was so angry, especially after she called my suggestion immature, that I almost forgot where we were—I wanted nothing more than to claw her eyes out.

Before we could take it further, Ha Neul stepped in. His eyes burned with fury, and seeing that intensity made my own eyes well up. His voice was sharp and commanding, cutting through the room like a blade. “Silence! What the hell do you think you're doing? Arguing over a name?” His tone was full of frustration, but we both knew it wasn't just about the product.

“Minus points for disunity,” he growled. “And we’re going with Ms. So Hyang’s suggestion. I never want to see this kind of behavior again!” He slammed his fists on the table, scaring everyone.

His words were colder than I expected, and I couldn’t take it. Without thinking, I stormed out of the room, knowing it was rude but not caring. I rushed to the restroom, breaking down into tears as Ha Neul’s disappointed face replayed in my mind. *I hate you, but I love you.*

Seventeen

Adunni



Tessa wrapped her arms around me the moment she saw me crying in the bathroom, and I buried my face in her shoulder, my sobs muffled.

“Did you see his face? He’s so disappointed in me. It hurts so much,” I whispered. She gently rubbed my back in slow, comforting circles.

“I get it, Dunni. I get it. Stop crying, it’s going to be okay.”

When I finally looked at her, she smiled softly, “Your pretty face is all smudged with mascara. Come on, let’s fix it.” She led me to the mirror where I washed my face, trying to steady my emotions.

“Did you and Ha Neul have a fight before all this?”

“It wasn’t anything major. I was planning to talk to him after the meeting...” My voice trailed off when I noticed So Hyang walking into the bathroom. I quickly looked away, resisting the urge to slap her.

“Are you okay, Ms. Dunni? Did I offend you in some way?”

“You did more than offend me, So Hyang. Much more.” I spat, gripping Tessa’s hand and turning to leave, but So Hyang blocked the doorway.

“What do you want now? Please, just move out of the way!” I snapped, my irritation spilling over.

"Do you hate me that much, Unnie? I don’t like the CEO anymore. So, you should forget about me. But you keep acting like I did something bad."

"You threatened me, remember? You said I wasn’t good enough for the CEO."

"Listen, I don't have time to go over everything you've done to me, so just move out of the way," I warned. Slowly, she stepped aside, letting Tessa and me pass.

"What did she say?" Tessa asked, and I rolled my eyes.

"She had the nerve to ask if I hate her. Can you imagine?" I said, and Tessa burst into laughter.

"That girl is ridiculous, I swear," she said. We had just reached our desks when I suddenly came face to face with Ha Neul. I immediately

looked away.

"Ms. Dunni, I need to have a word with you," he said, his commanding tone sending shivers down my spine.

"I have nothing to say to you right now, Mr. *Daepyo Nim*. Come on, Tessa, let's go." I held Tessa's hand, trying to walk away, but Ha Neul grabbed my wrist and pulled me back forcefully.

"Let me go!" I warned, but his grip tightened. Tessa stood there, stunned, as I was dragged toward the stairwell.

"Leave me alone!" I repeated, but he didn't release me until we had climbed a few flights of stairs.

"Are you crazy? You can't just drag me off like that! Do you want people to find out about us?" I yelled at him. He sighed deeply.

"That's not the point right now, Dunni. Why are you avoiding me? What did I do wrong? Talk to me, Dunni," his voice softened, sounding more hurt than angry.

I folded my arms and stared at the floor, refusing to meet his gaze.

"I asked you a question," he repeated, and I finally looked up at him.

"You yelled at me, and you chose another woman over me. You might as well date her."

"I didn't choose her over you. I would never do that. You come first, **Noona**."

"That's not what it felt like. You made me cry, Ha Neul. When I told you she threatened me, you didn't defend me. You just told me to get over it. I refuse to let it go, Ha Neul. Not until she apologizes to me. And please, don't cause another scene at work. No one needs to know we fought. Goodbye."

With that, I walked away, leaving him behind. I couldn't wait for the day to end, and the moment the clock hit five, I left for home. Ha Neul sent me multiple messages, but I ignored every one of them and went to bed.

The next morning, determined to move forward, I focused on the *kimchi*-making competition. On my way to work, I watched several tutorials so I wouldn't have to rely on So Hyang for anything. When I arrived at the production building, everyone was already there, dressed in aprons and gloves.

Secretary Kim was leading the event, and we all stood in front of a long table filled with ingredients. As I prepared, my eyes crossed paths with So Hyang, and the tension from the previous day lingered between us.

"Unnie, can you make *kimchi*?"

"Of course."

"Okay, let's start then."

I chopped the napa cabbage while she stood with her arms crossed, waiting for Tessa to salt them on her own. “Did you come here just to fold your arms, *Ahjumma*?” Tessa teased, and So Hyang shot us a horrified look.

“How dare you call me that?!” she exclaimed, stomping her feet before finally joining Tessa to salt the cabbage.

“Okay, now add enough water to cover it,” I instructed, and she complied.

“So who’s going to stand on it to help drain the water faster? *Lekpa*, *shift*. Tessa, come stand on this.”

I placed the cabbage in a plastic bag, and Tessa climbed on top, squeezing out the excess water. “Dunni, your mouth *ehn*,” Tessa teased, rolling her eyes.

“Oh, nice! Ms. Tessa is using her powerful weight to drain the *kimchi*. I’m not sure why they’re doing this, but let’s trust them!” Secretary Kim announced through the microphone, leaving Tessa blushing in embarrassment.

“Is this man stupid?” she whispered to me, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

“He’s complimenting you! Look, Chae Min can’t take his eyes off you,” I pointed out, seeing Chae Min gazing at her adoringly. She got even more flustered, prompting her to ask So Hyang to stand on the bag instead.

“I’m not doing any damage,” So Hyang said, and I chuckled at her words.

“You’re helping.” Tessa looked at us, astonished.

“Are you two actually getting along right now?”

“NO!”

“Wait, Dunni, are we supposed to soak the *kimchi* in water or drain it?” Tessa asked, noticing that no one else was draining their cabbage. I froze and turned to So Hyang.

“Madam, are we supposed to drain the *kimchi*?”

She turned bright red. “Uh...I don’t quite remember.”

“Both of you are hopeless!” Tessa hissed, placing the cabbage back in the bowl and covering it with water.

“One person is from Korea, and the other knows Korean culture, yet neither of you remembers how to make *kimchi*. Nice!” Secretary Kim announced, and I was two seconds away from strangling him.

“If that man says anything else, I’ll throw my heels at his face!” So Hyang exclaimed, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

“I’d love to see that!” I grinned at her, and she returned the smile. But when we realized what was happening, we both quickly looked away. I decided to take a stroll around the room to steal some tips from the others.

After a few trips, I returned to our table, where Tessa was busy draining the cabbage. It was time to finish the job, so we each took turns putting the cabbage in a cheesecloth and placing it in a plastic bag. So Hyang nearly toppled off the footstool we were using, but I managed to catch her just in time, leaving her flustered.

“What in the name of girl love is going on here?” Tessa teased, and I was almost shoving a piece of salted *kimchi* into her mouth.

“Garlic, ginger, sugar, fish sauce, *gochujang*, *gochugaru*, onions, oil, and water,” So Hyang instructed Tessa, but we were struggling with our measurements.

*“*Do we just add until our village people tell us to stop*?”* Tessa quipped, and I chuckled.

“What does that mean?” So Hyang asked, puzzled.

“It means we keep adding ingredients until a voice inside our heads tells us to stop,” I explained, and she giggled.

“Let’s do it,” she replied. I stirred everything together, and when So Hyang tasted the mixture, it turned out to be a huge mistake. Her tongue started to burn, and I rushed to grab a bottle of water.

“Here, here!” I handed it to her, and she gulped it down immediately.

“Thank you,” she whispered afterward. Tessa looked at us, amused.

“What?”

“Nothing! Just nothing at all,” she replied, shaking her head.



WE SQUEEZED THE CABBAGE and gradually added the paste, followed by green onions and some radish. “Teamwork on Team Tae Yang over here.” Secretary Kim made sure to embarrass us further.

“Tae Yang? Really? I commented, and Tessa laughed.

“I’ll try it,” I volunteered, tasting the *kimchi*. To my surprise, it tasted just like the store-bought kind.

“Let me taste it too.” Tessa took a bite. “We make the best *kimchi*, girls,” She remarked with a grin, and I gave her a thumbs up. We packed the *kimchi* into a jar labeled #1, with Tessa pushing her glove inside to help release the brine. Once it was properly sealed, we all sighed in relief.

“Finally!” we said, peeling off our gloves and high-fiving each other.

But our moment of victory was short-lived as Secretary Kim announced, “Looks like Team Tae Yang is the first to finish their *kimchi*!”

While waiting for the judges, I wandered around, checking out the other teams' *kimchi*. I even tasted a few, but none matched the flavor of ours. Feeling quite smug, my confidence quickly evaporated when I saw who the judges were. Ha Neul, along with a few shareholders I barely recognized, entered the room. The moment our eyes met, my cheeks heated up.

“Welcome, everyone. The tasting shall now begin,” Secretary Kim announced. As the judges prepared to sample the *kimchi*, we turned our backs so we wouldn’t see their reactions.

“All right, some really went heavy on the spice! Ooh, and some went all in on the salt. *Aigoo*, is this *kimchi* or *kimchi jeon*? It’s way too oily. Ah, here’s the best *kimchi* I’ve ever tasted,” Secretary Kim commented, making everyone squirm as they recognized their own mistakes.

Once the judging was done, he asked us to turn around. “The votes are in. We have two winners, and we’ll also be awarding points for good behavior. Drumroll, please!”

He was being overly dramatic.

I could feel Ha Neul’s gaze burning into me the entire time, making me uncomfortable. I wanted to leave as soon as possible, but I stayed longer when our team won the award for the best *kimchi*. To my surprise, we also gained extra points for hygiene and cooperation. Each of us was handed a ₦150,000 cheque, totaling ₦450,000 for simply making *kimchi*. It was unexpected, but the win and the prize made the discomfort worth it—at least for that moment.

“At least, I'll see money to buy *ashawo* gown for my man.” Tessa commented, and I slapped her arm.

“What's that? *Ashawo*?” I covered So Hyang's mouth immediately, glaring at Tessa.

“Nothing, it doesn't mean anything.”

"Are you talking to Ha Neul now?" Tessa asked, her voice laced with concern.

I shook my head, my fingers curling around the strap of my bag.

“Well, I think you should, Dunni. He looks sad, and I know it's because of you. He didn’t stop staring at you the whole time. Try to forgive him, *abeg*,” she pleaded, her words striking a chord of guilt deep within me.

I hesitated but found myself walking toward the elevator anyway, my heart pounding with every step. By the time I reached his office door, I was so nervous I didn’t think to knock. I pushed it open and stepped inside.

The room was dim, bathed in the soft glow of the setting sun filtering through the blinds. My breath hitched at the sight before me—Ha Neul, sitting on the sofa, his head bowed, shoulders shaking. He was crying.

“Oh! Why didn’t you knock, Dunni?” He sniffled and quickly turned away. My heart ached at the sight of him. Slowly, I walked over and sank beside him on the couch.

“Is it because of the *gochugaru*?” I teased, hoping to lighten the mood.

He let out a soft, watery laugh, finally meeting my gaze. His eyes, red-rimmed and filled with longing, made my chest tighten.

“No,” he whispered. “It’s because of you. You’re upset with me, and I don’t know how to reach you. I miss you so much, Dunni. I’m sorry for what I did—I shouldn’t have—”

I didn’t let him finish. Instead, I leaned in, capturing his lips in a kiss, deep and unhurried. It was filled with everything I hadn’t been able to say—all the longing, all the love, all the forgiveness.

When we finally pulled apart, his forehead rested against mine, our breaths mingling in the quiet room.

“I love you,” he murmured, his voice raw with emotion.

A wide smile stretched across my lips, making my cheeks ache. “I love you too.”

He exhaled a soft laugh, brushing a strand of hair from my face. “Let’s go on a date.”

I grinned. “I’d love that.”

Eighteen

Ha Neul



I packed the picnic basket with sandwiches, *gimbap*, dumplings, *bibimbap*, and fries, then got ready. I chose a blue dress shirt and black pants, putting the gold clover pendant I'd bought for Dunni into my pocket.

She was already waiting by the gates, and I couldn't help but marvel at how beautiful she looked in her yellow floral maxi dress and black sandals, her braids cascading down her back.

"You look so sumptuous, babe," she said, making me laugh. "What happened to 'handsome'?" I teased, opening the door for her.

At the park, she laid the blanket on the grass, and I joined her, feeling a mix of excitement and nerves.

'Wow! Did you really make all this?" Dunni asked, her eyes wide in amazement.

"Only for you," I replied, smiling as she gave me a warm, appreciative look.

"You're such a sweetheart. Thank you, baby," she said, leaning in to kiss my cheek. Her attention shifted to the gimbap. "Is it supposed to taste this good?"

"Yes, it is."

She grinned and picked up a piece, holding it out to me. "Say aah."

"I'm not a baby, I can feed myself."

"Yes, you are. You're my baby. Now, open up."

Reluctantly, I narrowed my eyes and let her feed me. Just then, I overheard a group of women behind us.

"He's so handsome. Let's ask for a picture," one of them whispered.

Dunni's smile faded as she noticed them, but before I could say anything, the group of four young women, who looked to be in their early twenties, approached us.

'Oppa, you're so handsome. You look like Ahn Hyo Seop."

"Oppa? *Aigoo*. Thanks a lot. You're all students, right?"

“Yes. We hardly see Koreans around here, so we were excited when we saw you. We are all learning the language. We hope to go to Korea one day.”

“That's great. If I may ask, why do you want to go to Korea? To see BTS? Blackpink? Or EXO?”

“BTS!”

They said in unison, their excitement nearly startling me. That’s when Dunni finally decided she couldn’t stay silent any longer.

“Hey, you girls. Can't you see I'm on a date with my boyfriend? Didn't you learn about manners in school?”

The girls quickly apologized and left, glancing back at Dunni with a mix of shock and jealousy. She hissed, taking a sip of her soda, while I kept quiet, not wanting to make her more upset.

“Why are you eating so loudly?” she snapped, as I silently took a bite of my sandwich. I swallowed hard, forcing the food down.

“Sorry, baby.”

She didn’t respond, and an awkward silence settled between us for about three minutes before she let out a deep sigh.

“Why did you let them call you Oppa? Why are you so friendly with other women? Can’t they just call you ahjussi or something? Must it be oppa? Any small thing, oppa.”

“*Aigoo*, our Dunni is so cute.”

“Are you alright? I'm your *Noona*.”

“But I'm your boyfriend. So, I can be Oppa.”

“Are you joking right now?”

“Why would I? Give it a try, call me Oppa.”

“I’m not calling you Oppa when I’m two years older than you,” she said firmly, taking a sip of her water.

“Really? Alright then,” I responded, playfully moving away from her.

“I want you close, stop moving,” she complained.

“Say it.”

“No.”

“Then I’m staying right here.”

“Why are you doing this to me *na*?”

“*Oya*, forget it,” I said.

“Who taught you that word? *‘Oya*?’” she asked, clearly amused.

“You, Mr. Caleb, Tessa, Mark, Chae Min... basically everyone in the research department uses it,” I explained, and she smiled.

“*Oppa*, why are you so cute?” she teased, her mischievous grin lighting up her face.

“Say it again,” I challenged, moving closer.

“*Oppa*,” she whispered playfully in my ear, sending a shiver down my spine. I immediately attacked her with kisses.

“Stop it, Ha Neul. We're in public!”



“YOU KNOW THE COMPANY’S anniversary is coming up, right?” I asked cautiously.

“Yeah, what about it?”

“My mom wants me to come to Korea for it.”

Her face immediately fell, her eyes welling up with tears. “You’re leaving? You’re leaving me!” she said in a small, hurt voice. I pulled her into a hug.

“Of course not, Dunni. I’ll only be gone for two months. I’ll be back before you know it.”

“But your mom said you’d go back to Korea for good after two years. That’s just eleven months from now, and now you'll be gone for two of them. So that leaves us nine months before you’re gone for good. You’ll forget about me, marry someone else, and I’ll be left here heartbroken,” she said, her voice trembling. “Did you bring me here just to say goodbye? I hate you.”

I wiped away her tears as she hugged her knees, refusing to look at me.

“Baby, you’ve got it all wrong. I would never leave you. I can’t. I love you,” I reassured her, my voice soft. “I only found out about it last week, and I knew you’d be sad, so I hesitated to tell you. But now, here we are—your tears, your sad face, and your disapproval. I can never leave you, Dunni. You’re my soulmate. I love you so much. I’m just going away for a few months, but I will come back.”

“Then what about in eleven months? Will you really stay in Nigeria because of me? Your parents won’t let you. You’ll leave eventually.” Her voice cracked as she spoke, and I hugged her tighter.

“I’m never leaving you. I’ll stay with you forever. Don’t think so little of my love for you, Dunni. You mean everything to me, and I will never

forget you."

"You promise?" she mumbled against my chest.

"I promise."

She sniffled and inhaled deeply, her face still pressed against me. "You smell so nice," she murmured, and I couldn't help but chuckle.

"Why are you laughing?" she asked, looking up at me.

"My chest is ticklish," I admitted with a grin. I should've known better than to mention that, because the next thing I knew, she was playfully tickling me, making me bite my lip to keep from laughing too loudly in the park.

Eventually, she gave up and we left the park. On our way back, we stopped for ice cream, and as we neared her house, I remembered the necklace. I regretted not giving it to her earlier during the picnic, when she was the happiest. But I still had the chance to surprise her.

"Thank you so much for today, my love," she said sweetly as we sat in the car outside her house. I reached out and gently caressed her cheek.

"I have something for you," I told her, pulling out the small box. Her eyes lit up as I opened it, revealing the gold clover pendant. She gasped softly, and in an instant, I placed it around her neck.

"It's so pretty!" she exclaimed, admiring it in the mirror before turning to hug me tightly.

I walked her to her gate. "So, when are we going to tell your parents about us? It's been eight months since we started dating, baby."

She smiled apologetically, a hint of worry in her eyes. "I don't want their attitude towards you to change, Ha Neul. They love you, and if they find out we're dating, it might shift. I promise I'll bring it up to them soon. Don't worry." She squeezed my hand, and I didn't press further.

As I turned to leave, she asked, "No goodnight kiss?" I chuckled at her playful tone. I gently held her face and leaned in, kissing her deeply.

"Mógbe!"

Both of us opened our eyes and slowly turned to the side, only to find Dunni's parents staring at us in shock. I immediately pulled away, trying to hide my swollen lips, while Dunni rushed to grab the bag her mother was holding. "Mum, Dad, welcome."

"We just caught you kissing your boss, and the first thing you can say is 'welcome'? Will the both of you enter inside this house *now now*?!"

Before I knew it, Dunni had shoved me into the house, and we sat on the sofa, facing her parents, who folded their arms and glared at us. “Dunni, care to explain what’s going on between you two? Why did we see you sucking faces with your *oga*?” her father demanded, his tone making the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

“Daddy, Ha Neul is my boyfriend.”

“Boyfriend? Since when? Have you been dating him all this time?” her mother questioned, her eyes narrowing.

“No, Mummy. We started dating five months after he visited us for the first time,” Dunni explained quickly.

Her father sighed, clearly frustrated. “So why did you hide it from us? Did you think we wouldn't accept him? Why keep it from us for so long?”

It was my turn to speak. “Mr. Olayanju, Dunni didn’t tell you because she was worried that you wouldn’t be as open with me anymore. She didn’t want you to feel burdened by me, and I understood her concerns. We’re sorry for hiding it.”

Her mother looked at me with a soft expression. “You are like family to us, Ha Neul. Why would we change? We care for you a lot, and you’ve helped us so much. We’re grateful that you take care of Dunni at work, and we’re even happier that she’s your girlfriend. We’re just upset that we had to find out by ourselves. You two are adults; you shouldn’t have to hide anything.”

I smiled at her mother, feeling relieved, and her father shook my hand firmly. “Thanks, Mom. Thanks, Dad. I’m sorry for hiding it.” Dunni smiled at them.

Nineteen

Ha Neul



After church, Dunni told her mother, “Mummy, I'm going to Ha Neul's house.”

“To go and do what?” Neither of us could answer.

Her father stepped in, cutting off the awkward silence. “What does a woman do when she visits her lover? Don't ask silly questions, Bisola. Let the kids be. Come on, let's go.” Grateful for the rescue, I whisked Dunni away.

“What do you want to eat, babe?”

Without hesitation, she replied, “Chinese food.” We ordered boba tea, dumplings, glass noodles, and chicken wings. Back at my house, we shared the meal at the dining table, chatting about the past week.

As we finished the dishes, Dunni broke the silence with a quiet voice, “So, you're leaving in two days.” I leaned against the kitchen island, watching her dry her hands with a towel. I could see the sadness in her eyes.

“Yes, babe. I’ve got everything ready.”

“You better not look at another woman over there, Ha Neul,” she warned, squeezing my hand so hard that my eyes widened.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I replied, and she released my hand, kissing me softly on the cheek.

“Good. Let’s watch a movie.”

She fell asleep just thirty minutes in. Seeing her toss and turn, I gently carried her to my bed and tucked her in. I ended up falling asleep, only to wake with Dunni lying on top of me.

“**Noona**,” I whispered, gently shaking her. “I can’t breathe.” She groggily raised her head, her makeup smudged and drool staining my white shirt.

Later, in the kitchen, she surprised me by saying, “Ha Neul, I’m leaving.”

“But I just ordered dinner.”

“I really can't stay,” she said softly.

“I don’t want you to go,” I admitted, holding her tightly. “I don’t even know if I’ll see you tomorrow. My schedule is packed, and I already have a headache thinking about it. Please, forget what your mother said. Just stay.”

When I woke up, Dunni was already gone from the bed. Just as I finished stretching, she got out of the bathroom. “Good morning,” she greeted cheerfully, and I smiled back at her.

“Good morning, babe. Are you heading back home?” I asked, to which she nodded.

“Why didn’t you wake me? I could have driven you home or at least waited outside for you,” I said as I got up. When I came out with my tie in hand, she offered to help me put it on.

“Doesn’t this feel like we’re a married couple?” I joked.

“It does,” she replied, and I returned her smile.

“Ha Neul, stop the car! We’re in front of the company!” she squealed, and I rolled my eyes.

“No,” I replied simply, and she practically sank into her seat. “You do know the windows are tinted, right?” I said, amused by her embarrassment.

She quickly exited the car and dashed to the elevator, leaving me behind. “Seriously?” I muttered to myself before heading to my office alone.

By 6:30 A.M., Mr. Caleb and Secretary Kim had arrived at my house, but I was already in a foul mood. I didn’t exchange pleasantries. Dunni’s nonchalance about my departure gnawed at me, and I couldn’t help but wonder if she’d miss me at all.

At the airport, I was eager to get everything over with, but Secretary Kim seemed to have other plans. He sat down in the waiting area, much to my annoyance. “What are you doing? Let’s go!”

“Just give me five minutes,” he said calmly. With my arms folded, I stood there, frustrated. “There they are!”

I turned around, and to my utter disbelief, Dunni, Tessa, and So Hyang were approaching, suitcases in hand. I stood there, dumbfounded. “What’s happening?”

“Surprise!” Dunni locked our arms, grinning from ear to ear.

“We’re coming with you to Korea!”

“But... how? What’s going on?” I asked, trying to wrap my head around it.

Secretary Kim chimed in. “They won the kimchi-making contest, and Mrs. Han asked me to arrange for them to be the Nigerian branch’s representatives. I finalized their flights last week.”



I LAUGHED IN DISBELIEF as Dunni beamed. Before I could respond, Tessa interrupted, “Come on! We’re going to miss the flight!”

As we walked, I leaned closer to Dunni. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I found out a month after you mentioned leaving, and I decided to keep it a secret to see your reaction. I almost spoiled the surprise last night, but Tessa would have killed me if I did.”

“I’ll get you back for this.”

Tessa’s eyes went wide. “First class!”

So Hyang had to pull her into her seat. We sat behind them, and I glanced at Dunni. “So... you and So Hyang are friends now?”

She shrugged. “We get along well. I’m not sure if we’re friends yet, though.”

I patted her hair. “Good job, babe.”

She rolled her eyes. “And you? Are you talking to her?”

“We don’t talk much, but we’re cool. All the past is behind us.”

Nearly a day later, we finally arrived. “Are we really here?” Dunni asked in astonishment, and I nodded.

“We're at Gimpo Airport now. Let's go out, a van is waiting.”

We arrived at a luxurious hotel, and Ha Neul helped me out of the van. "This place is huge," Tessa remarked, gazing around in awe as we walked toward the lobby. I nodded in agreement.

“It’s owned by the Kim family. They’re really wealthy.”

So Hyang added with a bit of irritation, "Oh, here comes Kim Dam."

I barely had time to react before a tall woman with long, black hair hugged Ha Neul.

"Who is that? ‘Kim Dam’? What’s her deal?" Tessa whispered to So Hyang.

"She’s Mr. Han’s best friend," So Hyang explained, her voice laced with annoyance. "She was my senior in high school, and a lot of people thought they were dating and would eventually get married. She’s had a huge crush on him for years. Unnie, you better keep an eye on her."

I couldn’t help but glare at the woman, who was speaking with Ha Neul. She was just as tall as me, with big eyes, a dimple, and an air of elegance that radiated from her designer clothes and Alexander Wang heels. I watched as she casually linked her arm with Ha Neul’s, leading him toward us. He shot me an apologetic look as he gently removed his arm from her grip.

"Hello, and welcome to Wol Hotel!" she announced confidently. "I’m Kim Dam, the hotel director. Our hotel is proud to sponsor the anniversary of BadaShirak, and we’ll ensure you’re all well taken care of for the next four weeks. The bellhops will handle your luggage." She handed each of us a gold access card, and I couldn’t help but feel a little overwhelmed by the extravagance.

"Oppa, introduce me!"

My face fell. Another oppa villain? Tessa must have seen my face because she nearly burst into laughter.

“Of course,” Ha Neul said.

Twenty

Adunni



I mentally rolled my eyes at her pretentious attitude as she finally left us. "Ladies, you're all staying on the seventh floor, so don't get lost. The anniversary party is in a few hours, and your dresses have been prepared. A car will pick you up later, so you can rest for now," Secretary Kim informed us.

It suddenly dawned on me that Ha Neul wouldn't be staying with us at the hotel. "You're not staying here?" I asked.

"I'm staying with my parents, babe. But don't worry, Secretary Kim will stay with you all after he gets back from his parents' house. I'll see you later in the evening, okay?" he said in a whisper. I nodded.

He kissed my forehead before leaving, and I followed So Hyang and Tessa to the elevator.

“See how this one doesn't make you dizzy?” Tessa joked, and I laughed.

We agreed to visit So Hyang's parents once we rested. My hotel room was absolutely gorgeous, and I collapsed onto the soft bed. The view of Seoul from my window was breathtaking. I smiled widely. "I'm here," I whispered to myself.

After getting dressed, I called Vanessa and gave her a tour of the room. She couldn't stop raving about it. When I mentioned Ha Neul's best friend, she immediately got suspicious, warning me to be careful and mark my territory. I laughed and told her I wasn’t even in my own territory.

Staying at So Hyang’s house had given me a sense of peace, but as we reached the lobby at 6 P.M., my heart began to race. I was about to meet my old boss.

I put on the luxurious green satin dress and heels that had been provided, amazed at how perfectly they fit.

I knocked on Tessa's door, where So Hyang was already inside. Both of them looked stunning in their dresses and heels.

"This doesn’t feel real. How are we getting ready for an anniversary party in Seoul?" I said in disbelief.

"Get used to it, Dunni. This is all real," Tessa replied, finishing up So Hyang's makeup.

“Don’t get drunk, girls. That’s the last thing you want to do," I warned, and they chuckled.

When we arrived at the hotel where the party was being held, my nerves spiked. As we approached the doors, my anxiety grew. I had no idea who would be behind them—shareholders, partners, important people I'd never met. “Let’s do this,” Tessa cheered.



“ARE YOU ALL READY?” Secretary Kim asked, and we nodded. The doors opened, revealing a grand hall filled with decorations and elegantly dressed guests. Congratulatory flowers, balloons, ribbons, and a large anniversary banner adorned the space, and people were eating and drinking, not a single one underdressed.

I immediately spotted Ha Neul at a table, but my smile faded when I saw who was with him—his family and Kim Dam, along with her parents, presumably.

“Look at that witch, smiling at him like that. I’m going to try the wine,” Tessa said, pulling So Hyang away.

I grabbed a drink from an usher, not caring what it was, and downed it quickly as I wandered around the hall. Some people greeted me politely, while others stared curiously, as if I were something unusual.

Soon, a group of children gathered around me, and I felt embarrassed by the attention they were attracting. Eventually, I caught the eye of Mrs. Han. She introduced me to Kim Dam’s parents, Kim Hae In and Go Hyang Hee. When my eyes met Ha Neul's dad's, Han Soo Young, a blush crept up my cheek. He had a fatherly smile when Mrs. Han introduced me.

But Ji Min’s eyes held mischief and amusement. Meanwhile, Ha Neul never said anything to me.

Twenty One

Adunni



Ji Min noticed my discomfort and led me away, offering his arm for me to hold. I overheard Kim Dam whisper to Ha Neul that we made a good couple, which irritated him.

"Keep your eyes ahead, Dunni," Ji Min warned, making me feel even more embarrassed.

"I'm sorry, I was distracted."

"You're worried about Dam, right? Don't be. She's harmless."

"No, she's not. She's sneaky, and I don't like her," I said in disgust as he grabbed two champagne glasses for us.

"You're quick to judge, just like Ha Neul. Anyway, it's nice to finally meet you, Dunni. You're even more beautiful in person." I blushed and thanked him for the compliment, noticing how much he resembled his mother and Ha Neul, but taller and with longer hair.

"So, do you always save damsels in distress?"

"I believe so." We bowed to a group of people, and he got me some macarons.

"Thank you," I said, and we found a spot at the far edge of the hall with a perfect view of the crowd.

"So, when is my brother introducing you to my family?" he asked, making me choke on my drink. Before he could fetch me a tissue, Ha Neul arrived and surprised me.

"Missed me?" he said, winking.

"Why did you leave your precious Dam to come to me? You were having fun, weren't you?" His smile faded as he reached for my hand but couldn't touch it.

"See? You can't even do it. This is one place where you can't proudly say I'm your girlfriend, right? You didn't even try to talk to me at the table." I turned to leave, ignoring him, and he didn't follow. I pushed down my sadness and rejoined Ji Min, who had more snacks.

“I saw you with Ha Neul. What happened?” he asked as I angrily munched on my cupcake.

“Your brother is afraid to be near me in this hall,” I replied sadly. He chuckled.

“Too bad; you’re fun to be around,” he said, and I laughed.

“Wait until you meet Tessa.”

“Who’s Tessa?” he asked just as we bumped into her.

“Who’s this handsome man?” she squealed, causing his cheeks to turn red.

“This is Tessa, the graphic designer.”

“Such a dashing lady,” he commented, making Tessa blush hard.

I met Kim Dam in the bathroom, and instead of leaving, she decided to wait for me. I got déjà vu from last year.

"Unnie, why didn't you say you could speak in Korean? Do I make you feel uncomfortable?"

"No. I didn't say anything because of my friend. She can't speak Korean."

"Okay. I wanted to ask you if Ha Neul has a girlfriend in Nigeria. The two of us are betrothed and I don't want another woman to come later on."

Betrothed? Ha Neul is betrothed? I stared at her in surprise, speechless. In an instant, I dashed out of the bathroom and headed for the exit. I bumped into Ji Min, who immediately noticed my tear-streaked face.

“Are you okay?” he asked. I shook my head.

“Can you take me out of this place?” I begged. He nodded and led me to the parking area.



ONCE IN HIS CAR, I struggled to hold back my tears, but they were on the verge of spilling over. They finally broke free as he drove us to The Han River. I chuckled sadly when he asked if I was okay.

“I'm fine, it’s just funny. I always imagined eating ramen by The Han River, but here I am, crying. I’m starting to think coming to Korea was a waste of time.” Tears streamed down my face as he handed me a box of tissues.

“This is the first time a lady has broken down in front of me, and I... I’m speechless. But I understand if you don’t want to talk about it. From the looks of it, I can tell it’s my brother. Why don’t I go to the convenience

store and get us some ramen? Let's relive your dream. It's a win-win, right? Even if you have snot on your face."

I scoffed slightly at his comment and thanked him for trying to make me feel better.

I checked my KakaoTalk and saw worried messages from So Hyang and Tessa. I reassured them that I was fine and with Ha Neul's brother. Just after that, Ha Neul's call came in, and I reluctantly answered it.

Dunni, where are you? I've looked everywhere! The party has ended and you didn't say goodbye. Tessa didn't see you leave, and I've been worried sick!

Really? I thought you would be busy with your fiancée. Did you really look for me? How could you do this to me? Is this why you didn't say anything about me to your parents? You're engaged to Kim Dam? I hate you!

Engaged to Kim Dam? Where on earth did you hear that from? I am not engaged to her, Dunni.

Well, I don't believe you! Until you tell your parents about us, don't bother coming to my hotel room!

The call ended, and I kicked an empty bottle in frustration. To my horror, it hit Ji Min right in the stomach.

"I am so sorry!" I rushed over to him, but he just chuckled.

"People need to stop littering the sidewalks. They could get fined," he said, tossing the bottle in a nearby trash can. We sat on a bench together.

"Hope you like *Shin* ramen."

"That's Ha Neul's favorite ramen."

"Yeah, I influenced him. He used to be an *Ottogi* fan, but after seeing his Hyung eat *Shin* ramen all the time, he switched and never went back. Sorry, I shouldn't be talking about him right now. Let's dig in. I also got you some *gyeran* and cheese."

I frowned. "That's what your brother says when he means egg."

"Sorry, I'll be quiet from now on. Here's some cider and *kimchi*. I hope he doesn't call it that too," Ji Min said cautiously, and I laughed.

"No, no, he doesn't. Thank you so much."

"I got you a sandwich and I bought *Binch* for myself. Hope that's okay?"

"No. Ha Neul likes it too. Why must you be like him? So upsetting."

"Sorry! I can't help that I'm like Ha Neul."

"Okay, you can stop crying now, Dunni. People are looking at me and getting the wrong idea," he said, urging me to calm down after I cried loudly. I sniffled, feeling better after letting my emotions out. We finished our food and went for a walk. I felt chilly, so he offered me his jacket.

"Thank you," I said as we made our way back to the hotel.

As I arrived, I was surprised to see Ha Neul waiting by my door. He looked worried, his stylish hair was messy, and his tie was missing. His dark, jealous eyes were fixed on me.

“Whose jacket is that?” he asked, his tone sharp. I quickly took it off.

“My friend’s,” I replied simply, trying to walk past him, but he blocked my way.

“You're lying. That's Ji Min’s jacket. Were you with him the whole time? Did he tell you that I was engaged?”

“Why would your brother tell me that? Your beautiful fiancée mentioned it herself. I heard you two grew up together, so you must have loved her from a young age,” I said, feeling a twinge of jealousy.

“Dunni, I would never play you. Dam is in love with me, but I’ve told her repeatedly that I don’t feel the same way. I told her I have a girlfriend, so she spoke to you to warn everyone in Nigeria to stay away from me. Don’t believe her; she’s just being a brat, and I’ll put her in her place. I love you, **Noona**. There’s no other woman who can make me feel the way you do. You’re everything to me. I already made plans to introduce you to my parents next week, but I didn’t tell you about it. I’m sorry. I know they’ll love you.” His loving words warmed my heart. I pouted as he caressed my cheek, and then a devilish thought crossed my mind as I glanced at the security cameras in the hallway.

“Do you have to go home tonight?”

“No, I don't.”

Kim Dam, I hope you're seeing this in 3D.

Twenty Two

Adunni



The day of our concert finally arrived, and we were all buzzing with excitement. As we left the hotel, Ha Neul arrived in a van.

"Mr. Han!" Tessa shouted, waving enthusiastically. I hid my face in embarrassment, and she nudged me to hurry up.

"I see you're all ready to meet your stars," Ha Neul commented, and we all nodded eagerly.

"I can't wait to see my *oppas*!" Tessa suddenly blurted out, leaving me dumbfounded.

"Tessa, do you realize you're older than all of them? Stop acting like a *koreaboo* and behave like a normal person."

"Weren't you the one who influenced me? Oh please." She shoved me playfully and climbed into the van. However, she quickly stepped back out, looking puzzled. "*Oga, abeg* who else is coming with us to this concert?"

Before Ha Neul could respond, the very person I hoped to avoid came out of the van. My smile immediately disappeared.

"Hi, Unnies!" Kim Dam chirped, and my mood soured in an instant.

"Jesus," Tessa whispered behind me, and I had to stifle a laugh.

"I can't believe you're fans too! We're going to have so much fun!" Dam squealed as she dragged me to sit beside her in the van.

"Let's go, guys," Secretary Kim instructed, and Ha Neul sat next to me. Tessa and So Hyang sat on the opposite side, while I was unfortunately sandwiched between Ha Neul and Dam.

"Let's go!" Tessa squealed excitedly, and the van finally took off. But Dam wouldn't stop talking the entire ride.

I shot Ha Neul a pleading look, silently begging him to make her stop. He chuckled and handed me a pack of chips, but Dam immediately stuck her hand in the bag, frustrating me even more.

She continued talking nonstop, and I could sense that everyone else in the van was equally annoyed, but no one said anything.

Finally, we arrived at the event, and I wasted no time jumping out of the van, ditching Dam to join Tessa and So Hyang.

"We're here! Secretary Kim, take pictures of us!" I commanded, and he quickly obliged.

Before we knew it, Dam photobombed our pictures, inserting herself into every shot.

*"*Shey if I knack this girl, her daddy will still allow us to stay in their hotel?" Tessa whispered in my ear, causing me to burst into laughter.

"Tessa, please," I whispered back, still chuckling. She gave Dam a side-eye.

"*This girl na werey*," So Hyang suddenly said, surprising us both.

"Did you just speak pidgin?"

"My Unnies always speak it, so of course I learned," she giggled. Just as we were enjoying the moment, Dam joined in.

"What did you learn?" she asked, but we ignored her and went off to grab snacks instead.



AS IT WAS GETTING LATE, we decided to visit a restaurant for dinner. The cozy place was packed with people eating and drinking. Ha Neul pulled out a chair for me, and I thanked him as he sat beside me. He and Secretary Kim took the liberty of ordering for everyone, listing a variety of dishes I had never heard of.

"We want *soju o*," Tessa requested playfully, and Ha Neul gave her an OK sign.

Soon, the food arrived, and I was taken aback by the amount: *udon*/glass noodles, beef, pork, fried chicken, *doenjang jjigae, tteokbokki*, fried eggs, *kimchi*, tempura, beer, and *soju*. My mouth watered at the sight.

"Can we finish all of this?"

"We can."

"Is this *samgyeopsal*?" I asked, and Ha Neul nodded. Without hesitation, he grilled the pork and fed me in front of everyone, including Dam. I felt a bit embarrassed but ate from his hand anyway.

"Well, that was awkward," Tessa whispered, and I blushed, feeling self-conscious.

Halfway through the meal, Secretary Kim mixed beer and soju together.

"Aren't you driving?"

“I’ll call a driver from the hotel. I can't miss out on this combo,” he said before downing the drink in one shot. Curious, I decided to try it too. Before I knew it, I had taken two more shots.

“That’s enough,” Ha Neul said as he took my fourth glass away, finishing it himself.

“No fair,” I mumbled, already feeling tipsy. I couldn't help but laugh when I noticed Tessa had passed out beside me.

“Oh God, Tessa!” I shook her gently, and she smiled in her sleep.

“Mummy, let me sleep *abeg*,” she mumbled.

“You shouldn't have given her so much to drink!” Dam scolded Secretary Kim, who just smiled apologetically before heading off to get the bill. Seizing the opportunity, I sneaked another glass, and the alcohol finally kicked in. Before I could embarrass myself further, Ha Neul grabbed my arm and led me out of the restaurant.

“Oppa,” I squealed, giving him a playful squeeze on the backside.

“Dunni, don’t do that in public,” he warned, but I giggled.

“I will do it.”

Ha Neul guided me into the van, and I accidentally bumped my head against the window, snapping me into brief clarity. “Where’s Tessa?” I asked, still tipsy.

“Hereee,” Tessa said in a dainty voice, sitting beside me. We both burst into laughter and slumped into our seats.

“Never let them drink again,” Ha Neul warned So Hyang. I passed out as soon as the van started moving.

The next morning, I woke up with a mild headache. After freshening up in the bathroom, I heard a knock on the door. Expecting the usual hotel worker who brought breakfast, I was surprised to find Kim Dam standing there instead—at 10 in the morning. She held my breakfast tray, looking far too put together for someone who had been out last night. Her suit was perfectly tailored, her hair pulled back into a tight bun, and there wasn’t a trace of sleep or tiredness in her brown eyes. Her makeup was flawless, with bold red lips.

Meanwhile, I stood there with a toothbrush in my mouth and a beauty mask on my face. *Nice, Dunni.*

“Hello, Unnie.”

“Hello, Ms. Dam.”

“I brought your food.”

“Oh, thanks a lot.”

“Can I come in?”

“Okay, come in.”

“Unnie, do you normally go after men who are engaged?”

“What? What is the meaning of that?!”

“I went to the security room to check a system error. While reviewing the footage from the last 24 hours, guess what I saw? You and Ha Neul, wrapped in each other's arms. In the damn hallway!” Dam came closer, her face twisted with anger and jealousy. “How could you be with a man who's betrothed?”

“Dam-*ah*, you're not engaged to Ha Neul, and he doesn't love you!” I shouted, but she scoffed.

“And you think he loves you? Do you honestly believe his parents would let him marry a non-Korean? Are you that naive? You should break up with him and go back to your country. Do you really think a conglomerate heir is within your reach? This isn't some charity. You're ungrateful for everything Mrs. Han has done for you. I've never liked you. You pretend to be humble, but deep down, you're just a greedy witch. A greedy tramp who went behind her boss’ back and slept with her son!”

Slap.

It all happened in a blur. My handprint was already visible on her cheek, her head turned to the side. I was seething with anger, completely unfazed that I had just slapped the daughter of the hotel's owner. She had insulted me, and I wasn’t going to let it slide. Slowly, her head turned back to me, her eyes burning with fury and tears brimming at the edges.

“Crazy woman!”

She slapped me back, and before I could fully process what was happening, she shoved me to the ground and yanked at my hair. “Leave Ha Neul alone! He's mine!” she screamed, pulling harder as I cried out in pain. Desperate, I loosened her bun and tugged at her hair in return, making her scream and curse at me, calling me every name she could think of.

“Get off me!” I shouted, but she dug her sharp nails into my skin.

“Stay in your own land, *nigga*!”

“What did you just say? I'll teach you a lesson today!” I twisted her arm, and she screamed.

She overpowered me and hit me with her heel countless times before the door flung open. She left my body immediately.

“Ha Neul, she started it!” Dam whimpered, tears already spilling down her cheeks. She wasn’t hurt badly, but I was. Three of my braids had been ripped out, my arms were scratched, and my neck was bleeding from where her heel had struck me. Ha Neul, So Hyang, Tessa, Secretary Kim, and two hotel guards were at the door. Ha Neul held me close, pulling me tightly against his chest.

He instructed the guards to escort Dam out, and she looked stunned that he wasn’t taking her side. Stomping her feet, she stormed out, leaving Tessa glowering behind her.

“Tessa,” Ha Neul warned, and she reluctantly backed away.

“That crazy witch! How could she hurt you like that?” she muttered as the door closed. Ha Neul helped me sit on the bed, his face full of concern.

“I was going to give you a surprise, but before I knocked, I heard your screaming. Did she hurt you badly? What did she say? Are you feeling okay? Secretary Kim, check the closet for the emergency first aid," Ha Neul rattled off quickly, and my head throbbed from all the commotion.

“She accused me of stealing you and said I didn’t know my place. But I’m the one who slapped her first. I just couldn’t take what she was saying anymore. She’s been on my nerves ever since we got here, and I snapped.”

“*You for comot her eye. Nonsense.* She deserved it!” Tessa said.

“How did your mask stay on though?” So Hyang asked, and I touched my face. My face mask was still there.

“I wonder.”

Twenty Three

Adunni



"We'll sue her and the hotel for assault and defamation," Ha Neul said in a low voice, his tone serious. I felt baffled. I didn't want to escalate the situation further, nor did I feel comfortable staying at her hotel any longer. The thought of her having access to my room again, of being assaulted or worse, killed, made me uneasy.

"Ha Neul, I don't want to sue her. Let's just let it go."

Rising from the bed, he moved to the window, staring out into the distance. His silence told me he was struggling to control his anger.

But to me, it made sense. If we pursued legal action, I wouldn't be able to stay at the hotel any longer, cutting my trip short. She hadn't tried to kill me, after all, so I didn't see a reason to press charges. "Why don't you want to sue her? She attacked you! In your own hotel room! There's CCTV footage outside your door that proves it! Why are you making such a bad decision?" he questioned, turning to face me, pain evident in his eyes.

I couldn't meet his gaze and felt the sting of tears in my eyes. I quickly blinked them away. "If we sue her, I might have to leave. I don't want to mess with people who are out of my league," I admitted, feeling ashamed. He scoffed.

Slowly, he walked back to me, sitting down beside me before pulling me into a tight embrace. "I never want to see you hurt again, sweetie. It kills me that this happened because of me, and I'll give her a warning. You're the only woman in my life, and you always will be. I'll make sure everyone knows that."

A gentle smile appeared on his face. "Do you think you'll be able to meet my parents this weekend?" he asked. A sudden wave of fear washed over me, but I quickly pushed it aside and nodded.

"Alright, we'll make plans to meet them. I'll let them know today. I can't wait to see their reactions," he said, sounding eager.

He stayed for a couple of hours before leaving so I could rest. A splitting headache was threatening to tear my head apart. I made sure to lock my door before going to bed. I also slid my heels under the bed for safety since there was nothing in the room I could use as a weapon.

“Dunni, we want to go sightseeing today, but we're not sure if you're physically up for it,” Tessa said in the morning.

Before I could think it through, I found myself already in the closet searching for clothes. My legs had moved on their own the moment she spoke.

I quickly found the perfect black dress for a sunny day and grinned widely.

“Are you sure you can go out?” So Hyang asked, looking concerned.

I rolled my eyes. “Did she run me over with her car? She hit me, scratched me, and pulled out my braids, but I’m fine. I’ll live. I’m still breathing, right?”

I stood before them, hoping they'd be convinced. Thankfully, they were.

“Okay, fine. We’ll wait for you to get dressed,” Tessa said.

I squealed and rushed into the bathroom to get ready. As I touched the part of my head where my braids had been ripped out, I cursed Dam. I couldn’t style my hair in a ponytail because of the damage.

As we headed downstairs, I wondered how we’d get around. Just then, So Hyang dangled a set of Mercedes-Benz car keys in front of my face.

“IT’S A LIE!” I screamed, and she gave me a mischievous smile. “Tessa, why aren’t you surprised?”

“*Abeg*, who do you think is sponsoring our outing? Your man, of course. Wait here, we’ll get the car.”

I stood outside the hotel, tapping my fingers lightly on my purse while waiting for them. Out of nowhere, Ha Neul’s mother appeared before me, dressed in formal attire. I hadn’t even noticed the car parked in front of me, but I sure noticed her. She noticed me too. My throat went dry.

"Hello, Ms. Dunni, looking great."

"Good day, Mrs. Han. I didn’t expect to see you here today," I replied with a smile.

She returned my smile. "I have a conference meeting with some of the shareholders."

Just then, So Hyang and Tessa arrived with the car.

"My colleagues and I are heading out, ma'am," I said as they bowed to her.

"Well, I'll let you go then. Enjoy your day!" She gave a polite nod and walked into the hotel.

The moment she was out of sight, I let out the breath I'd been holding.

"Your mother-in-law is so fashionable," Tessa teased, and I rolled my eyes.

"Please. Let's just go!" I said, hopping into the backseat as So Hyang turned on the car.

"I hope you can drive well, So Hyang," I asked with concern.

She chuckled. "Unnie, trust me!"

Tessa, noticing my worry, quickly fastened her seatbelt.



I DIDN'T EXPECT TO see Ha Neul waiting in the lobby when we returned, but there he was, looking relieved to see me. I ran up to him and hugged him, a wide smile spreading across my face as I admired his handsome features.

So Hyang and Tessa thanked him for the outing before leaving us alone, and he accompanied me to my room.

When I told him I wouldn't be spending the night, he sulked and plopped onto the bed.

"I came here so we could go on a date, but you're ditching me for your friends."

"Baby," I said, sitting on his lap as he wrapped his arms around me, "I'll be back soon, I promise. Today was so much fun because of you, and I can't wait to spend more time with you. Just let me go tonight, Ha Neul, and we'll be together for the rest of the month."

He smiled softly and hugged me tightly. "I'm gonna miss you, babe."

"It's only for one night, Ha Neul. I'll be back tomorrow. Don't miss me too much, okay, my love?" I teased him, though he frowned a little before smiling again.

"Give me a kiss."

As I leaned in, he suddenly asked, "Why do you smell different?"

"I used some random soap today."

"Don't use it anymore. It smells like hand sanitizer," he said, wrinkling his nose. I giggled softly, gently caressing his cheek.

"Okay, my love. Can I leave now?"

"Yes."

We went downstairs together, and as we parted ways in front of the hotel, I waved at Ha Neul, blowing him kisses.

"Dunni, if you want to go with him, go *abeg*," Tessa sneered, watching the whole thing unfold.

"Jealous much?" I asked, raising an eyebrow as she rolled her eyes.

"That reminds me," Tessa suddenly said. "Dunni, will you come with me to visit Chae Min’s parents?"

"Chae Min's parents? *As how*?"

Part Three



MR. AND MRS. HAN

Twenty Four

Adunni



Ha Neul and I planned a date while So Hyang went with Tessa to visit Chae Min’s parents. Though Tessa seemed upset that I didn’t join her, she told me to enjoy myself. I wasn’t sure if she was being sincere or sarcastic, but she left without a proper goodbye, and I went on with my day.

The weather was a bit warm, so I chose a pink minidress and wore my hair down. After applying some makeup, I put on white stiletto heels and grabbed my white purse. Just as I finished getting ready, there was a knock on the door. I opened it, smiling with happiness at the sight before me.

Ha Neul stood there, looking incredibly handsome and charming in a brown suit, holding a bouquet of red roses wrapped in black paper. "Hey, baby."

"Are those for me?" I asked, admiring the sparkling roses. He nodded, and I smiled. "Aww, you're so sweet." I took the flowers and hugged him, inhaling the scent of his cologne.

With these heels, I was finally able to match his height, making me feel like I was on top of the world. Ha Neul glanced down and chuckled. "I knew something was different."

"You're mean," I teased, walking into the room to put the flowers away.

"Are you ready for our date?" he asked, and I nodded. "We’ll visit an art gallery, have lunch, catch a musical, then head to the N Seoul Tower for dinner. Sounds good?"

I smiled at his adorable attempt to confirm everything. "I'm not complaining, but we should still plan another date—something more casual, like a library, amusement park, photo booth, coffee shop, or a walk in the park. You know, those kinds of things? This feels a bit formal."

"Why so impatient?" he teased. "We'll get there, but let's enjoy today first."

He held out his hand and I took it, grinning at him. "Okay.”

We left the hotel, and Ha Neul drove us to an art gallery that looked impressive even from the outside. I fell in love as soon as we walked in. They're all so beautiful," I remarked, and he chuckled, pointing out a few I had missed.

Just then, a man approached and hugged Ha Neul before engaging him in conversation. I didn't interrupt, waiting until the man noticed me and gave a sheepish smile. He then pulled Ha Neul aside, and I overheard him ask why Ha Neul was with another woman when Dam had said they were engaged.

Hearing that made me feel moody, but I pretended I hadn't heard and wandered ahead, admiring the intricate artworks on the walls.

Later, in the car, I asked, "Where are we having lunch?"

He just smiled, not giving away any details.

"You're not telling me?"

"Patience is a virtue... or something like that," he teased. I laughed softly and decided to wait. We eventually arrived at a western restaurant, and I was impressed by the peaceful atmosphere despite the tight security.

Pink and yellow flowers lined the entrance, employees greeted us with bows and smiles, and the place had just the right ambiance. The chairs were black and white, the tablecloths sparkled in black, accented with white napkins and red roses in vases at the center. Couples filled the room, all seemingly absorbed in each other. No children, no elderly, just young couples enjoying their time.

"Do you like it here?" he asked after the waiter took our orders. I nodded, smiling.

"You're not going to ask me to take pictures of you?" Ha Neul teased with a smug look.

I raised an eyebrow. "You're not funny. But yes, go ahead."

"Do you like your steak well done or slightly overcooked?"

Propping his head with his hands, he replied, "Rare."

"Eww!" I exclaimed, and he smirked.

"The Nigerian in you won't let you eat meat that still looks pink, I know, babe," he teased.

"Thank goodness you know me. Rare means the cow is still mooing."

Our food arrived, and Ha Neul switched our plates, helping me cut my steak while I tasted the mashed potatoes. Then, I noticed him mixing a raw egg yolk into his salad. I paused, giving him a murderous glare.

“You are dangerous.”

We soon made our way to the musical—or whatever kind of disaster that was. I nearly fell asleep, and that’s not counting the five times I actually dozed off. Sure, it was opera, meant to be exhilarating and joyful, but I couldn’t get past the constant singing. Everyone around me seemed to be enjoying it, so I felt bad. I forced myself to stay awake, but that didn’t go too well. When it finally ended, I clapped harder than those who had actually watched it from start to finish.

By evening, despite the long day, I wasn’t hungry at all—lunch had been so big there was no room left. Ha Neul felt the same. We took a walk, and during our stroll, we spotted a tteokbokki kiosk. Hand in hand, we headed over, quickening our pace.

“Ready for your first Korean tteokbokki?” Ha Neul asked, holding out a skewer for me. I opened my mouth to reply but closed it again quickly.

“What about the ones we had in Nigeria? Aren’t they regu—”

“How does it taste?” he cut me off, pushing the tteokbokki into my mouth before I could finish.

My throat burned from the spiciness, but the chewiness was just right. “Spicy?” he asked, and I nodded, fanning my mouth.

Without warning, he shoved half an egg into my mouth as if I were a vending machine that needed coins.

“Water?” he asked again, and I nodded eagerly. This time, I managed to grab the water bottle just before he could drown me in the name of feeding me.

Note to self: never let your man feed you again.

“I thought the gyeran would help with the spiciness, but I guess not,” Ha Neul said, breathing heavily from the heat, and I couldn’t help but laugh at his flushed red face. The old lady at the kiosk complimented his looks, which only made him blush harder, turning two shades redder than usual.

Finally, we escaped the spiciness and wandered down the street. We stumbled upon a photo booth and immediately jumped in. “I’m a bit claustrophobic, babe,” Ha Neul said, catching me off guard.

“But you’ve been on an elevator before. How are you claustrophobic?” I asked, puzzled.

He pouted and replied, “I just wanted to see your reaction. But you failed miserably!”

“Baby,” I touched his arm softly. He huffed dramatically. “Are you really going to do this?” I asked, and he glanced at me.

“Maybe.”

I kissed his cheek gently, and he melted, giving in almost immediately. Just as he was about to kiss me back, I turned toward the camera and struck a pose.

Realizing I had outplayed him, he grabbed my waist and started tickling me. “Ha Neul!” I squealed, laughing uncontrollably.

“Say sorry.”

“I’m sorry!”

He stole a quick kiss before pulling back, smirking. “I'll get you back.”

“Where are we going?” I asked when he extended his hand, leading me as we strolled through the city. We eventually arrived at Namsan Park, and I gasped in surprise. The park was lively, filled with couples, children, and even elderly people. But what truly took my breath away was the N Seoul Tower glowing brightly, illuminating the night sky.

“Would it be weird if I got on that carousel?” I asked, noticing the children riding it. He laughed softly.

“I’ll watch you,” he said, and I smiled. Despite being surrounded by kids, I hopped on, and Ha Neul draped his coat over my legs.

“Such a gentleman,” I teased, and he smirked, taking a video as I spun around.

I tried to contain my excitement, especially with the kids around, but the second I was off the ride, I hugged Ha Neul tightly, squealing into his chest.

“Did you enjoy it that much? You looked like a kid, I almost forgot you’re hitting 30 next year.” I playfully hit his chest, and he wrapped his arms around me, kissing my face shamelessly in public.

“Are you crazy? Let me go!” I laughed, but he held onto my hand, guiding me toward the cable cars.

“No way. Not at all,” I protested, but before I knew it, we were inside the car, and it was already moving. “I hate you,” I muttered in a terrified voice, doing my best not to look down. “How could you do this to me?” I sank into my seat, refusing to move.

“I knew you wouldn’t agree, so I had to make it happen. Face your fears, baby,” he said with a grin.

“You're not serious at all. Face which fears? Can't you see that I'm about to pass out? What if I have to pee? I don't want to hear your voice.” I said in

a grumpy voice, and he suddenly wrapped his arm around my waist.

“Are you aware that this car is transparent? What are you trying to do?” I asked in a shaky voice. *This is not the right time to have butterflies in my belly.*

“Who cares if it's transparent?”

“Oga, stop na.”

“Are you still scared?” He stared deep into my eyes.

“No, no I'm not,” I replied, almost too immediately.

“Have you ever made out in a cable car?”

“I've never even been on a cable car, baby,” I said, and he smiled.

“Then that's a good thing.”



THE RIDE ENDED, AND as we stepped out, it was like we were two completely different people, leaving the cable car experience behind. I headed to the bathroom while Ha Neul waited for me. After using my detector to check for any cameras and ensuring everything was safe, I quickly finished up and returned, but I couldn’t find him. As the night grew colder, I waited, teeth chattering, rather than wandering the streets.

Then, I heard his voice from behind, “**Noona**.” I giggled, amused that he called me that after such a long time, but when I turned around, my smile disappeared, and I froze in place.

There was Ha Neul, kneeling in front of me, holding a ring box with an LED light illuminating a stunning diamond ring. My mouth dropped open as I looked at him, tears instantly welling up in my eyes.

"Where were you? What are you up to now?" I asked, tears brimming as I bit my lip to hold them back. He grinned, looking slightly embarrassed.

"I was practicing what to say, but now that I’m here, I’ve forgotten it all. Sorry, babe." My hands trembled as I nervously grasped the sides of my dress, waiting for whatever he had to say next.

“Dunni, we’ve come so far in our relationship, and I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you ever since that visit to the farm. You’re such a kind person, and your personality is simply remarkable. The way you speak, your jokes, and your smiles—they're my favorite things in the world. I love you more than you could ever imagine, Dunni. You’re hardworking, and you never let the small things shake you. You’re so resolute in your

dreams and in life, and I want to help you in any way I can. I want to wake up next to you every day, and I want to love you forever."

By the time he finished, I was crying uncontrollably. My heart was full, and I could hardly believe it was happening—Ha Neul was proposing to me, right in front of the N Seoul Tower, with the most beautiful ring I'd ever seen.

"Adunni Jillian Olayanju, will you marry me?" he asked, his voice steady and full of love.

I wiped away my tears, muttering to myself, "Why am I crying on such a happy occasion?"

He chuckled, waiting expectantly. "Yes, yes, I'll marry you, Ha Neul. A hundred times yes!" His face lit up with a huge grin as he slipped the ring onto my finger, and I gazed at it, overwhelmed with love.

I couldn't stop staring at my beautiful engagement ring. "It's so beautiful! When did you get it?" I asked in awe as we walked back to the car. He held my hand, kissing the finger where the ring sat.

"Just a few days ago. I had everything planned," he said with a smile. I tiptoed to kiss his cheek, squealing with joy.

"I love it so much! Thank you!"

We had a quick group call with my family, and they were over the moon with excitement. Ha Neul chuckled, "One family done, one to go." My stomach dropped. His parents—of course, we needed to meet his parents.

"How do we tell them?" I asked nervously, and he squeezed my hand, placing a gentle kiss in the center.

"We have to tell them now, before they hear it from someone else. Are you okay with going to see them right now?" he asked cautiously. I bit my lip.

Was it really happening so fast? Did he propose because he wanted his parents to see how serious he was about me?

"Let's go," I finally said, trying to sound more confident than I felt. He studied my face for any sign of hesitation.

"Baby, you don't have to do this right now. I just want you to be comfortable. No pressure at all," he reassured me, his voice soft with concern.

"I'm okay, really. Let's go see them. Don't worry," I said, gently touching his face.

With a nod, he started the car, but as we got closer to his parents' house, my heart began racing. Was this a mistake? *It's just his parents, Dunni. Relax. You'll be fine.*

Twenty Five

Ha Neul



Dunni walked into my house, admiring the tiled floors and off-white walls. She commented that the sofas looked softer than clouds. "Let's sit and wait," I told her, and she sat down quietly. I sent a text to my brother, and when he came downstairs, he was thrilled to see her.

"Dunni is finally here. Hello, Dunni. Good to see you again."

"Hello, Oppa. Nice to see you as well."

"Hyung, do you see her ring? We're engaged!"

"Really? Congratulations! Wow, this is such great news. Do Mom and Dad know?"

Just as I was about to answer him, I heard my parents from the stairs.

"Ha Neul, are you back?"

"Yes, mom."

"Hello, *Daepyo Nim*."

"Adunni? Hello. What brings you to our house this evening?"

"Mother, Father. Dunni is my girlfriend, and I proposed to her today. We want to get married."

"Girlfriend? Wait, we can't have this conversation here. Let's go to the dining room. All of you."

"Ha Neul, you want to get married? All of a sudden?"

My father asked despite my mother's warning. I stayed silent as she pulled him into the dining room, and we all took our seats, including Ji Min. Dinner was served immediately, and no one moved a muscle, not even when my mother glared at Dunni, who sat beside me, trembling with fear. I pleaded with my mother to ease up on her stare, but she looked at me incredulously. "Ms. Adunni, can you tell me why my son brought you home as his fiancée?"

My mother's tone was serious, laced with a hint of betrayal and disappointment, though it wasn't as piercing as her gaze. "Mrs. Han, I don't have any excuses. I fell in love with Ha Neul instead of working for him.

I’m sorry, ma'am,” Dunni said, apologizing. I squeezed her hand, reassuring her it was okay.

“So, you two are truly committed to each other? You really want to get married? What if this is just an impulsive decision? Has it been a year since you started dating?” Mom asked too quickly, prompting Ji Min to tell her to calm down.

“We’ve been dating for almost a year, ma'am. And no, we're not acting on impulse. We genuinely want to be together,” Dunni replied.

"Honey, what do you have to say? Ha Neul wants to get married to a foreigner."

"Well, you sent him to a foreign country when he was just 18, what do you expect? I have nothing to say regarding this matter. If he wants to get married, let him. Dunni, welcome to the family!"

"Thank you, Father-in-law."

"Father-in-law, *aigoo*. That sounds nice."

"Honey, what are you doing?"

"Mom, calm down. Ha Neul is grown; he's 27. He knows what he's doing."

"*Ya*, Han Ji Min. You knew about this? That your brother was dating someone from work?"

"Mom, she can hear you. Please, be nice to Dunni. She's my fiancée."

"I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can have dinner with you all. *Ahjumma*, please take care of the guest."

“It's okay, Ha Neul,” Dunni said, holding me back when I tried to follow my mother as she rushed upstairs. Ji Min shot me an apologetic glance while my father smiled warmly, engaging Dunni in light conversation.

“She just needs some time to process everything,” Dunni reassured me, but I had my doubts. My mother typically made snap decisions, and I suspected she wouldn’t easily accept our relationship, though I kept that to myself. We shared dinner and talked about the future, including my meeting with Dunni's family.

My father was fully supportive and promised to discuss the matter with my mother. When it was time to leave, I asked Dunni if I could accompany her to her hotel room, wanting to give my mother some space. She readily agreed. After saying goodnight to my father, I took her to my room, where

she admired my childhood space, complete with toys and stuffed animals stored in a box under the bed.

“Wow, young Ha Neul was something else,” she remarked, looking at the pictures on the wall. “You looked so cute yet deadly,” she added with a grin, and I chuckled.

“Thanks for the compliment,” I said, pretending to be offended, as I packed some clothes and essentials. She sat on my bed, watching me move in and out of the closet and quickly dart into the bathroom.



“DO YOU THINK SHE’LL ever approve of us?” Dunni whispered when I returned, and I sat beside her, wrapping my arm around her shoulders.

“She will. She’s my mother; she would never disapprove of us. And she likes you, **Noona**. She’s just a little...uhh...” I faltered, searching for the right word.

“Appalled, bewildered, betrayed, stupefied?” Dunni suggested with a smirk, and I squeezed her cheek.

“Something like that.” I responded, and she leaned against my shoulder, asking if everything would be okay.

I assured her she had nothing to worry about, and she smiled brightly before we headed downstairs, where I said goodbye to my brother. “I’ll talk to her, Dunni. Don’t worry. You’ll definitely become my younger sister,” he promised. Dunni blushed at my brother’s words, while I rolled my eyes at his cheesiness.

“I'll be looking forward to that, *Oppa*.” She waved at him, and got in the car.

"Don't worry. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Okay, Hyung. Thanks. Sleep well." The ride to the hotel was quiet but peaceful. Dunni kept fiddling with her engagement ring and sighing. “Are you worried?” I asked, and she nodded slowly.

“I don’t want your mother to hate me,” she whispered. I took her hand with my free one.

“Don’t worry, Dunni. We’ll get through this,” I reassured her, and she smiled faintly.

When we arrived at her hotel room, she showered first while I worked on my laptop. I was surprised when I saw her wearing my shirt instead of

her pajamas, a playful smirk on her face. “What are you doing?” I asked, and she walked over, hands on her hips. I quickly focused on my laptop.

“What’s the matter, Ha Neul? Can’t wait until our wedding night?”

“Dunni, don’t try to seduce me. I’m working. We’ll have all the time in the world at the end of the month,” I replied firmly, but her expression turned serious.

“Ha Neul, let’s get married in Korea, then when we go back to Nigeria, we’ll have a traditional wedding with my family and our staff there. How does that sound?” she asked, her eyes sparkling with excitement. I smiled warmly.

“Sure, baby. Let’s do whatever you want. But if we’re getting married here, the wedding has to be big because of my father’s reputation. Are you up for that, future Mrs. Han?” I teased, and she blushed.

“Yes, let’s do it! I want to wear a wedding hanbok, too. And our honeymoon should be on Jeju Island.”

“Duly noted, ma’am. I’ll tell Secretary Kim to get started. We’ll have the Zoom call the day after tomorrow since we have a group outing tomorrow,” I said, and she nodded enthusiastically.

“I’ll tell my sister to sort out the bride price items so we don’t have to worry when we get to Abuja,” she added, and I smiled sheepishly.

“What is it?” she asked, curious. I opened a file on my laptop.

“Your parents already gave it to me; the only thing they didn’t discuss was what you and your siblings needed.” Dunni looked bewildered.

“So they were planning on selling me without my knowledge?” she said, and I laughed. “Well, in that case, send it to me. I’ll forward it to my sister after the meeting so she can get things started. I guess we’ll get really busy after tomorrow.” She grinned, and I kissed her briefly.

“Yes, we will. Don’t worry, my love. We’ll have the wedding of your dreams.” I smiled at her, and she fell asleep shortly after our conversation.

Eventually, I fell asleep beside her, and she snuggled up to me, resting her head on my chest. “I love you,” I whispered before closing my eyes. I woke up before she did and went to shower first.

While in the shower, I heard the door open and a sleepy Dunni walked in, oblivious to the fact that I was inside. After she washed her face in the sink, she yawned and turned to the side, screaming before closing her eyes.

“Good morning to you too, my love.”

We met Tessa and So Hyang outside their doors, but Tessa didn't seem pleased to see Dunni. "Good morning, Mr. Han!" So Hyang greeted me cheerfully, and I responded in kind.

I turned to Tessa, noticing her discomfort. "Are you alright, Ms. Tessa?"

She glanced at Dunni, who appeared guilty. "I'm just not too happy to see my so-called friend who doesn't care about me," Tessa replied, her voice tinged with hurt.

Dunni's expression fell. "Dunni, did something happen?" I asked, and she nodded.

"Tessa, can we talk?" Dunni said, leading her to the end of the hallway while I went into the room. I called my brother to check on my mother, and he told me she hadn't come down for breakfast.

Although I felt sad after the call, I was relieved when Dunni returned.

"How'd it go?" I asked, and she gave me a thumbs up.

"She forgives me. I promised her I would go with her wherever she wants from now on."

"Did you tell her about the wedding?" I inquired, and she shook her head.

"I want to surprise them. I'll do it after our outing." She giggled mischievously, and I ruffled her hair playfully.

"Okay, I didn't ask for room service because I thought it would be nice to eat at an English restaurant. Is that alright?" I asked, and she nodded enthusiastically, grabbing her purse as we headed out.

I stayed in the passenger seat while she sat beside her friends in the car, surprised they hadn't noticed her engagement ring. It was clearly visible, yet they must have assumed it was just a fashion ring or a replica, completely unaware it was made of real diamonds.

I let Secretary Kim handle the ordering, and he chose soufflé pancakes, brownies, crepes, bacon, eggs, oats, syrup, coffee, tea, and fruits. "Wow, Hyung, living in Nigeria must have really influenced you. You know the perfect breakfast combinations now. Congratulations!" I teased, and he playfully huffed in response.

"Can I get some parfait as well?" Dunni asked, and I nodded without hesitation.

"Anything for you, my love." I propped my head on the table, watching her eat gracefully. I poked her cheek and stared at her lovingly, completely forgetting about my own food.

“Can you stop? Look at how everyone is staring at you!” Dunni exclaimed, breaking me out of my trance. I noticed the annoyed expressions on our friends' faces at my display of affection. Clearing my throat, I took a sip of my matcha latte.

After finishing our breakfast, we headed to a tourism center that allowed us to wear hanboks. It had been nearly nine years since I’d last worn one, and I found it surprisingly challenging to get dressed. Just when I thought I had it figured out, my pants unexpectedly slipped down, leaving me in my boxers. Embarrassed, I called Secretary Kim, who had just emerged from the restroom. He came in and helped me adjust the hanbok. I thanked him, complimenting his own outfit. He wore a light blue and white hanbok, complete with a black headband, while I donned a green and silver one, holding a white hand fan.

When we stepped out, the ladies were already waiting for us, looking like a bouquet of flowers. So Hyang wore a pink and white floral hanbok, Tessa sported a striking red and black one, and Dunni—Dunni was the most beautiful of them all, clad in a purple and white hanbok, her hair adorned with a jade hairpin.

“Wow, you look... astonishing. I’m speechless,” I whispered as I approached her, and she smiled shyly.

“You look handsome as well,” she replied, giving me a sweet kiss on the cheek.

“You two are so annoying, you know that, right? Why must you always make us feel like we’re interrupting?” Tessa whined, causing us both to blush in embarrassment. We took a flurry of pictures and videos until we were exhausted and ready to move on to our next destination—my former high school.

“Really?!” So Hyang exclaimed in disbelief when we arrived at the school gate, and I nodded, amused.

“Yay! We get to wear high school uniforms!” Dunni cheered, her excitement contagious as we entered the school.

“Wow, you haven’t changed at all, Ha Neul,” Dunni remarked as she saw me in my uniform. It was the typical white and blue Korean style, nothing particularly special.

“You really do look like Ahn Hyo Seop, Ha Neul,” Tessa commented, and I blushed.

“You wish,” Hyung muttered under his breath. *I punched him.*

“Do I look cute?” she asked, twirling in her perfectly fitting uniform.

“You’re more than cute. You’re breathtaking,” I replied, wrapping my arms around her and kissing her softly.

“Caught in 3D!” Tessa exclaimed as she snapped a photo of us.

“Tessa, we’re sorry. We’ll stay away from each other,” I said, trying to appease her, but she rolled her eyes in response.

“Let’s walk around the school!” she suggested, and we all gathered together, running down the hallways while recording videos. When we reached the fields, we collapsed onto the grass, completely worn out. But the fun wasn’t over yet. We decided to head to a nearby park and paid to ride bikes together. Tessa rode solo while Secretary Kim paired up with So Hyang, and Dunni positioned herself behind me, wrapping her arms around my waist.

“Don’t let me fall *oh*, Ha Neul. If you do, I won’t marry you,” Dunni said, a hint of fear in her voice. I laughed as the soft breeze brushed against my skin.

“I’ll never let you fall,” I assured her, and we rode for a while until she decided to take over. However, her skirt was a bit too short, exposing her thighs.

“Why didn’t you put on safety shorts or whatever they call them?” I asked, trying to suppress a smile.

“Because I didn’t want to,” she pouted, crossing her arms in defiance.

“Okay,” I said, raising my hands in mock surrender. She let me take over again, and we finally stopped to watch the sunset while enjoying ice cream. Dunni smiled warmly at me.

“We should find our friends,” she suggested.

“Yeah, we should. But before that...” I turned to her and leaned in for a kiss while we were still on the bike. Just as the kiss deepened, we heard our friends yelling at us.

“We need to separate these two,” So Hyang joked, and I scoffed.

“Guys, Ha Neul and I are engaged.”

Twenty Six

Adunni



"Engaged? As in, you two are getting married?" Tessa asked, getting up from her bike.

"Yes! I wanted to surprise you both. Ha Neul proposed last night, but you didn't even notice the ring on my finger."

"How did we miss that?! No wonder you kept waving your hand in my face, Dunni. You're engaged!" So Hyang exclaimed, pulling me into a hug, with Tessa following.

"Congratulations! When's the wedding?" So Hyang asked eagerly.

"We've already got everything planned; we just need your help and support," Ha Neul chimed in. They both looked at me with admiration.

"Of course! We'll support you all the way, Dunni," Tessa said, and I thanked her gratefully.

Secretary Kim turned to Tessa, "I'll send you all the details, Ms. Tessa. You're in charge of the graphic designs."

Tessa nodded, but So Hyang pouted. "What about me? What do I do?" she asked. I smiled at her.

"You've got a great eye for color schemes and decor. We'll need your expertise there. And don't worry, both of you will get paid for your work," I added.

They looked shocked. "Paid? For your wedding? No way, Dunni. We're your friends—we're helping because we care. Don't even think about sneaking payment to us," Tessa warned, making me tear up.

"You two," I started crying, and Ha Neul quickly handed me his handkerchief.

"Why are you crying? This is supposed to be a happy moment," So Hyang said, smiling.

"You're the best!" I hugged them both tightly, and they returned the hug.

“It’s getting late, and I’m hungry,” Secretary Kim said, breaking the moment.

“Listen, guys,” Ha Neul warned sternly. “We can’t overdo it tonight. No getting drunk—we’ve got a long week ahead, and we need clear heads.”

Everyone nodded in agreement. When the food arrived, Ha Neul grilled some eel at the table. “Tessa, have you ever had eel before?” I asked.

“Wait, that’s not salmon?!” she exclaimed, staring at the sizzling meat. I couldn’t stop laughing. “Eel? Why? Do *you* have to eat everything?”

I braced myself for her reaction when the octopus was served.

“What’s this now? Hold on—Jesus is Lord, why are the noodles moving?” she said, horrified. I laughed so hard my stomach hurt. The fact that she knew what it was but refused to acknowledge it made it even funnier.

“Tessa, you know those aren’t noodles,” So Hyang teased, and Tessa’s face went pale.

“You people are monsters,” she muttered as I grabbed a moving tentacle with my chopsticks and waved it in front of her.

“Get that thing away from me!” she shrieked, and I laughed, placing it on the grill.

“Tessa, it’s dead. It’s cooked. It’s well seasoned. Stop making that face,” I scolded gently, dropping some on her plate along with rice. She hesitated before finally tasting it, and to her surprise, she moaned in delight, shoveling more into her mouth.

“Is it supposed to be this good?” she asked, her eyes lighting up as she continued eating.

“I think so,” I laughed, then tried the grilled octopus, which I found even better than the eel.



“SO, WHEN YOU GET MARRIED, will Dunni move here with you, Ha Neul?” Tessa asked, turning to him. He looked at me, leaving the answer to me.

“Well, I want to study here, so yes, I’ll move with him when he returns to Korea.”

“Wow, Dunni and So Hyang will leave, and I’ll be stuck in Nigeria. Wow, just wow,” Tessa pouted, but I wasn’t sure if it was genuine or if the smoke was getting to her.

“Just marry Chae Min, and you can come to Korea too!” I teased, and she quickly shoved some pickled onions in my mouth.

“You’re dating Chae Min?” Ha Neul asked in surprise, and Tessa shyly nodded.

“See what you’ve done, Dunni,” she rolled her eyes but kept eating.

Before I could grab my second bottle of *soju*, Ha Neul snatched it away. “Don’t even think about it.”

I sulked, quietly sipping my water.

After a long day, we finally got back to the hotel, and I was beyond exhausted. I nearly skipped my shower, but when Ha Neul came out of the bathroom wearing nothing but a towel, I forced myself in, staying under the water for twenty minutes.

“Are you ready for the week?” Ha Neul asked as I climbed into bed.

“I am. Are you?”

“I can’t wait for all our plans to come to life. And I can’t wait for the day you’ll walk down the aisle, smiling at me, and finally become my wife.”

“And I can't wait to wake up next to you everyday.” I kissed his cheek and it turned pink.

“Me too, my love. Me too.”

During the family meeting, Ha Neul's mother remained upstairs, uninterested in our conversation as we continued the video call. “We’re so happy to finally meet you all! Everyone in Dunni’s family is so beautiful and handsome. I’m jealous,” Ji Min said, and the room filled with laughter.

“Ha Neul, will your family come to Nigeria for the traditional wedding?” my mother asked. Ha Neul hesitated.

Suddenly, I heard footsteps from the stairs. His mother emerged, her demeanor completely different. “Of course, we will be there. Good day to everyone. I’m Han Soo Min, Ha Neul’s mother. Apologies for keeping you all waiting. It’s wonderful to finally meet Adunni’s family. We are honored to have your daughter join our family. Thank you for raising such a remarkable and hardworking woman.”

Her compliments seemed insincere, but everyone accepted them, so I kept my thoughts to myself. After a while, the call ended, and we were all smiling, even Ha Neul’s mother, who walked up to me.

“I’m sorry about my earlier reaction. I was just caught off guard, that’s all. Anyway, welcome to the family, Adunni. I can’t wait to see you in your

wedding dress,” she said as she hugged me tightly. It felt a bit forced, but I kept silent as usual, thanked her, and joined the others for lunch.

During lunch, Ha Neul’s father asked if we would like to use Wol Hotel for the wedding. I declined faster than I had ever refused anything in my life. He then suggested we use the conference room at the headquarters instead, and both Ha Neul and I agreed. His mother remained quiet throughout the discussion, and I didn't expect her to voice her opinion. I suspected she was hiding her true feelings, so I stayed cautious around her.

After dinner, I stayed in Ha Neul's room and asked him for a measuring tape to take my measurements. However, he was busy on the phone with Secretary Kim, going over the wedding plans, so I headed downstairs to ask the housekeeper. To my surprise, Ha Neul's mother overheard the conversation and offered to measure me herself.

"It's okay, Mother. I can ask Ha Neul to do it."

"No, I want to do it. Are you rejecting my help?"

"No, not at all, Mother."

I stood in the kitchen, waiting as Ha Neul’s mother retrieved the measuring tape from the cabinet. I showed her the measurements I needed for my traditional wedding attire, and she nodded, beginning the process carefully. At first, everything seemed fine, but soon, I started to feel uneasy. Her nails dug into my skin as she measured, and when it came to my waist, she pulled the tape so tightly around me that it was uncomfortable. Still, I said nothing.

As she moved on to measure my bust, the same thing happened—she tightened the tape around me, but I remained silent, not wanting to make a scene. Finally, when she got to my thighs, her grip became even harsher, almost suffocating. It was then that I realized this was no mistake.

“Mother, can you do it more gently?”

“Okay. It's just that you're a little fat. Sorry.”

Me? Fat? I am not more than 55KG.

“You will need to lose weight before you get pregnant, Dunni.”



"WHAT? I HAVE TO LOSE weight before I get pregnant? What do you mean by that, Mother?" I asked, completely caught off guard. She calmly put the tape measure back in the cabinet before responding.

"Nigerian women tend to gain unnecessary fat during pregnancy, and that's not something I want to see on you. You need to eat healthy and exercise so you don’t end up looking like a fat pig. Once you lose weight, carrying a baby won’t make you gain as much. We don't want that unfortunate weight gain ruining your figure. You African women really know how to look unattractive when pregnant, but not in my family. Don't ruin the bloodline with your genes."

I stood there, stunned, as she gave me a dismissive look before walking out of the kitchen. I couldn't bring this up to Ha Neul, as she was always pretending to accept me in front of him, but I knew how much she despised me behind closed doors. It didn't matter, though—I wasn’t marrying her. *I was marrying her son.*

The dress fitting was scheduled for the following week, and while So Hyang and Tessa already had their dresses, mine needed adjustments. When I finally tried it on, I fell in love instantly. It looked even better than I had imagined. The mermaid silhouette hugged my curves before flaring out into a stunning, voluminous skirt. My veil was the finishing touch—a sheer, delicate lace that cascaded down, pinned securely to my freshly styled T-frontal wig, which curled softly at the edges. It was everything I’d dreamed of and more.

"Stop staring at the dress, or you'll wear it out!" Vanessa and Shola teased over the video call, and I rolled my eyes.

"So, what do you guys think?" I asked my four companions, and they all knew—this was the dress. With help from two employees, I quickly took it off, already dreading the effort it would take to put it on again in two days.

As we stepped out of the fitting room, I spotted someone I’d been avoiding for over three weeks—Kim Dam, standing with a few of her friends, glaring at me. "Fancy seeing you here," she sneered, and I folded my arms.

"I should say the same. Anyway, I can’t say it’s nice to see you. It’s bad luck to talk to you just before my wedding. Let's go, girls." I motioned for So Hyang and Tessa, who were already glaring at her, but suddenly Kim Dam grabbed my hand.

"Your wedding? Wait, is that a wedding dress? And shoes? Who are you marrying?" Her voice rose in shock.

"Use your brain, Kim Dam. Who else would she be marrying?" Tessa shot back, her tone sharp.

Kim Dam's eyes widened in disbelief. "You're marrying Ha Neul? How? No, you can't marry him! He's mine, you tramp! You used voodoo to charm him! He can never love you!" She lunged toward me, but Tessa quickly pushed her back, sending her into the arms of her friends.

"Look at yourself, all this over a man? Pathetic!" Tessa spat as we hurried out of the store before things escalated.

"What kind of witch is that?" So Hyang muttered as she drove us to the mall, her voice full of worry. "She almost hurt you! We should file a case or something. Who knows what she'll do once we leave Korea?"

I chuckled. "Don't worry. If she tries anything stupid, I'll handle her. I'll have authority soon. One comment about her hotel, and she's done. Let's not waste energy on her."

They nodded, seeing the logic in what I said. At the jewelry store, I got distracted by a beautiful set that I thought would look perfect on my mom, so I bought it. I also picked out necklaces for Shola and Vanessa and nearly forgot about myself. Luckily, So Hyang saved the day and got me a stunning pearl jewelry set.

After we went to get shoes for them, I found myself in an intimates store and heat rose to my cheeks. They each showed me beautiful lingerie sets to choose from, but I was too shy to pick any of them. "What's wrong with you? Make your choice so we can go and have lunch. I'm hungry." Tessa whined and I rolled my eyes.

I blushed as I looked at the jewelry options, feeling indecisive. "I'm shy, guys. I don't know which one to pick."

Both Tessa and So Hyang burst into laughter, making me feel even more embarrassed.

"Please, Dunni. You are anything but shy. Or do you think we don't notice how Ha Neul's hand is always somewhere? We know you two are freaky, don't even try to deny it," So Hyang teased, her words only adding to my embarrassment.

I waved them off. "Get your heads out of the gutter. We're not freaky. I'll just take these three."

"Why not take all?" Tessa teased.

After leaving the store, we grabbed some food at a restaurant and eventually made our way to a karaoke room. We were singing our hearts out, carefree and laughing, when the door suddenly opened. Four grown Korean men walked in, holding baseball bats and brass knuckles.

Tessa quickly turned off the music, and we all grabbed our purses, the mood instantly shifting. Our hearts pounded in our chests as we breathed slowly, trying to remain calm.

"*Aigoo*, what do we have here? Four beautiful ladies, waiting for us. Guys, let's have a good time with them."

Tessa didn't hesitate for a second. She broke a glass bottle on the table and swung it toward the men, her voice low and threatening. “Take one more step, and I’ll kill you.”

The men cursed at her, but just as they prepared to come closer, I let out a piercing scream, yelling for help. That seemed to throw them off, and we all began throwing whatever we could get our hands on—fries, tambourines, microphones, even our heels. I wasn’t about to be abducted right before my wedding.

In the chaos, I managed to pull out my pepper spray, aiming it straight at them. As they stumbled back, security rushed in and dragged them out, and soon enough, the police got involved.

We explained everything, and they assured us the situation would be handled. They even asked if we wanted to sue the karaoke management for their lack of security, but before I could say anything, Ha Neul and Secretary Kim burst in, their expressions full of concern.

“You called them?” I asked So Hyang, and she nodded, explaining that she had Secretary Kim on speed dial. We let them handle the rest of the questioning and were told to wait in the parking lot.

As we stood outside, Tessa suddenly said, “What if Kim Dam sent them?”

I stared at her, wide-eyed. “Kim Dam? Send men to beat us up?” The words sounded ridiculous at first, but as soon as they left my mouth, the pieces clicked together. Could it really be her?

"Crazy woman."

"So Hyang, chill. Don't worry about her. Ha Neul will take care of it. Guys, let's not stress about that good-for-nothing woman. Remember, we have our spa date and my bachelorette party tomorrow night," I said, trying to lift their spirits. It worked immediately.

“Fine, but you know your husband won’t allow us to go out again after today, abi?” Tessa teased, and I chuckled, holding her hand.

“HE’S NOT MY HUSBAND until a few hours from now. Don’t worry, I’ll speak to him and get permission,” I replied confidently. Before Tessa could respond, Ha Neul interrupted from behind us.

“I am never letting you three out of my sight again. Getting attacked at a *noraebang*? Seriously? And I heard from the bridal store staff that Kim Dam almost attacked you. Is it just a coincidence?” His voice was tense, and I couldn’t help but look down, feeling the weight of his concern.

Sighing, he softened his tone. “You’re all moving out of that hotel tonight. I don’t trust Kim Dam. Secretary Kim will take you to another hotel,” he announced. We didn’t argue. Tessa and So Hyang left with Secretary Kim while I rode with Ha Neul. He held my hand tightly as he drove, the tension still lingering.

“Are you upset, baby?” I asked, breaking the silence.

He nodded, keeping his eyes on the road. “You could have gotten hurt, and I wasn’t there to protect you. I’m never letting you go anywhere alone, sweetie. And I’m taking this matter to court. Once we have solid evidence that Kim Dam is behind this, I’ll sue her. She’s obsessed with me. Ever since she hurt you, she’s been trying to get to me,” he confessed, frustration laced in his words.

I squeezed his hand gently, encouraging him to continue.

“She’s come by the house multiple times, but I locked myself in my room. I even saw her at the headquarters when I went to visit. I finally confronted her and told her I didn’t want to be her friend anymore. She cried and almost jumped in front of a car, just because she wanted me to keep talking to her. I told her we could never go back to the way things were, and she seemed okay with it. But now... now she’s targeting you. Don’t worry, baby, I’ll handle everything.”

I gave him a reassuring smile as he pulled up to our new hotel, a luxurious place with an incredible night view of Seoul. I couldn’t help but admire the beautiful city lights as Ha Neul unpacked my things. The room was spacious and cozy, with a softer bed, a large mirror, and every amenity you could think of. I felt safe. Ha Neul stayed with me until I fell asleep, watching over me protectively.

The next day, our spa date was heavenly. Secretary Kim sat in the waiting area, diligently working on his laptop while we indulged in massages, waxing, and a nail treatment. The French tips I got were flawless.

By the time we returned to the hotel, I was ready to collapse, but I was greeted with a huge surprise. Balloons, ribbons, cake, presents, and a congratulatory sash decorated my room.

"Congratulations on your last night of being a Miss!" Tessa squealed, pushing me inside. She assured Secretary Kim we wouldn't leave the room again for the night.

"Here are your pajamas!" So Hyang handed me a beautiful pink silk set, and I was moved to tears.

I heard Vanessa and Shola's voices from the TV, and to my delight, they were wearing matching pajamas and celebrating along with us from afar.

"Guys, you shouldn't have," I said, choking back happy tears.

Tessa wrapped me in a warm hug. "Let's get this party started."

Twenty Seven

Adunni



“Alright, let's get married today!” I declared confidently, but the makeup artist quickly asked me to keep still so she could focus. I apologized and let her continue, while Tessa, now dressed in her purple satin gown, carefully laid out my dress, shoes, and accessories on the bed.

An hour later, my makeup was finished, and the stylist helped me into my dress before adjusting my veil. She added a hair vine at the base of my braided ponytail. Once I was adorned with jewelry, So Hyang’s makeup was done, and Tessa’s was halfway finished. A knock at the door interrupted us, and Ji Min entered, accompanied by two photographers.

“Wow, you look like a real bride!” he said, making me chuckle softly.

“Thanks, and you look like the groom’s brother,” I replied, gesturing to his sleek black suit. With my bouquet of white roses in hand, I was led out into the hallway where the photographer took solo shots of me, though Tessa and So Hyang soon joined in for some fun group photos.

After the hotel, Tessa initiated a conference call, and my family, along with the staff in Nigeria, Vanessa, and Cheng, all joined to give me warm compliments.

Though I appreciated their words, deep down I wished my family could be there in person to witness my marriage to Ha Neul. But I reminded myself not to be too greedy—we’d be seeing them in two weeks.

“Are you okay?” Tessa asked. I nodded, explaining that I was just feeling a bit nervous.

“We’re almost there,” she reassured me as I looked out the car window, seeing the company building in the distance. My heart raced.

Before I knew it, we had arrived at the entrance. A large crowd waited behind those doors, all there for me, *the bride*. Tessa, So Hyang, and Ji Min could sense my nerves. “Relax, Dunni, it’s all going to be fine,” Tessa comforted me, and I smiled, grateful for her support.

“Ready?” Ji Min asked. I nodded.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” I replied. The doors swung open, and Tessa and So Hyang walked out first, scattering rose petals along the red carpet. I looked up and saw Ha Neul waiting for me at the altar.

The moment Ha Neul laid eyes on me, he seemed to stop breathing, as if caught in a trance—and I was equally mesmerized.

His slicked-back mullet and minimal makeup highlighted his ruggedly handsome features. He wore a sapphire blue Armani suit, one of his favorite brands. The officiant, a familiar face from the anniversary party, gave the signal for me to walk down the aisle, and Ji Min accompanied me.

As I walked, I noticed my family on a wide screen in the hall, all beaming with joy. Ha Neul's parents were also present—his father in a suit and his mother in a gold and red hanbok, both wearing white gloves. My own mother and Vanessa were crying, but they smiled through their tears. I finally looked back at Ha Neul, catching him wiping away a tear, and the sight of it nearly brought me to tears too, but I held them back.

Standing in front of him, Ha Neul snapped out of his trance. "You look so beautiful, baby," he whispered, and I blushed, too overwhelmed to respond. Ji Min handed me over to Ha Neul, giving him a quick hug and whispering his congratulations.

An English interpreter repeated the officiant’s words, and when it was time for our vows, tears quietly fell. Ha Neul gently wiped them away with a tissue, offering me a soft smile before taking the microphone for his vows.

"I, Jacob Ha Neul Han, take you, Adunni Jillian Olayanju, as my wife. I promise to love, cherish, and care for you. To be your best friend and husband, in sickness or health, in good times or bad. No matter what happens, I will love you, even beyond death."

"I, Adunni Jillian Olayanju, take you, Jacob Ha Neul Han, as my husband. I promise to love, cherish, and care for you. To be your best friend and wife, in sickness or health, in good times or bad. No matter what happens, I will love you, and death will never part us."

"I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride."

“Ha Neul, are you really going to kiss me in front of our parents?” I whispered, and I noticed his gaze fixed on my lips. The guests were clapping and cheering, but Ha Neul seemed oblivious to it all.

“Yes, and I’ll do it a hundred times, my beautiful wife.” I closed my eyes as his lips met mine, warmth flooding my cheeks from the loud cheers of the crowd. When we pulled apart, he licked his lips and smirked. We

turned to face the crowd and bowed respectfully. I could hear my family celebrating, and I waved at them with joy.



“SHALL WE, MRS. HAN?” Ha Neul extended his hand, and I smiled widely.

“Yes, we shall, Mr. Han.” We walked down the aisle, showered with rose petals once more. The photographers were busy, capturing every moment, and I posed gracefully for them. We paused by the door as everyone filed out to congratulate us, presenting gifts that Tessa and So Hyang helped manage.

“I’m getting tired,” Ha Neul whispered to me.

"Husband, just a little while longer."

He smirked at my words, and just as he was about to say something cheesy, his parents finally came to congratulate us. "Congratulations, son. Welcome to the family, daughter-in-law!"

"Thank you, Father."

"Congratulations, Adunni."

"Thank you, Mother."

She opened her arms for a hug, and I reluctantly embraced her, feeling uneasy in her hold.

“You managed to force yourself into our family, Adunni. Congratulations,” she whispered coldly, her voice laced with disdain before releasing me. I studied her face, aware of the façade she maintained; beneath her pretense of kindness lay a deep-seated hatred, which I could sense, though I still hoped she might eventually change.

In the car, Ha Neul held my hand tightly, showering kisses on my wedding ring. “I hope you're ready for tonight, my lovely wife. Because I am. I can't wait to get everything done, so we can finally be alone together.” I looked at him in disbelief, my mouth slightly agape.

“What the hell does that even mean?” I whispered, glancing at the mirror to ensure Ji Min wasn’t watching. “It means,” Ha Neul began, then whispered in my ear. “I’ll finish my statement later.”



“WE'RE HERE,” JI MIN announced before I could tease Ha Neul. After taking more pictures, we headed to our changing rooms for a wardrobe change. The stylist and makeup artist were waiting for me, and I stood for what felt like an eternity as they removed my dress and dressed me in a royal blue and gold wedding hanbok.

They changed my accessories and attached a hairpin to my hair. I learned that we would be heading to the airport immediately after the shoot, so we rushed to finish up, with the makeup artist making final touches. Ha Neul wore a similar outfit, though his was simpler, yet he looked even more majestic than I did. We spent several hours taking photos, and I was exhausted by the end. Ha Neul felt the same, but when I suggested a break, he replied with a playful grin, “There will be no breaks today, baby.”

“Ha Neul!” I playfully slapped his arm. Finally, we changed into casual clothes, and I wore a pink chiffon dress and sandals.

“Are you ready to leave?” Tessa asked when we joined them by the car.

“Yes, did you pack all my things?” I inquired, and she nodded.

“Ha Neul’s things are in the trunk, too. Let’s go; you’ll be late for your flight,” she urged.

Upon arriving at the airport, Secretary Kim swiftly unloaded our suitcases. Ha Neul’s parents awaited us, and we set up a conference call for my family and Vanessa. After the call ended, Ha Neul’s parents blessed us as well, but I noticed his mother smiling while casting me a venomous glance.

“Enjoy your honeymoon,” Ji Min said, and I embraced him briefly.

“Congratulations again, Unnie. I can’t wait to see you in Nigeria. We’re leaving tomorrow,” So Hyang added, and I hugged her tightly.

“Thank you all so much for your support. I’m forever grateful to have such good friends. Tessa, I know you’re missing your man. Please say hello to him for me,” I told her as she rolled her eyes before hugging me.

“Bye!” Ha Neul and I called as we made our way onto the plane.

“Finally, all that drama is over,” Ha Neul sighed in relief after we settled into our seats, and I chuckled at his reaction.

“Baby, we still have another wedding to plan in two weeks.”

“True, but what matters is that we’re already married. That makes things a lot easier,” he replied in a low voice, sending goosebumps across my skin.

“You’re so dirty-minded,” I teased, and he laughed in response. The flight was peaceful, with Ha Neul continually praising how beautiful I

looked in my wedding dress. Our hands were intertwined, and I leaned against his shoulder, enjoying the comforting scent of his cologne.

Eventually, our trip came to an end, and we hopped into a taxi headed to the villa where we would be staying. Jeju Island was stunning, filled with picturesque sights that I had already noted for future visits. Our honeymoon was generously funded by his uncle. Upon arrival, I was awestruck by the cozy yet luxurious atmosphere of the villa. The walls were painted a soft off-white, adorned with beautiful artwork, and there was a wide-screen TV mounted on one wall. The sofas, made of high-quality leather, were arranged around an enamel coffee table set on a plush black rug. The dining room featured four elegant black chairs around a glass table, which held a delicate porcelain vase at its center.

The kitchen was the most exquisite I had ever seen; the pantry was fully stocked, and the built-in oven and microwave complemented the spacious design. The fridge and deep freezer were filled with various proteins, desserts, and an array of frozen foods. I made my way to our large bedroom, which featured a king-size bed. Overwhelmed with fatigue, I collapsed onto the bed, relishing the softness beneath me. “Tired already? The night is still young, my beautiful wife,” Ha Neul said, suddenly on top of me.

“Get off me.”

“No.”

Twenty Eight

Adunni



Ha Neul wasn't in bed, but before I could go looking for him, the sound of movement in the kitchen caught my attention, along with the mouthwatering aroma of bacon and fried eggs. The scent lingered, making my stomach growl, but I shook it off and headed to the bathroom to freshen up. Afterward, I walked into our warm, modern kitchen, where my husband stood by the electric stove, shirtless in gray sweatpants, flipping pancakes. "Hi," I greeted him shyly as soon as our eyes met.

"Good morning, my gorgeous wife. Sleep well?" he asked with a teasing grin, and I narrowed my eyes.

"I sure did. What about you?" I replied, and he chuckled.

"I slept too well."

"I can see that," I said, sitting at the island, noticing the coffee he'd already prepared. Two white mugs with our initials were waiting, each adorned with cartoon versions of us—oversized heads, heart-shaped eyes, and us holding hands in our wedding outfits. I laughed, inspecting them.

"Ji Min's gift is cheesy, but adorable."

"He's really into pottery," Ha Neul added.

"Tastes great," I remarked after sipping the matcha latte.

"For the beautiful lady," he said, placing a plate of pancakes, eggs, bacon, sausage, and syrup in front of me, with a side of yogurt, granola, and fruit.

"Yum!" I squealed as he sat beside me with a matching meal.

"How did I do?" he asked eagerly, and I kissed his cheek.

"You did amazing!" I responded as he took my hand and said a prayer.

"What should we do today?" I asked after we finished the dishes.

He paused for a moment before suggesting, "Let's go fishing."

Though I'd never fished before, I was open to it since he seemed excited, and I didn't want to dampen his mood.

As I started to leave the kitchen, he scooped me into his arms, and I shrieked, laughing and pleading for him to put me down, but he refused. "Wait, we have to get on a boat? Babe, why didn't you tell me? I don't like being in the water!" I whined as we arrived at the docks. Ha Neul chuckled.

"Don't be a baby, Dunni. We're not going far, and we'll be guided. No worries." He wrapped a raincoat around me, but I still frowned. The instructor handed us a list of fish we might catch, along with fishing rods and other gear, and I already felt a bit dizzy.

We boarded the boat, and seasickness hit me almost immediately, but I didn't want to make Ha Neul feel bad. The instructor reassured us that we wouldn't be out on the water for too long, so I silently begged my body to hold on.

"Are you okay, my love? You don't look too good," Ha Neul asked once the boat started moving. I fought the urge to vomit.

"I'm fine, just a little cold," I replied, and he pulled me into his arms.

"How about now?" he whispered, warming me more than just physically.

"Much better, thank you," I smiled.

"Ready?" he asked after we were given instructions on how to fish. I nodded.

"Okay, go," he said, and I lowered my rod into the deep water, feeling overwhelmed.

"What if we fall in?" I asked nervously.

He chuckled, "You'll be fine, Dunni."

Just then, Ha Neul's eyes widened as he caught something. "I got one!" he exclaimed, reeling in a huge fish I couldn't even name. The instructor praised him and encouraged me to catch one too, but I had no luck. Ha Neul caught at least six more fish while I sat, arms crossed, frustrated as the fish kept eating my bait and escaping.

"Don't be upset, baby. You can do it. Let me help," Ha Neul offered, but I shook my head.

"Mr. Han, I'll do it myself." I turned away, determined to catch something.

"Mrs. Han, you're clearly upset. Let me help you," he insisted. Just then, I felt a tug on my line.

"Shh!" I hushed him, reeling it in as the fish fought back hard. "Help!" I cried out as it almost pulled me into the water. The instructor rushed over to

assist, and soon we revealed a massive carp—at least, that's what he called it, though I was too busy celebrating to pay attention.

"That's my girl!" Ha Neul cheered, giving me a high-five and playfully ruffling my hair. Once back on land, I immediately threw up, heaving violently.

"Why didn't you say you were feeling sick?" Ha Neul asked, concerned as he rubbed my stomach.

"I didn't want to ruin it," I admitted.

"You should've said something, Dunni. I wouldn't have let you get on the boat if I knew you'd be seasick. Let's go to the convenience store and get you some medicine." I nodded, and after the instructor gave us a cooler with our fish, we loaded it into the trunk. I hadn't been able to visit all the places I wanted due to the wedding preparations, so I made a list of must-see spots. But first, we needed to eat. I had no idea what Ha Neul was doing with the fish. He asked me to make a dipping sauce, which I did, but I was confused about how he planned to cook the fish—or if he even planned to cook it at all.



"HA NEUL, WHAT EXACTLY are you doing with the fish?" I asked as I watched him put on gloves and start deboning it.

"Making sashimi, of course," he replied, looking at me as if I'd asked something ridiculous.

"Sashimi? I don't understand." I was even more confused. "What's funny? Isn't sashimi raw fish or something?" I asked, and he nodded, slicing the fish. That's when it hit me—we were about to eat raw fish.

"Ha Neul, *wait o*, are we cooking this fish?"

"Of course not. Stop asking questions and sit down, baby."

"My love, I... I have a lot of questions. Why are we eating it raw? What happened to frying or grilling it? Why must it be raw?" He laughed. *I completely understand Tessa now.*

"Just trust me. Sit down," he insisted. I reluctantly gave up.

"Okay, if we can eat eel and octopus, I guess raw fish isn't too bad."

"Exactly," he said, placing the beautifully arranged fish slices in front of me. I gulped, eyeing the white flesh. Oddly enough, it didn't smell fishy and actually looked pretty appetizing, though I wasn't sure.

"What’s wrong? Are you scared? You’re not going to die, my love. Give it a try." He tried to feed me, but I clamped my mouth shut.

"You try it first," I challenged him, and he smirked before popping a piece into his mouth, moaning in delight.



"DELICIOUS. NOW, YOUR Majesty, will you try it?" he teased, holding a piece with chopsticks.

"Your Lordship, I don’t think the Nigerian in me will let me—" Before I could finish, he quickly shoved the piece into my mouth. I was expecting something awful, but to my surprise, it tasted really good. I opened my eyes, shocked, and found myself eating a few more pieces.

"It’s not bad, I guess," I admitted, noticing the smug look on Ha Neul’s face.

"I heard pregnant women can't have raw meat or fish, is that true?" Ha Neul asked, and I nodded.

"Yeah, it's not good for the baby. There are a lot of risks that come with it, so no sushi or sashimi," I explained, sipping my water. "Why'd you ask?"

"I want to get you pregnant."

I nearly choked, water coming out of my nose as I coughed violently, clutching my chest in a dramatic fashion. "Are you okay?" he asked, wiping my face with a tissue.

I stopped him. "What did you just say?"

"I said I want to get you pregnant," he repeated, completely unfazed.

I jumped up from my seat. "Mr. Han, are you seriously trying to put a stranger in my stomach already? Stay away from me. I don't want a baby right now!"

He stood up, lifting me effortlessly and placing me on the kitchen island. "Why not? Aren't babies cute?"

"They are... they’re cute," I stammered, "but being cute isn't enough for me to want one."

He laughed softly. "You're so funny, baby. I was just kidding. I can't let you get pregnant when you still have school and work to focus on. We'll think about a baby later, okay?"

“Yes, sir.”

I called Vanessa later in the day. As soon as the video call connected, she had a mischievous look on her face.

“What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Nothing *o*. So, Mrs. Han, what is married life like?”

“I just got married yesterday, Vanessa. What do you want me to say? Things are normal, our intimacy is on another level, so I'm getting used to it—having to dress in front of him and him walking into the bathroom while I'm on the toilet seat is something else. He seems to be handling it better than I am.”

“That sounds like a lot of work, but you'll get over it soon. I miss you a lot, Dunni. And I can't wait to see you soon.”

“Me too, I can't wait to see you too. We'll be coming in less than two weeks, fear not, my Madam.”

“Abi? So, where is your husband? I wanted to say hi.”

“He went to buy us dinner. The delivery riders are busy, according to the restaurant manager, so Ha Neul went by himself.”

“Jejudo *come be like Nigeria.* Anyways, the Zhang brothers give their regards. Cheng said something about our wedding being the next, but I hope he's joking because I'm not ready to get married yet.”

“Wow, that's amazing. My regards to them, but why aren't you ready? Aren't you head over heels in love with Cheng?”

“I am, but I don't know. The whole difference in culture and all that, it's overwhelming. I'm scared that things won't work out for us.”

“Why wouldn't it? Cheng loves you, does he not? And you love him too, so what's the big idea?”

“Dunni, you don't understand. Just because it worked out for you and Ha Neul doesn't mean it'll work out for us. Love isn't everything, Dunni. Love is not enough to break the horizon between us. I don't want his family to hate me, nor do I want my family to hate him. So, we have to think about it. And when we see that we really want to be together, we will take that step.”

“Okay, Vanessa. I understand what you're saying. I'm rooting for you guys. Soon, I know you two will make the right decision.”

“Thanks, Dunni. I gotta go now. My lunch break is over.”

“Bye, see you soon!”

"Was that Vanessa?" Ha Neul walked in just as I ended the call, and I hugged him tightly, nodding at his question.

“She said hi,” I told him with a smile.

“Send my greetings to her. Look, I got fried chicken!” he said, shaking the food box in the air. I clapped in excitement. We sat in the dining room and dug in, happily making jokes.

"Beer and chicken is the best," I commented after finishing my pint, and Ha Neul agreed with a grin.

"I knew the place was good when the delivery guys were busy."

Feeling sleepy, I laid my head on the dining table. Ha Neul scooped me up, carrying me to our room. He tucked me in, kissed my forehead, and whispered, “I love you.”

“I... love you too, hick!” I hiccuped, tipsy, and closed my eyes to sleep.

I woke up at noon with a slight headache, but Ha Neul was already at my beck and call. The spicy, comforting smell of doenjang jjigae filled the room, and I noticed a tray on the desk, covered with a kitchen towel. I

walked over to it and found a note from Ha Neul, saying he was by the pool waiting for me. Smiling at his sweet gesture, I quickly ate, showered, and peeked through the villa windows. There he was, swimming freely in the pool.

"I hope I packed a swimsuit," I muttered, emptying my suitcase. After a long search, I found one. My heart raced as I stepped outside to the pool, but when Ha Neul saw me, I felt a wave of relief and warmth wash over me. He was in the middle of the pool, wearing nothing but black shorts, and he stretched his hand out to me.

“Care to join me, Mrs. Han?” he asked in a deep, teasing voice, and I nodded shyly.

Twenty Nine

Ha Neul



“Let's go hiking today, babe.” I said to my wife during dinner, and she paused.

“Hike? You mean, climb up a mountain and die?” She asked, and I nodded. She laughed until a noodle came out of her nose.

“Ha Neul, have you forgotten that I'm Nigerian? What do you mean, ‘let’s go hiking today’? How does that even make sense? Our honeymoon is almost over, and I have no intention of wasting what’s left of it hiking.” That’s what she said yesterday, yet here we were at Hallasan Park the next day. She didn’t stop complaining throughout the entire hike.

“Is this Mount Everest?” she groaned, sitting on a rock.

“Dunni, we’ve barely started. Look, you can still see people walking around,” I pointed out, trying not to laugh. She huffed, giving me a playful shove before swaying her hips and marching ahead, bravely climbing the mountain.

“Slow down, babe.”

“Or you could hurry up,” she shot back, pausing with her hand on her hip. I quickly caught up, handing her some water with a grin.

“Here, my precious wife,” I teased. She gave me a sharp look but took the bottle anyway. We continued the hike, and once we reached the peak, she turned to me.

“Alright, what now?” she asked, a little out of breath.

I pulled out my camera. “First, we take some pictures.”

“After the pictures, what next?”

“We head back down. Unless you want to camp out here?” I raised an eyebrow.

She shot me a glare before heading down. “You’re sleeping in the pool tonight!” she called over her shoulder.

“Please, my love, don’t do this *na*,” I pleaded in a thick Nigerian accent, rushing after her.

“E for effort.”

As our honeymoon neared its end, I took her to a spa to help soothe her sore muscles after the hike. She relaxed visibly, smiling throughout the treatment, and I couldn’t help but smile watching her unwind.

"I don’t want to leave,” Dunni pouted as she packed her things, and I gently ran my fingers through her hair.

“We’ll come back soon, I promise,” I reassured her. She gave me a small, weak smile.

“Let’s visit one more place today. I found something online, a tea museum... or something like that,” she said, her eyes lighting up with excitement. I chuckled.

“Alright, let’s do it before we go.”

After our shower, we set off for the Tea Museum, eager to make the most of our last day. The moment we arrived, we were greeted by a breathtaking view of sprawling green tea fields that seemed to stretch endlessly into the horizon. Rows of neatly trimmed bushes glistened under the soft sunlight, the air filled with the crisp, earthy aroma of fresh tea leaves. Walking hand-in-hand, we strolled through the narrow paths that wound between the tea plants, their delicate leaves rustling softly in the breeze.

As we wandered further, we came across sections of the field dedicated to different types of tea plants and flowers. Dunni’s face lit up when we stumbled upon a small grove filled with chamomile flowers, their pale yellow blooms swaying gently. She crouched down, marveling at the tiny daisy-like flowers. “I never thought I’d see real chamomile like this,” she whispered in awe, her fingers lightly brushing one of the blossoms.

“Beautiful,” I said, watching her as she took it all in. We moved on, exploring more of the garden. There were sections filled with lavender, its purple spikes creating a soft haze over the landscape, and further down, we found a patch of vibrant marigolds, their golden-orange petals glowing in the afternoon sun.

As we neared the pond, we sat down to enjoy a cup of tea made from the butterfly pea flower. The tea’s rich, indigo-blue color was mesmerizing. I took a sip, enjoying the mild, earthy flavor, but Dunni scrunched her nose slightly at the taste. “It’s not really my thing,” she admitted with a chuckle, but in her stubborn determination, she finished the cup.

“I admire your commitment,” I teased, watching as she nearly gagged at the last sip.

She smiled at me, her eyes bright despite the discomfort. "It’s part of the experience, right?"

We sat by the pond, surrounded by lily pads and dragonflies flitting across the water, savoring the peacefulness of the moment. The mixture of floral scents—from the chamomile to the lavender and marigold—combined with the fresh air, was everything. “I love it here,” I said to my wife. The landscape around us was a living canvas of colors, textures, and fragrances, something out of a dream.

“This place feels like a painting,” I remarked, and she nodded in agreement, a content smile spreading across her face.



HALFWAY THROUGH THE flight, Dunni complained of a stomach ache. “Are you sure you’re okay?” I asked, worried. She nodded but was starting to look unwell.

“What if you’re allergic? Why did you drink the tea?” I pressed, noticing her sweating.

She gave me a weak smile. “Remember when you touched peppers that one time? I guess I’m allowed a dumb mistake too.”

Suddenly, her breathing became labored, and her tongue swelled. “Ha... Neul,” she tried to say, but her words were slurred and hard to understand. Panic set in as I called the flight attendants and asked for an EpiPen.

“What’s that?” she mumbled, but I didn’t answer. I dug it into her lap.

Her eyes welled up with tears as she gasped for air, and I fanned her, assuring her that she would be fine. “How are you feeling now?”

“Allergic to butterfly pea flower? Really, Dunni?” she muttered, rolling her eyes at herself, but then thanked me for reacting quickly.

“It’s okay, baby. Anything for you.” She leaned on my shoulder, resting for the remainder of the flight.

When we landed, she stretched in her seat. “Welcome to Seoul!” I said with a smile, and she hugged me tightly.

“We’re back!” she squealed as we made our way through the airport.

“When do we go back to Nigeria?”

“In two days. We’ll stay at my parents’ house and travel back with them. Everything’s set, baby—Secretary Kim confirmed the wedding

preparations. All that's left is for us to arrive. Oh, and Ji Min's waiting for us outside the airport."

She nodded, a playful glint in her eyes. "We're getting married again, isn't that funny?"

I smiled and leaned in, my voice soft. "I'd marry you over and over again, baby. I wouldn't mind a million weddings with you."

"I hope you're not trying to seduce me."

I snickered. "Not at all." Just then, we met up with Ji Min. As he drove us home, he mentioned that the company had sued Wol Hotel for the assault, and they were now facing a hefty fine.

Dunni asked if Kim Dam had been interrogated, and Ji Min nodded, explaining that she admitted to hurting Dunni and calling the gangsters. I felt my fists clench at the mention of Dam—someone I once considered my best friend. She betrayed me. My chest tightened with the thought that Dunni had suffered because of me. I would do anything to protect her, even if it meant fighting my past.

When we arrived home, we were greeted with open arms by my parents. My mother embraced Dunni, and I couldn't help but feel grateful seeing them bond so well. My father blessed us, wishing us a happy marriage, and we soon had a video call with our family in Nigeria. Their house was beautifully decorated, clearly ready for our return, and I could feel the excitement through the screen.

After the call, we went upstairs to my room, and Dunni immediately burst into laughter when she spotted my baby pictures. I felt a wave of embarrassment rush over me. "Give me that," I said, quickly tossing the frame into the dresser, but she wasn't letting me off that easily. She threw her arms around me, and before I knew it, her hands grabbed my backside.

I squealed in surprise, my face turning bright red. "Dunni!"

She smirked, raising an eyebrow. "Doesn't feel so great when I do it to you, huh?"

"Let go of me," I said, trying to sound stern, but the grin on her face only widened. "**Noona**, please get your hands off my glutes."

"Serves you right," she said before sitting on the bed with a satisfied grin.

I joined her, shaking my head at her antics, but her mischievous smile was contagious. It was moments like this that made everything worth it, no matter what challenges lay ahead.

After we showered, she put on one of my oversized t-shirts and nestled against me, her legs tangled with mine under the blankets. The room was dark, peaceful, but I couldn't quiet the thoughts swirling in my mind.

"Baby?"

"Mmm?" she responded sleepily.

"Do you like my mother? Is she giving you a hard time?" I asked. No reply. "Dunni?"

"She's okay," she finally said, her voice soft but a little distant. "She's still warming up to me. We'll be fine, don't worry. She used to like me, remember?" There was a note of uncertainty in her tone, but I could tell she was trying to stay optimistic.

I smiled in the dark, trying to ease her concern. "I love seeing you two together. You both mean the world to me. You're the only woman I care about the most, and I really want to see you happy with each other. But if she ever makes you feel uncomfortable, don't hesitate to tell me, okay?" I said seriously, my voice firm to let her know I was on her side.

"Yes, baby."

Thirty

Adunni



"I would like to take Dunni to a bazaar today," Mother announced during breakfast, catching me off guard. I nearly choked on my water.

"That's great news. Do you want to go, Dunni?" Ha Neul asked, and though I wanted to refuse, I found myself nodding awkwardly. I couldn't say no, not with everyone watching.

"Good. We leave at 4 P.M.," Mother said, flashing me a fake smile. I forced a smile back, but my stomach churned.

Once Ha Neul's father left for work, we spent the next few hours lounging in the garden until noon. When Ha Neul and Ji Min headed out, leaving me alone with my wicked mother-in-law, a sense of dread washed over me. As soon as I saw them off, I rushed to our room and collapsed onto the bed, nervously biting my nails.

"This woman hates me. What is she going to do to me today?" I muttered to myself, pacing around before eventually picking out a formal dress and white heels for the bazaar. Anxiety crept over me, making me second-guess her intentions. What was Ha Neul's mother trying to achieve by taking me out, just hours before our journey?

In a moment of panic, I sent a quick text to Tessa, explaining the situation. Her response was practical but not comforting: "Just stay calm and don't do anything to irritate her." I scoffed.

"Tessa, she hates me. It doesn't matter what I do; she'll find a reason to be angry. Her gaze is always spiteful, and she snarls at me when no one is around. Honestly, she's even more wicked than Aphrodite!"

"Dunni, that's your husband's mother! Why haven't you said anything to Ha Neul? You need to tell him his mother is bullying you. Stop bottling up your feelings like this! Remember, you'll be seeing a lot more of her when you relocate to Korea."

"I know, but Ha Neul cares about his mother a lot, and I don't want to create a rift between them just because she gives me those stares. I can't say anything until she does something truly unacceptable. If she tries to kill me, you'll be the first to know, Tessa."

"You're crazy, Dunni. Anyway, we can't wait to see you all. Just stay safe and please, don't let your mother-in-law kill you!"

"I'll keep that in mind. Bye, Tessa."

"Let's do this. Mrs. Han, I'm ready for you," I said to my reflection, a mix of determination and anxiety swirling within me. After applying my makeup with careful precision, I stepped out of the room, my heart racing.

As I descended the stairs, I bumped into her. I froze, feeling her gaze scrutinizing me from head to toe. "Let your hair down; don't tie it," she ordered, gesturing dismissively at my loose ponytail. Without hesitation, I complied, letting my hair cascade down my shoulders, knowing that any defiance would only escalate her ire.

"That bag is tacky. Get a white purse instead," she added, her voice dripping with disdain. My Hermes bag, a beautiful gift from Ha Neul just days before our wedding and worth over $6,000, suddenly felt like a burden. I winced internally, fighting back the irritation that bubbled up. *Way to go, Mother.*

I turned back to our bedroom, grabbing my white Chanel bag instead. The silence between us was thick with unspoken tension. As I rejoined her, she simply eyed me, her expression unreadable, before striding downstairs. I followed closely, feeling the weight of her expectations as we climbed into the car. The ride was suffocatingly quiet; she was glued to her phone while I picked nervously at my nails, my mind racing with anxiety.

When we finally arrived at the hall, the atmosphere felt electric, filled with chatter and laughter. Just before we entered, she leaned in, her voice low and sharp. "Remember, you are the daughter-in-law of Han Soo Min. Do not embarrass me, Adunni. Keep your replies short and polite, and only speak when spoken to. Lastly, don't wander off. Stay close to me, and do not cause me any embarrassment. If you need to go to the bathroom, let me know first. Understood?"

I nodded quickly, feeling the weight of her words settle heavily on my shoulders. She shot me a sharp look, but as we stepped inside, her demeanor softened upon recognizing some of the women in attendance. Her bitter façade slipped away, replaced with a mask of cheerfulness, but when they asked who I was, her smile faded.

I was met with a few disgusted looks that quickly morphed into awkward glances as no one bothered to engage with me. The atmosphere felt suffocating, and despite my mother-in-law's strict instructions echoing in my mind, I couldn't help but feel a pang of loneliness. I remained silent,

hovering close to her side as she engaged in conversation with others, yet I found myself distracted by a nearby stationery stall.

As I picked up a few colorful pens to surprise Ha Neul later, a sense of comfort washed over me momentarily. But when I glanced around, panic set in; I realized I had strayed too far and lost my way. My heart sank at the thought of the look on Mother's face when she discovered I was missing, a mix of dread and embarrassment flooding through me.

When I asked a certain woman for help to get to Mother, she rained insults on me, calling me a fraud and saying my back was a knock off. She had just called security when I glared angrily at her.

"Is this one okay?" This woman, just around 25 years old, stood before me, her tone dripping with condescension. My body heated with anger, and I felt an instinctive urge to retaliate. Just as security guards moved to escort me out, Kim Dam appeared, stepping in to defend me. She told her I was Ha Neul's wife, and that touching me meant trouble. The woman's demeanor shifted immediately; she stammered an apology and left, leaving me alone with Dam.

I shifted uncomfortably, bowing in thanks, eager to escape the tension of the moment. However, Dam suddenly grasped my arm. When I glanced down at her hand, she quickly released me. "What do you want, Dam?" I asked, irritation seeping into my voice. She bit her lip, hesitating.



"I...UH...NOTHING. YOUR mother-in-law is with my mother right now. I can take you to her," she offered in a cool, almost indifferent tone. I nodded, deciding it was best to follow her.

As we walked, I couldn't help but break the silence. "So, are you going to talk about what happened a few weeks ago?"

She cleared her throat, a defensive edge creeping into her posture. "No, I'm not."

I scoffed in disbelief. "You could have ignored me, but you came over and defended me. Why?"

"I did it for Ha Neul. I can't let his wife get humiliated in public. I didn't do it for you, Unnie. Don't flatter yourself," she snapped, her words slicing through the air. I had mistakenly believed she might feel remorse for her past actions.

“I can’t believe you sent Ha Neul to reprimand me, Unnie. You’re the older one here; couldn’t you have spoken to him? You ruined our friendship over a little mistake!”

“Little mistake? You almost killed me, twice! You assaulted me and called gangsters to hurt me right before my wedding. You’re evil, Dam. Ha Neul will never be friends with a horrible person like you.”

Dam fell silent, unable to retort as we approached her mother, who was chatting with Ha Neul's mother. A smirk tugged at the corners of my lips at the sight of the annoyed expression on Dam's face; it felt like a small victory in the ongoing battle between us. I crossed paths with Dam a few times, but neither of us said a word. That was exactly how I wanted it. She was cruel, and there wasn’t a shred of remorse in her eyes. Envy oozed from her like a waterfall. I was beyond relieved that we were leaving the next day. Nine whole months without having to see her, and Ha Neul would finally be free of such a toxic friend.

“Let’s go home,” Mother ordered, and I followed without a word.

“I heard about what happened with Ms. Bit Na. I could say I’m sorry, but it’s not really worth crying over, is it, Dunni?” Her cold eyes met mine, and for a second, I saw a flicker of something like satisfaction. She didn’t care. In fact, it felt like she was pleased I had been humiliated. Her silence said, “You deserved it.”

“No, no it’s not,” I murmured. She returned her attention to her phone, leaving me to nervously pick at my nails, trying to push the memory of Dam out of my mind.

Later that evening, I skipped dinner and called Vanessa. I told her everything. She was furious, saying she would’ve put Bit Na in her place if she’d been there. Vanessa always knew how to make me feel better. She reassured me that things would eventually settle and that Ha Neul's mother would come around in time. I could only hope she was right.

To make things worse, my period started right after the wedding, and I didn’t have anything on hand. My emotions hit me like a tidal wave, and soon enough, I was crying in the room, sobbing over everything—or maybe nothing at all.

“Stupid Bit Na. If I ever see you again, I’ll make sure you regret it,” I muttered, grabbing a tissue to blow my nose. “And Dam... that crazy witch, calling me Unnie while secretly loving my husband. Too bad, Dam. He chose me!”

I hadn’t realized how tightly I was clutching the tissue box, my frustration bubbling over as my emotions overwhelmed me. A sharp cramp hit, and a sudden craving for tteokbokki made me murmur, “I hate this.” Just then, the door opened. When Ha Neul came in, I quickly hid my face.

“Baby?” His voice was soft as he noticed my distress. I sniffled, unable to hide my discomfort. “Hey, what’s wrong? Does your head still hurt?” he asked gently, pulling me into his arms. I intertwined our fingers and pouted. His eyes were full of concern as he rubbed my cheek tenderly. “Talk to me, Dunni. What’s the matter?” His voice was soothing, and he wiped away a tear that had slipped down my cheek.

“I have cramps, babe.”

His hands moved to my abdomen. “Here?” he asked, and I nodded. He wrapped his arms around me, whispering sweet words of love that made me blush.

“Should I make the pain go away for nine months?”

“*Please respect yourself.”*

His lips brushed softly against my temple before he pulled back. “Do you need anything?”

“I don’t have any sanitary pads, and I’m really craving *tteokbokki*.”

Ha Neul chuckled softly. “Okay, let’s go out and get you what you need.”

I leaned my head out the car window, enjoying the warm breeze against my face. Ha Neul focused on driving, his expression relaxed. After he rolled the windows back up, I asked, “Are you excited to go back to Nigeria?”

He nodded eagerly. “I really am. And you know the best part?” he teased. I raised my brow, waiting for him to continue.

“You’ll be living with me, so I won’t have to go to your parents’ house to see you.” He shot me a smirk, and my cheeks flushed red.

“You’re so cheesy.”

“You got your period, so we can try for a baby next month, right?” Ha Neul’s comment caught me off guard.

I looked at his smug face, confused. “What does that even mean?”



"BABE, I DON'T WANT *tteokbokki* anymore. I want *Buldak* ramen," I said as I sat down, watching Ha Neul prepare it for me. He made himself some ramen too, but of course, he went with *Shin*.

"Why don’t you ever eat any other ramen?" I asked, after he added cheese and *kimchi* to my bowl.

"Too spicy. If I eat *Buldak*, I’m gonna get diarrhea," he said casually, still focused on his ramen.

I glared at him. "Now why would you say that while I’m eating?"

He rolled his eyes. "Oh, please. Stop acting like you don’t do it too. Your fart stinks a lot, Dunni. You’re gonna kill me one day."

I blushed furiously. *I’m getting a divorce.*

"I’ll never forgive you."

"I love you regardless, baby. You shouldn’t be ashamed, okay?" *It IS something to be ashamed of.*

Later, we went for a walk, holding hands and sharing an ice cream as we strolled along the riverbank.

"I love this," Ha Neul said, admiring the view.

I smiled and squeezed his hand. "Me too, babe. Let’s make this a regular thing."

By the time we reached the car, I was exhausted and ended up falling asleep during the drive home. When I woke up, it was 5 a.m., and I found myself lying in bed. The sound of the shower told me that Ha Neul was already up.

Still groggy, I pulled myself out of bed and joined him in the shower.

As I was going down the stairs, I missed a step and tumbled down, landing hard on my backside.

"Oh my gosh, are you okay?" Ha Neul rushed over, his voice full of concern as he helped me up.

"Did I just fall down the stairs?" I asked, wincing at the sharp pain in my side.

"Where does it hurt?" I pointed to my side, and he gently massaged the area. "Does that help?" he asked, and I bit my lip to keep from crying out.

Before we could continue, Ji Min and his parents appeared. "What are you two doing so early?" Ji Min asked, and we quickly separated.

We all loaded into the cars—Ji Min and his parents in one, Ha Neul and I in another. I dozed off with my head on Ha Neul’s lap, and by the time we reached the airport and boarded the plane, I had fallen asleep again. I didn’t wake up until noon, just in time to have lunch with Ha Neul, and then I drifted off once more.

We finally arrived at our destination around midnight and checked into a hotel near the airport. I hadn't had a chance to let my parents know we were back, and by then, they were likely asleep.

"It feels so good to be back!" Ha Neul exclaimed as we entered our room, and I couldn't help but smile at how cute he was. "Mr. Han, you start work next week. Are you ready?" I teased, and he crossed his arms.

"Killjoy."

We left the next morning, and my parents met us at the new hotel where the wedding would take place. There was an emotional reunion before we sat down for a family dinner. "Dunni!" Vanessa squealed as she hugged me, followed by Shola, Tessa, and So Hyang.

"I missed you all so much!" I said, and they all smiled. I told them about our honeymoon, the amazing places we visited, and our fishing adventure. They were all jealous and said they wanted to visit Jeju Island too, though I warned them to avoid Love Land. When they asked what it was, I just kept quiet.

"Alright, time for Dunni's introduction!" Shola announced when the makeup artist and stylist arrived.

"Introduction? I'm already married," I giggled as I got a new frontal installed. "Where's Ha Neul?"

"*Where's Ha Neul*? You two aren't married in Nigeria yet, remember?" Tessa teased, and I rolled my eyes.

By the time we arrived at my parents' house, it was already evening, even though I had started getting ready at noon. Typical African time, I thought, rolling my eyes. I noticed Ha Neul's car and several others parked in the driveway, and I could hear lively voices coming from inside.

My heart raced, and with the veil over my head, I couldn't see much. I was dressed in a light blue blouse and skirt, complete with a gele and a white floral veil. I had heard from Vanessa that Ha Neul's mother was also wearing an Ankara outfit, and I couldn't wait to see how she looked—either to laugh or feel sorry for her.

My uncles, aunties, grandparents, siblings, and friends were all around. It was almost as if they were guarding me from Ha Neul, who looked like he was ready to rush over and sweep me into his arms in front of everyone. I noticed the bride price items laid out in the middle of the living room, and my heart warmed as Ha Neul was asked to declare his intentions.

"Hello, everyone. My family and I have come a long way to be here with you—to share in the joy of being among such wonderful people and, for me personally, to express my deep love for your daughter, Adunni. I've been with Dunni for over a year now, and in that time, I've come to love everything about her—her kindness, her character, and all the qualities that make her special. She's compassionate, hardworking, and ambitious—everything I could ever dream of in a woman. I love her deeply, and I'm here to formally ask for her hand in marriage. I want to spend forever with her, and I hope you all see the sincerity of my love."

"Ha Neul is such a romantic. Dunni, you've hit the jackpot!" Shola whispered, and I couldn't help but smile. Ha Neul was warmly received as he prostrated before my parents, with his father and brother doing the same. His mother knelt, though she looked like she'd rather be back on a 19-hour flight to Korea than sitting with us.

The bride price was presented, and I was asked to stand with Ha Neul in the center of the room. I blushed when he lifted my veil and hugged me tightly, and the room filled with warm wishes. Ha Neul and I wore matching outfits, his parents were dressed in emerald green, and my family and relatives were in sunset orange.

"Congrats, sis. Your husband sure knows how to sweet-talk," Ifeoluwa said, handing me a glass of wine. I playfully rolled my eyes.

"Thanks, bro," I replied coolly as he shook Ha Neul's hand.

"So Hyang, any of our cousins catching your eye?" Shola teased, and So Hyang blushed.

"Uhh...no?" she replied, but her eyes kept glancing toward Secretary Kim, who was chatting with my cousins. My eyes widened in realization.

"No way, you like Hyeon Sook?" I asked, shocked. She quickly ran off before anyone could probe further.

"Looks like another wedding might be on the horizon," Tessa teased.

The introduction ceremony ended, but before I could retreat to Ha Neul's arms, my female companions whisked me away for a second bridal shower. This time, my female cousins joined us, along with Mrs. Yasmine and Mrs. Rosa. We played games, danced, and I received so many gifts, some of which were obscene lingeries from Tessa. Overcome with emotion, Vanessa wrapped an arm around me for comfort. It was a night I'd never forget—a time just for me and my girls, no men involved. A truly special moment.

Thirty One

Adunni



“Good morning, Mrs. Han,” the workers greeted me as I entered the packaging building. I felt a flush of embarrassment creeping up my cheeks. Even after six months of marriage, I still wasn't fully used to my new name. It felt like just yesterday that Ha Neul and I were married—once in Korea, and again in Nigeria. Every day felt special, even though we had our fair share of disagreements. Closing the toilet seat, deciding what to eat, making the bed, and even laundry routines were ongoing points of contention. While I preferred doing the laundry during the week, Ha Neul did his every night. And then there was his addiction to coffee, and staying up until midnight, habits he toned down after we talked.

Despite these minor squabbles, our married life was wonderful. We took trips whenever we could, spent quality time with family and friends, and kept in touch with his family—though his mother still harbored a strong dislike for me. I didn’t let it bother me too much, especially since I wasn’t close to her, and I knew I’d have to see her again in three months.

Vanessa had been especially clingy since breaking up with Cheng. Although they still cared for each other, their relationship ended because Cheng wanted her to move to China, and Vanessa wasn’t ready to make that move. I had tried to convince her not to rush into the breakup, but she insisted that if Cheng truly wanted to be with her, he would return. Now, two months later, she still saw him at work, and it was clear she was hurting. I was staying at her place to give her some emotional support.

I went to the restroom and saw Tessa crying, which surprised me because she had seemed fine earlier in the cafeteria.

“Tessa, what’s wrong?” I asked, rushing over to comfort her. She hugged me tightly, her tears flowing.

“It’s Chae Min. I think he’s cheating on me,” she sobbed.

“Cheating on you?” I asked, shocked. From what I had seen, there didn’t seem to be any issues between them. “What makes you think that?”

“He’s been acting strange—busy all the time and hiding his phone from me. Chae Min never used to do that! He’d let me check his phone whenever I wanted. And he knows I’d kill him if he ever cheated, so I don’t know why he’s doing this!”

“Calm down, Tessa. If something’s going on, we’ll find out.”

She smiled weakly through her tears. “I’ll bury him and his side chick alive.”

We made a plan to follow Chae Min the next time he acted suspicious, and two days later, we had our chance. After work, Tessa, So Hyang, and I followed him in my car, keeping a safe distance. Tessa’s phone rang—it was Chae Min. “He says he’ll pick me up in an hour. But he’s not headed home. What if he’s seeing her first before coming to me?” she fumed.

When we arrived at his destination, we were stunned. It was a large hotel, and Chae Min was meeting a woman right at the entrance.

“Is she the one? I'll get her!” Tessa was gone in a split second.

“Tessa!” we yelled, our voices echoing down the hallway as we sprinted after her. She got into the elevator just before we could reach her, the doors closing with a quiet, final click.

“What if she causes a scene?” So Hyang murmured, biting her nails. The pit of worry that had been gnawing at me all evening only deepened, a dull ache that made my head spin.

Suddenly, So Hyang’s phone vibrated in her hand. “Tessa just texted. She’s in big trouble! Let’s go!” Her voice trembled with urgency as she grabbed my wrist, pulling me toward the next elevator. I could feel the tension humming between us as we raced up to the fifth floor, the seconds dragging into an eternity.

When we knocked on the door, anticipation thrummed in the air, but the sight that greeted us was far from what we’d expected. A photographer opened the door, ushering us into a room bathed in soft, golden light. It was like stepping into a dream—delicate petals of roses scattered across the floor, balloons floating like whispers in the air, ribbons curling in graceful arcs, and confetti shimmering under the glow of the chandeliers. At the heart of the room, an LED sign blazed in bold letters: *Will you marry me?*

I gasped, a hand flying to my mouth in disbelief. My eyes landed on Tessa, who stood in the center of it all, her face flushed with surprise and joy, an engagement ring glinting on her trembling hand. “Oh my God!” I squealed, my heart swelling with happiness as I rushed forward to embrace

her. The joy was infectious, the kind that fills the room, warming every corner.

Laughing nervously, Tessa explained how she had mistaken the wedding planner for Chae Min's side chick. The mystery, the secrecy—it had all been for this moment, a proposal crafted with love, not betrayal. Relief flooded me, knowing that Chae Min had never strayed.

"So, I'm the only one without a partner, huh?" So Hyang's voice broke through the haze of celebration, her realization dawning like a soft blush on her cheeks.

I couldn't help but chuckle. "What about Hyeon Sook?" I teased, my eyes sparkling with mischief as her face turned a delightful shade of red.

"We're just friends," she muttered, but Tessa was quick to jump in with her playful taunt.

"Come on, So Hyang, we know you have feelings for him. You should tell him before it's too late. He's going back to Korea in three months, and who knows what might happen then? Wouldn't it be better to confess now, before he finds someone else?"

So Hyang pouted, her lip jutting out in that endearing way she always did when she was deep in thought. "Okay, fine. I'll think about it. But marriage? Not yet. I'm only turning 25. I've got time."

Tessa laughed, a full, carefree sound that seemed to make the room glow even brighter. "And here I am, nearly 31, with Dunni turning 30 soon. We're getting old, aren't we?"

"Old? Please," I said, grinning as I threw an arm around them both. "I'm forever 16, and you both know it." My joke dissolved into laughter.

We left Tessa and Chae Min to revel in their moment, the joy in the room lingering on my skin like a warm breeze as I drove So Hyang home. The quiet drive allowed my mind to settle, the night's events swirling in my thoughts like a beautiful melody.

And as expected, when I opened the door to the bedroom, there he was —Ha Neul, lounging on the bed, shirtless, his sweatpants hanging low on his hips, his abs sparkling. His eyes met mine, and a slow, knowing smile spread across his lips, as if he had been waiting for me. Without another word, I jumped into his arms, and the rest is history.



“HMM, WHAT DO I EAT today?” I thought as I set out ingredients for lunch. I skipped work as my health wasn't really good. “After eating *jjigae* and *kimchi* all week, I need serious *amala* for my stomach.”

I took a whiff of the soup. I made a mistake. The floodgates opened and I threw up in the sink, vomiting everything I ate that morning.

“*Sickness wey go make me reject amala?* May I never see it in Jesus name, Amen.*”*

The moment I caught a whiff of the soup again, dry heaves rose in me. There was no way anything could settle in my stomach without making its return, and frustration mixed with despair drove me to tears.

“Stupid *amala*. *After I turn you finish.*” I scolded myself, hastily dressing to head to the pharmacy.

As I sat in the *Bolt* car, I anxiously scrolled through my symptoms on Google, my heart racing with each result. My eyes widened as I read the word that struck a chord deep within me: **Pregnant**.

“Me? Pregnant? It can’t be,” I whispered in disbelief. Checking my period calculator revealed the shocking truth: I had missed my period without even realizing it.

By the time I arrived at the pharmacy, the medications I had intended to buy faded from my mind, replaced by the urgency of a pregnancy test. I returned home, heart pounding, and sat on the cold bathroom floor, staring at the test. “I can’t believe I’m doing this,” I murmured to myself, gathering the courage to proceed. As I waited for the results, a whirlwind of panic engulfed me. I was on the cusp of starting school; I couldn’t afford to be pregnant. Ha Neul and I had never truly considered parenthood, and the thought sent my heart racing. If the test revealed what I feared, our lives would transform in ways I wasn’t ready to embrace, even though I knew I had to be.

When the result flashed positive, disbelief washed over me, followed swiftly by tears—tears of joy and bewilderment. I was pregnant, and there was no turning back.

I called Ha Neul, asking if he was finished with work. His affirmative response came quickly, and he was home within the hour. The moment he walked in and saw the look on my face, his brows knitted in concern. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, Ha Neul. I just have a surprise,” I replied, excitement bubbling beneath my nerves.

“A surprise? What is it?” I held out the pregnancy test, and he stared at it, confusion etched on his features. “What’s this?” he asked, his brow furrowing deeper. I couldn’t help but giggle through my tears.

“I’m pregnant, Ha Neul. We’re going to be parents!” I squealed, unable to contain my joy. His expression shifted, his eyes widening in disbelief as he processed the news. For what felt like hours, he stared at the test, then suddenly swept me off my feet, spinning me around as laughter erupted from both of us.

“Are you really pregnant?! I’m going to be a dad?” His smile illuminated the room, and I nodded vigorously, laughter spilling from my lips.

“Yes, you are!” I exclaimed, and he kissed me tenderly, as if sealing this moment in time.

“I’m so happy right now, baby. Thank you so much for this gift. Let’s cherish our little one with care.”

“Of course, of course we will. Are you excited? I mean, we didn’t plan for this to happen so soon,” I wrapped my arms around his neck, feeling the warmth of his presence.

“I’m more than excited, Dunni. I’m genuinely happy. Honestly, it’s a blessing from God, so we have to embrace it with open arms, right?”

“Yes, yes we will,” I whispered, and he gently wiped my tears away, his touch tender and reassuring.

Days later, in the soft, muted light of the obstetrician's office, we sat side by side, our hands intertwined. “It’s a healthy baby, Mr. and Mrs. Han. You’re four weeks along, so please pay attention to the meals you eat and avoid stress,” the doctor advised, a warm smile gracing her lips as she looked between us.

We exchanged warm glances. “Come back in a month for another check-up,” she added, her voice calm and reassuring.

We left the hospital in smiles and headed to a restaurant to have food. I threw up everything we ate as soon as we arrived home. Ha Neul held my head while I emptied my stomach in the toilet. “I hate this.”

“I'm sorry, my love.”

“This is all your fault.”

“I'm pregnant, guys,” I announced, my heart pounding as Vanessa, Tessa, and So Hyang paused mid-bite, their gazes piercing through me like arrows. The room fell silent, anticipation hanging thick in the air.

“You're pregnant?!” Tessa's voice was a mix of shock and delight, her eyes wide with disbelief.

“OMG! Dunni! Congratulations!” Vanessa exclaimed, her face lighting up with joy. She leapt from her seat and wrapped her arms around me in an exuberant hug. So Hyang followed suit, her embrace warm and genuine.

Everyone was thrilled about the baby, including my family and even Ha Neul's family—well, everyone except his mother, who wore her displeasure like a storm cloud. As my parents danced and celebrated my pregnancy, joy radiating from their every movement, I could see her through the screen, her expression a mask of fury cleverly hidden beneath a façade of polite smiles. I could only hope she wouldn’t create any drama when we moved to Korea.

The day of our departure arrived too quickly, the bittersweet moment flooding my heart with a mix of sadness and excitement. I was leaving my family, my hometown, and my workplace—all the familiar comforts I had known. Tears streamed down my face as I said goodbye, and I didn’t stop crying even on the plane.

The thought of Tessa, who would join us in three months, and Vanessa, who had just reconciled with Cheng, weighed heavily on my heart. Vanessa had expressed her desire to follow Cheng wherever he went, planning to move after a year, and I couldn't help but feel a pang of longing for the friendships I would miss.

Ha Neul held my hand tightly during the flight. Across the aisle, So Hyang and Secretary Kim seemed cozy, their whispered conversations and shared smiles hinting at something deeper between them. I decided not to pry, knowing that if there was anything to be shared, So Hyang would tell me in her own time.

Finally, we touched down in Korea, and a wave of relief washed over me as I stepped back onto familiar soil. But as we made our way through the bustling airport, the scene quickly turned chaotic. A massive crowd of fans and paparazzi awaited, and Ha Neul immediately stepped in front of me, his protective instinct kicking in. At four months pregnant, my bump had begun to round out, though Shola playfully remarked that I looked more like I was seven months along.

As we navigated through the throng of people, my eyes caught sight of celebrities mingling in the crowd. My heart raced when I spotted a familiar

face from my screens. “Baby, look, it's your doppelganger!” I teased Ha Neul, unable to resist the urge to poke fun at him.

He rolled his eyes but couldn’t hide the slight smirk that tugged at his lips. “I'm more handsome than he is, baby,” he boasted, his confidence radiating.

I laughed, shaking my head. “Okay, Your Lordship,” I replied, playfully bowing my head as we made our way to the car. “Can't believe I'm married to Paul Ahn’s lookalike.”

“Do you want me to walk you to him so you both can run away?”

“*Abeg.”*



“HA NEUL, ARE WE REALLY going to keep living with your parents?” I erupted, my irritation bubbling over after dinner. “I thought we discussed this! I don’t want to stay here! Your father mentioned we could move to the other mansion, so what’s going on?” The weight of my frustration felt unbearable, and the fear in my chest told me that his mother was a serious threat. Her tone dripped with venom, and every time I tried to speak during dinner, she cut me off with a sharpness that made my blood run cold. No one else seemed to notice the wickedness lacing her words, nor did they see the menace in her suggestion to “be careful on the stairs.” The chilling implication of her voice hung in the air, yet everyone remained blissfully blind. Even when she carelessly spilled gravy on me during dinner, it went unnoticed—no one suspected a thing.

“Baby, we planned to move to our own house,” Ha Neul replied, his voice steady yet strained. “But you’re pregnant, and you need care. My mother is here for you, along with the housekeepers and drivers. If we stay alone, I worry something bad might happen. This isn’t Nigeria. Tessa and Vanessa aren’t around, and So Hyang will be busy starting next week. I don’t want you to stress; you know what the doctor said about your stress levels. Please, let’s stay with my parents until the baby arrives.”

“Did your mother put you up to this? Trying to brainwash me into believing that living here while pregnant is good for me? No, I can’t breathe here! I genuinely think I’ll wither away if I stay under her roof. I don’t want to be around your mother, Ha Neul! She's going to hurt me, I know it!” My voice was heavy with desperation, and I watched him exhale sharply, frustration etching his features.

“Dunni, behave. You’re living with my parents now; don’t be rude! They’re your in-laws, and you should show them respect. I’ve never spoken ill of your parents, have I? Why then should you disrespect mine?” His words pierced my heart, igniting tears that spilled over and streaked down my cheeks. I turned away, burying my face in the pillows, letting my sobs drown out his apologies.

The next morning passed in silence, our words unspoken. Ha Neul’s mother entered the room at noon, just as Ha Neul was out with his brother and father. “You look terrible,” she remarked, her eyes narrowing as she took in my red, puffy eyes.

“Good day, Mother. I’m fine,” I replied, forcing a smile that felt brittle. She scoffed dismissively.

“I don’t really care about your feelings, Dunni. Just don’t stress the child. Anyway, we have a women-only dinner party tomorrow. The housekeepers will bring your dress. You’d better not cry; I don’t want you looking ugly and embarrassing me.”

Once she left, I huffed in exasperation, seeking refuge in the warm embrace of a bubble bath. The soothing water helped quell the storm of emotions raging inside me. I loathed the way his mother bullied me, but I hated the fights with Ha Neul even more.

When he walked into the bathroom, finding me nestled in the tub, heat rushed to my cheeks. I turned away, anger still simmering beneath the surface. Yet, despite my frustration, the tingles that danced along my skin whenever he was near, or when he spoke, were impossible to ignore. “**Noona**,” he said softly, the sound wrapping around my heart.

“I’m really sorry for raising my voice at you last night, babe. Please forgive me. I let my emotions take over, and I shouldn’t have done that. I’m so sorry, my love.” Ha Neul knelt beside the tub, gently holding my damp hand in his. I sniffled softly, and he tenderly wiped away the solitary tear that had escaped down my cheek, turning my face toward him with a gentle touch.

“Why should this beautiful face be stained with tears because of me? I’m such a fool for making you cry. I’m truly sorry, Dunni.”

“It’s okay; I’m sorry too.” I offered him a sad smile, and his expression softened, mirroring my emotions with a smile of his own.

“Shall I join you in your bath, my dear?”

“No.”

Thirty Two

Adunni



I had just worn the black dress that the housekeeper had brought me, and to my surprise, it fit perfectly, cleverly concealing my baby bump. I couldn't help but wonder if Ha Neul's mother had chosen this dress specifically to hide my belly. Ha Neul had left for work early that morning at 9, while I went to school and returned home around 4 in the afternoon. Now, as the clock edged past 5, I felt the fatigue weighing down on me, yet I knew I had to accompany my mother-in-law out. She arrived home just as I did, and not once did she inquire about how my first day of school had gone. Instead, she scowled, remarking that I looked graceful in my sweatshirt and jeans.

Recognizing her sarcasm, I chose to ignore her comment and hurried upstairs to get ready. I managed to wear heels, even though I would have preferred something more comfortable, but I didn't want to upset my dear mother-in-law. With wobbly legs, I slowly descended the stairs and joined her in the car.

"Remember, you're the daughter-in-law of Han Soo Min. Don't bring shame to our family name. When people ask uncomfortable questions, don't answer—just nod and smile. They'll take that as a sign to shut up. Beware, the women there can be crazy sometimes. Don't let them intimidate you; though, I must say, that would be quite a sight." She scoffed after speaking, keeping me close as we entered the event center.

The room was filled with older women, all exuding an air of wealth, their fragrances mingling in the air. Yet, none had the commanding presence of Ha Neul's mother; everyone bowed as she entered, casting us into the center of attention. I caught sight of several guests whispering among themselves while locking eyes with me, and all I could do was smirk. *Talk all you want, mistresses; I'm one of you now.*

"Have fun, daughter-in-law. Just don't cause trouble." Her smile felt forced, but I took it as a cue to navigate the evening. I immediately made

my way to the snack table, only to be confronted by four elderly women who bombarded me with questions about my nationality, background, work, and family. I relied on my smile as a shield against their inquisitive nature when they asked about the baby's gender.

I had no clue whether I was having a girl or a boy, so I couldn't have given them a definitive answer, even if I wanted to. As I indulged in the snacks, my moment of happiness was abruptly interrupted by an unwanted guest.

"Han Dunni? Is it really you?" Kim Dam exclaimed in surprise.

"Hello, Kim Dam. It's me, Han Dunni, live and in the flesh. Did you miss me?" I taunted playfully, but she rolled her eyes.

"Missed you? Why would I miss a promiscuous woman like you? You trapped Ha Neul and married into his family just to become a citizen of South Korea, right? How disgusting! You Africans are obsessed with South Korea that you would do anything to come here! Go back to your country, Dunni, you have nothing to do here!"

I couldn't help but giggle, covering my mouth to stifle the sound.

"You sure have a lot to say, Kim Dam. But how can I possibly leave? I'm here with my husband, and our baby will be born here. How could I leave now?"

I noticed sweat forming on her forehead as her eyes fell to my protruding stomach, widening in shock. "You... you're pregnant?"

"Nearly five months gone, darling." I took a bite of my cupcake, savoring the moment.



"IS IT HA NEUL'S?"

I looked at her as if she had lost her mind. "Who else would it be? Ha Neul is my husband." I spoke with a biting tone, but she folded her arms defiantly.

"Why should I believe you? It could be anybody's. Secretary Kim, a worker from the company, or worse... Ji Min Oppa?"

Anger flowed through me, and I raised my hand, ready to slap her, but I held back. "How dare you slander me!"

"Oh please, Unnie. I'm only looking out for Ha Neul. Being married to him doesn't automatically make him the father of your baby. For all I know, *Koreaboos* like you always get pregnant. So, I'm not surprised. Ji Min

Oppa seems to care for you a lot. How fun would it be if we found out he's the father and not Ha Neul?"

"Shut up! Don't forget I can sue you for such slanderous talk! How dare you! You're so shameless! Insulting an unborn child because of your obsession with my husband? You can do better than this, Dam. You can do better!"

"You stole him from me! I've known Ha Neul all my life, and we were supposed to get married! We were meant to be together! But then he left and came back with you, someone who doesn't deserve him! And now, you're going to trap him with a baby. I'll never let you have your way! Trust me! Enjoy your snack, Unnie."

"That witch!" I stomped my feet, squeezing the cookie wrapper in frustration. "You'll never come close to Ha Neul; you never will!"

The event finally came to an end, leaving me utterly drained. I even dozed off in the car. Ha Neul's mother didn't see the need to wake me. Instead, she left me there until Ha Neul himself carried me upstairs and helped me undress.

The rest of the month was hectic. I attended school on certain days while managing Ha Neul's father's art gallery. It was a wedding gift to us, and when I learned about it, I was overjoyed. I couldn't stop thanking him for entrusting me with such a significant responsibility. On the days I wasn't in school, I was at the gallery, catering to VIP customers and participating in important meetings. I had never imagined I would one day be a CEO, but seeing my nameplate on my desk made me fully embrace my new role. "Dunni Han, CEO of Bada Art Gallery—what a perfect name!" Ha Neul said, his eyes sparkling with adoration as he visited my spacious office for the first time. "Your office is really nice, baby. It's even better than mine."

He wrapped his arms around me, planting a gentle kiss on my forehead.

"Oh, come on, it isn't that good," I tried to downplay it, but he was right. The office was indeed beautiful and serene—light wood-toned walls adorned with a few art pieces and calligraphy, a sleek dark wood desk accompanied by a comfortable cushioned black chair, brown sofas surrounding a round glass table, little bonsai trees scattered around, a TV, a fridge, a bathroom, air conditioning, and a lovely black rug under the sofas.

I loved my workspace; it was my sanctuary when I wanted to escape from Ha Neul's mother, who had become increasingly annoying. I was

doing my best to keep my distance from her, but one evening, luck was not on my side. Ha Neul was working late, Ji Min and Father had an important meeting, so it was just me and Ha Neul's mother in the house. The housekeepers were about to make dinner when she called me from the living room, asking me to cook instead. This caught me off guard because I only cooked for Ha Neul when he wanted Nigerian cuisine, but I didn't say anything to her.

She watched as I gathered various ingredients and cooking items from the pantry. In two hours, I prepared a feast—*haemultang*, seaweed rolls, *japchae*, dumplings, *bulgogi*, and white rice, along with side dishes like rolled eggs, green onion kimchi, bean sprouts, and radish. No one helped me, despite knowing I had a long and tiring day.

After setting all the dishes on the island for her inspection, I watched her closely as she tasted each one. Her indifferent expression made it impossible to gauge her thoughts. I could only wait, anxiety building within me.

Everything seemed fine until she tried the *haemultang*. The horror that flashed across her face sent chills down my spine, and a sudden fear gripped me, causing me to pee myself a little. "Are you trying to poison us, Adunni?" she spat, and my fingers trembled uncontrollably.

"No, not at all! I just followed the recipe, Mother!"

"Is this how they cook in Nigeria? Throw this garbage out, now!"

"Why, Mother? Does it taste bad?"

"Are you kidding me right now? Ah, so annoying. Get out now!"

"But, Mother, you didn't tell me what the problem was." I stood my ground, boldly defying her, and her eyes widened in disbelief.

"Problem? This whole stew is the problem! Did you taste it for yourself?"

I shook my head. "Well then, come have a taste!" She grabbed my hand, forcing the spoon into my mouth, and I yelped as I burned my tongue on the scalding, spicy seafood stew.

"Argh! It's hot!" I rushed to the fridge, grabbing a bottle of water to cool my mouth. "You burned me!" I yelled, glaring at her as she put the stew back on the burner, adding a cup of water immediately.

"You can't even make *haemultang* properly. Sure, the other dishes are mediocre, but this?" She gestured to the stew and laughed. "You can't get

this wrong! How many spoons of salt did you even add to this? Please, get lost. You're gonna kill us all if you ever cook again!"



"YOU DIDN'T APOLOGIZE for burning me, Mother." She paused, slowly turning her head to glare at me. My lips burned, and my tongue felt numb, fueling my rising anger.

"Why should I? Did you apologize for nearly poisoning us with all that salt? Leave now. And change your dress while you're at it."

She looked at me with disdain and called the housekeepers to take the dishes to the dining room. Tears pricked my eyes as I stormed out of the kitchen in frustration. I was on the verge of destroying everything in the room when Ha Neul walked in, looking exhausted but still handsome.

"Hi," I said shyly, dropping the pillow I had intended to throw.

"Hey, sweetie! How are you?" He hugged me tightly and showered me with kisses.

"I'm fine, baby. Stop!" I squealed, feeling all my anger dissipate with his touch.

"You smell like food. Did you cook?" he asked, and I nodded slowly.

"Your mother asked me to make dinner, and I did." I left out the part about the yelling and the burn to spare him from the stress of his day.

"Really? That's wonderful! I'm so glad to see you both getting along!"

I wish that were true, Ha Neul. I wish we could get along. But your mother is just like Aphrodite—cruel and heartless. How can I break your heart and make you resent her?

The following weekend, my cravings got the best of me. Ha Neul and I went to a cake shop I'd been thinking about all week.

"Do you like it?" Ha Neul asked after I took a bite of the soft, moist vanilla cake.

"I love it!" I replied happily, and he smiled warmly at me.

"I know living with my parents hasn't been easy, but I hope you're enjoying it so far. If you ever feel uncomfortable, please don't hesitate to tell me, baby." He held my hand, and I nodded in agreement.

When would I finally share the truth about his mother? She would showcase me as her perfect daughter-in-law at events, yet when we were alone, she would say hurtful things. I thought she would change after a few

weeks or even months, but she never did. Her hatred only seemed to grow, and I feared she would eventually harm me or the baby.

To my surprise, Ha Neul and I found Kim Dam and her parents at our house, enjoying tea with Ha Neul's parents. Kim Dam—what a cunning fox.

"Unnie, Oppa!"

Oh God.



I LEFT HA NEUL AND Dam to catch up while I lay on the bed, desperately trying to forget how Dam had linked arms with us, acting as if we were the best of friends. She was such a horrible person, and I knew Ha Neul must feel the same way... or maybe not.

A knock on the door interrupted my thoughts, and Dam walked in, holding a cup of tea and locking eyes with me immediately. "Unnie, you didn't come down for tea," she said, her voice dripping with false concern as she surveyed our bedroom. When her gaze fell on our wedding portrait, her expression soured. She quickly looked away, despite the many photos hanging on the walls in the sitting room.

"I can't have butterfly pea flower; I'm allergic. But thanks for thinking of me," I replied, getting up from the bed to confront her. She looked a bit frightened, but quickly composed herself.

"Well, too bad. Anyway, I came to apologize. For everything—insulting you, hurting you, and saying such awful things about your baby. I should have known my place. Please, forgive me."

I could hardly believe my ears. The mighty Kim Dam was apologizing? But I saw right through her; she had a scheme in mind, and I refused to be a pawn in her game.

"Save your apologies, Dam. I won't listen to you," I said, shoving her aside as I headed for the door. But she grabbed my arm, hot on my heels.

"Unnie, why are you doing this? I already apologized; why can't you forgive me?"

"Why are you yelling? Lower your voice!"

"Unnie, please. Don't hate me. I'm truly sorry for what I did!"

Her loud pleas drew everyone's attention, and I was about to explain what had happened when she suddenly dropped to her knees and began to

cry. There was nothing I could do now; she was sobbing hysterically and earning sympathy from everyone, including Ha Neul.

"Dunni, look at what you made her do. She's kneeling before you, in front of her parents. Don't you feel sorry for her? Tell her to get up!" Ha Neul's mother pressed, and I scoffed as she shot me a smirk. She had orchestrated this entire scene, and they were clearly in cahoots.

Well, if they want to play, I will gladly be their opponent.

"Dam, get up," Ha Neul said, pulling her to her feet. I looked at her tear-streaked face and smiled warmly, hugging her tightly.

"I forgive you, Dam."

"Really? Thank you so much, Unnie!" she exclaimed, squeezing me nearly to death. She grinned, likely thinking she had successfully deceived me, but she was mistaken. She was only fooling herself.

"It's nothing, Dam. Really, it's nothing at all." I assured her parents that everything was fine between us, and even Ha Neul seemed to buy it.

Later that night, as we lay down to sleep, Ha Neul asked if I had genuinely forgiven her. His tone suggested he had also made peace with her, so I played along. "She knelt down; how could I not forgive her? I hold no grudges against her, Ha Neul."

"That's good. I'm glad you no longer hate her. I just hope she doesn't go back on her word and hurt you again. If she does, I'll never forgive her."

Thirty Three

Ha Neul



"Who sent these?" I inquired, my curiosity piqued, as So Hyang placed an elegantly wrapped cake box on my desk. The sight of it was unexpected, for it wasn't my birthday, nor was there any reason to celebrate.

"Ms. Dam from Wol Hotel, sir."

A wave of irritation washed over me, and I rolled my eyes. "Take it back."

"Yes, sir," she said without hesitation, quickly reclaiming the box from my workspace. I returned to my tasks, the afternoon stretching before me like an unwelcome visitor. Minutes passed in silence until my phone lit up with Dam's name flashing across the screen. I immediately switched it to airplane mode. I had no time for her incessant calls, her attempts to weave herself back into my life after her public apology to Dunni last week. She had been relentless, chasing after me like a moth to a flame, yet I remained disinterested in her persistence. *Good luck to her in rekindling that friendship.*

As I focused on the reports sprawled across my desk, Secretary Kim entered, his demeanor formal yet slightly flustered. I caught sight of the telltale smudge of lipstick on his lips, and a snort escaped my lips. He and So Hyang thought they were clever.

I wrapped up my work early for the meeting with the shareholders, and returned home to prepare. Dunni was running late, and I lingered at the door, my family's voices echoing behind me as they left without us.

When she finally arrived ten minutes later, breathless and radiant, I couldn't help but tease her. "Don't run like that when you're six months pregnant, Dunni," I cautioned, my tone laced with genuine concern.

"Oh please, I didn't run," she lied, a mischievous glint in her eyes, and I chuckled, feeling my heart swell.

"Okay, ma'am."

As we arrived at the venue, I kept her close, my arm wrapped protectively around her waist.

The atmosphere was alive with laughter and conversation, and a flurry of guests approached us, offering compliments that painted her cheeks with a rosy hue. I admired her as she effortlessly connected with a circle of women, her laughter brightening the room. Meanwhile, I joined my father to engage with shareholders and dignitaries.

The event flowed smoothly like a gentle stream until a piercing scream shattered the air, sending ripples of panic coursing through the crowd.

“Mrs. Han!” I heard Secretary Kim shout, his voice cutting through the chaos. He soon approached me with urgency, his expression shadowed by alarm. “Mrs. Han is having an allergic reaction.”

My heart dropped, heavy with dread, as I pushed through the throng of bodies to reach her. The sight that met my eyes stole the breath from my lungs—Dunni lay unconscious, her delicate skin marred by angry rashes. “Dunni!” I cried out, my voice raw with desperation. I rushed to her side, lifting her effortlessly into my arms, the world around me fading into a blur.

“Hyung, help me!” I yelled, my heart racing as Secretary Kim rushed to open the car door.

“I’ll drive,” he said, seizing the keys from my trembling hand. I held Dunni tightly against my chest, her fragile form seeming to grow heavier with each passing moment.

“Babe, please, wake up,” I whispered, my voice a fragile plea, as I cradled her face in my hands, searching for the light in her eyes that felt so far away.



“HA NEUL, DO YOU SMELL blood?” Secretary Kim's voice pierced through the haze of panic that enveloped me. Goosebumps raced down my arms as dread settled deep in my chest. I could hardly breathe; the air thickened and spun around me. My gaze dropped to Dunni’s dress, and horror gripped my heart as I saw the crimson stains spreading like a nightmare come to life.

“Hyung, drive faster! She’s bleeding! The baby is not safe!” I screamed, the words tumbling from my lips in a frantic rush. Secretary Kim's eyes widened in response, and he pressed down on the accelerator, the car lurching forward as I cradled Dunni in my arms.

“You’ll be fine, and the baby will be fine too,” I whispered desperately.

When we finally arrived, I leapt from the car and rushed to the reception, Dunni’s fragile form still cradled in my arms.

“I have to stay with her!” I pleaded when the nurses gently but firmly tried to separate us. They assured me everything would be okay, but despair tightened its grip around my heart. I filled in the necessary information, my hands shaking as I scribbled down our details, each stroke of the pen feeling heavier than the last.

Once Dunni was wheeled away, I sank into a chair, the weight of worry pressing down on me like a suffocating blanket. The blood on my hands felt like a mark of my helplessness, and I sensed the concerned glances from passersby. I stumbled into the restroom, my reflection staring back at me with red-rimmed eyes. I held back the tears that threatened to spill, fearing that if I let them flow, something worse would befall her.

My family arrived soon after. Dam and her parents were there too. I waited impatiently for news, the clock ticking agonizingly slowly.

“She’ll be fine,” Ji Min said. I hugged him tightly, drawing strength from his confidence.

So Hyang joined us, her eyes puffy and red from crying. Secretary Kim moved to comfort her, whispering assurances that Dunni would pull through. I took a deep breath, gathering my thoughts. “Don’t inform any of our extended family members in Nigeria yet,” I instructed So Hyang, urgency lacing my words. “We need to know what the problem is first.” She nodded obediently, her expression reflecting my own worries.

Finally, the doctors emerged, and I sprang to my feet, heart racing as I prepared to hear the news that would determine our fates. I listened attentively, and breathed a sigh of relief. Thankfully, she was fine.

“Dunni is allergic to butterfly pea flowers?” So Hyang's voice trembled with disbelief, and I nodded, the gravity of the situation settling heavily on my chest.

“She never eats anything with it. Did they serve it at the party?” I turned to Secretary Kim, who shook his head slowly.

“I don't recall seeing it at the snack tables, and I inspected all the food Mrs. Han ate. I should have been more careful, sir. My sincere apologies.” His voice was laced with regret, and I tapped his shoulder, trying to convey that it was okay. The last thing I wanted was for him to blame himself.

“Butterfly pea flower changes color easily, so she must have had it in a different form,” Ji Min suggested, his voice steady amid the chaos. “We'll check the security cameras from the event and investigate.” I felt a wave of gratitude wash over me for his support, and I thanked him sincerely before he left with my parents.

Dam's parents offered a few words of comfort before departing, but she lingered, her presence a mixture of annoyance and unexpected solace. “Dunni Unnie is really strong. I really like her a lot,” she said, her voice softening.

“I’m glad you do,” I replied, forcing a smile. Dam giggled lightly, a brief flash of innocence breaking through the tension.

“Sorry about what happened, Oppa. Please, send me a text when she wakes up. I’ll come visit.”

“Okay, goodnight,” I waved her off, my heart still heavy as I returned to Dunni’s hospital room. So Hyang and Secretary Kim had gone to gather our belongings, leaving me alone with my thoughts and anxieties.

Dunni finally stirred awake at 9 in the evening, and relief flooded over me as I caught the glint of her eyes opening.

“Baby, how are you feeling?” I asked, gently taking her hand in mine. She managed a weak smile, the shadows of pain still evident on her face.

“My stomach hurts, Ha Neul. Is the baby okay?” Her voice was fragile, tinged with fear, and I nodded emphatically.

“The baby’s fine, my love. You had butterfly pea flower; that’s why you fainted. You were bleeding too, but the doctors say the baby is okay. There’s a heartbeat.”

Tears welled in her eyes, and she began to cry. “I’m sorry for getting you worried, Ha Neul. I made everyone worried too, all because I couldn’t watch what I ate. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t blame yourself, baby. Don’t cry,” I said softly, wrapping my arms around her. “We’ll sue the hotel for damages, and we’ll check the CCTV footage, so we know exactly what happened. Don’t cry, my love. You’re okay.” I kissed her forehead gently, and she blushed even through her tears.

“Okay,” she managed, and I wiped her face with tenderness.

I helped her shower and change into comfortable clothes before she ate dinner, her appetite still hesitant but improving. Soon, exhaustion took hold of her, and she fell asleep, her breaths steady and peaceful.

I laid beside her, watching her sleep, a sense of tranquility washing over me as I caressed her cheeks, whispering, “I love you,” and kissing her forehead. I thanked God for keeping her and the baby safe, for this moment of calm amid the storm.

When we finally returned home, Dunni begrudgingly took a week off from work, following my father’s advice to rest. She even attended online classes, much to my relief. My mother offered to stay with her despite the capable hands of our housekeepers.

A few days later, Ji Min called me to the hotel where the event had taken place. As we reviewed the footage, an unsettling realization crept in; there was nothing suspicious until an attendant spiked one of the drinks. “That glass was given to Dunni,” Ji Min stated, his voice grim.

“Someone intentionally poisoned her.” My fists clenched involuntarily, rage bubbling beneath the surface. No one else knew about her allergy; I felt utterly lost, not knowing where to start my search for answers.

I wanted to protect Dunni from this turmoil, so I refrained from burdening her with questions. She was already struggling to eat, anxiety etched into her every movement, and I couldn’t bear to make it worse.

Instead, I kept a vigilant watch over her meals, ensuring they were safe and nourishing. Days passed in a tense haze until one evening after work, Kim Dam called me. Her voice held a grave weight as she claimed to have solid evidence that Dunni was poisoned by my mother.

My blood ran cold, a wave of anger washing over me as I found myself knocking impatiently at Dam’s door. She opened it almost immediately, and I averted my gaze, heat rising to my cheeks when I realized she was wearing a sheer nightdress. “Oppa, you came.”

“I don't have time for this. What evidence do you have? My mother tried to poison my wife?”

“Come in, it's on my laptop.”

“Is this necessary? Why didn't you send it to my phone? It's almost midnight, I have to go home to my wife.”

“I can't send it. I got this illegally from the hotel. They deleted it because your mother asked them to do so.”

“Okay, play it. Let me have some water, I'm thirsty.”

“Here you go.”

I could barely focus on the footage, my head spinning and vision blurring. My legs felt heavy, as if they were made of lead, and the world

around me faded into a haze. It was as if my soul had drifted outside my body. I sensed Dam leading me to her bed and resting my head on a pillow. Then, I felt my watch being removed, followed by my tie and coat.

"What... what are you doing?" I asked groggily. Dam chuckled softly.

"Oppa, just trust me," she replied, her tone almost teasing. I weakly pushed her away.

"Don't touch me. I only love Dunni, I don't love you!" I yelled, the words spilling out more tiredly than defiantly. Dam huffed.

"Dunni this, Dunni that. Don't you ever get tired? She's not even pretty! She's fat and ugly! Sure, she's influential and all, but that's all. She doesn't have any charm! How did you marry such an unattractive woman?" Her words cut through the fog, but the pain they caused only further dulled my senses.

"Don't you dare insult my wife," I managed to hiccup, attempting to stand from the bed, but my legs buckled beneath me. Dizziness overtook me, and I could feel sleep pulling me back under.

"Dunni... Dunni is the best person on this earth. I love her unconditionally. She cares for me even more than my mother does. So don't you ever insult her! I'll never love anyone but her in this life, and I'll love her even in death!" My voice cracked, but I meant every word.

"Shut up!" Dam yelled, throwing a pillow at me. I chuckled, the absurdity of it all barely registering.

"Dunni, where is Dunni?" I muttered to myself, placing the pillow on the floor as sleep engulfed me once more.



WHEN I FINALLY AWOKE, the first thing I noticed was that I was shirtless and lying beside Dam on her bed. I barely had time to register that before Dunni's heartbroken voice shattered the remnants of my sleep.

"Ha Neul, what are you doing here?"

I shot up, finding myself face to face with Dunni. Her eyes were red and swollen from crying, and her fists were clenched tightly, a look of raw hurt etched across her features. She bit her lip as if trying to restrain herself from unleashing her fury on Dam.

"*Omo*, Unnie! You came! I must have forgotten to lock the door!" Dam said sleepily, her voice almost innocent, but I couldn't focus on her when Dunni's pain was so evident. I glanced away, acutely aware of Dam's

transparent nightdress, but the sight barely registered amid my growing panic.

“Dam, what did you do to me?” I demanded, my voice hoarse and shaky. “I didn’t sleep with you! I didn’t! You drugged me, didn’t you? You told me to come here, then you spiked my drink!”

The tension in the room crackled, and I could see the storm brewing in Dunni’s eyes as she turned to Dam, seeking answers. Dam’s playful demeanor vanished, replaced by a more defensive stance.

“Oppa, it’s not what you think!” Dam protested, but I could see the guilt flicker across her face.

“No! I need to know what happened!” I shouted, desperation rising in my chest. “Did you put something in my drink? Did you plan this?”

Dunni’s expression shifted from confusion to anger, her gaze fierce as she took a step toward Dam. “You better tell him the truth!”

Dam opened her mouth to speak, but the words caught in her throat. I felt a mix of rage and betrayal surging through me, my heart aching for Dunni, who stood there, her expression shifting from heartbreak to fury as the reality of the situation sank in.

“I’m sorry, Dunni,” I said, my voice cracking. “I would never—”

“Just shut up!” Dunni shouted, cutting me off. “Both of you! I can’t believe this!” Tears streamed down her cheeks, and I reached out, wanting to comfort her but unsure if my touch would only make things worse.

“Dunni, please. I love you. I would never do anything to hurt you.”

“Then why are you here? Why are you in her bed?”

“I... I don’t know!” I exclaimed, feeling the walls of reality closing in. “I was drugged, Dunni! I promise you!”

Dam stood up, her posture defensive. “I didn’t mean for any of this to happen! I just wanted to talk, and you were so out of it!”

Dunni’s gaze shifted between us, confusion and pain battling for dominance. I could see the flicker of doubt in her eyes, and it tore at me. “Dunni, please trust me. I love you, and I would never betray you.”

“Oppa, why are you lying? You were the one who said you wanted me,” Dam stated, glancing at Dunni with a smirk. Dunni scoffed.

“You're lying!” I yelled back at her, my frustration boiling over. Dam rolled her eyes, unfazed by my anger.

“You two are pathetic,” Dunni spat before turning on her heel and storming out of the house.

“Dunni! Dunni! Dun...” I called after her, but my voice trailed off as I remembered my shirt. I dashed back to the room to find Dam had tossed it in the washing machine. “Are you crazy?!”

She chuckled, as if this was all some kind of joke. “Oppa, do you really think Dunni Unnie will forgive you? She saw us in bed together, and you didn’t go home last night. There’s no way she wouldn’t divorce you. Don’t chase after her; come to me, Oppa. It was always you and me from the start. No more Dunni.”

“You’re insane. I wish I never met you, Dam!” I shouted, grabbing my coat and bag, ready to leave this nightmare behind.

“How can you not look at me? I’m literally wearing a mesh dress, Ha Neul! You should at least look at me and get tempted!” she yelled, her voice a mix of desperation and indignation.

I scoffed, turning my back to her. “You can walk around naked, but I will never look at you. You are not Dunni, and you never will be. Dunni is the most beautiful woman I have ever laid my eyes on, and she will forever be the hottest woman ever. So do yourself a favor and put on some clothes. I never want to see you in my life again. You’re disgusting!”

With that, I stormed out of her house, wearing only my coat. I could hear her scream in feminine rage behind me, but I didn’t care. I needed to find Dunni immediately.



I HOPPED INTO MY CAR and dialed her number, but it went straight to voicemail. Frustrated, I headed home first to see if she was there, but the front door was locked. “Strange, the housekeepers should be here by now,” I muttered to myself. I decided to go around back, and luckily, the door was open.

As I arrived, I heard voices coming from the living room—Dunni and my mother were in a heated conversation. I hesitated, almost interrupting, but their words caught my attention, baffling me.

“You wouldn’t dare do that, Dunni. I gave birth to Ha Neul! He would never believe you!” my mother insisted, her tone sharp.

“Why wouldn’t he? He’ll believe me! You changed the butterfly pea flower tea to purple! Kim Dam sent the video to me!” Dunni’s voice was filled with anguish and anger.

“Poor Dunni, you don’t get it, do you? Dam and I are in this together. I told her to send that video to you, so you could go to her house and see her with Ha Neul. And by the looks of your puffy face, I’m guessing you saw them?” My mother’s words dripped with malice, and I felt my heart drop.

“Wait, you plotted with Dam? Ha Neul’s your son! How could you do that to him?!” Dunni’s voice trembled with disbelief.

I stepped back, feeling the ground shift beneath me. My mother had orchestrated this? I wanted to burst in and confront them both, but my body felt heavy, weighed down by the reality of what I had just overheard.

“Relax, she didn't rape him, I only told her to spike his drink, that's all. She's not stupid like you; she would never do anything that would cause problems for us.”

“When have I ever caused problems for you, Mother? All I ever did was love your son! What did I do wrong?” Dunni's voice trembled, laced with hurt and confusion.

“Everything! You stole Ha Neul; you became the motherly figure in his life. Ha Neul depends on you more than he depends on his family. He’s always been the kind of person that sticks to one person, and you just had to be that person. You changed him, you taught him your ways, and even got him to fall in love with you. Then you go ahead and plant yourself into his heart. You married Ha Neul and got pregnant. Did he ever ask for it? Did you for once think about Ha Neul's future?” My mother’s words cut through the air like daggers.

“Did YOU think about his future? Did you ever care about his dreams? Do you think Ha Neul wanted to come to Nigeria in the first place? You did everything! You caused us to be together; you brought us together! So why blame me for the loss of your son? Mrs. Han Soo Min, accept defeat! I brought out a person from your son!” Dunni fired back, her voice strong despite the emotion behind it.

“Shut up! I’ve always disliked you, Adunni. You’re nothing but a treacherous woman! I pretended to like you because I had faith that Ha Neul would come out of his fever dream, but he never did. He’s so in love with you, but I’ll never approve! And you’ll never find happiness with my son! Never!”

The venom in my mother’s voice shocked me to my core. I had never imagined she could say such hurtful things to Dunni or that she had colluded with Dam to humiliate me.

Just as I was about to step in and confront my mother, Dunni came tumbling down the stairs. “Arghhh!” she groaned in pain, and my mother laughed, a cruel sound that twisted my stomach.

“Die, die with the baby! So Ha Neul can move on and flourish!”

“Mom!” I yelled, enraged. I couldn’t stand by any longer. I burst out from my hiding spot and rushed to Dunni, lifting her off the floor.

“Ha...Han...Ha Neul...” My mother’s eyes widened in shock, panic setting in as she began to sweat.

“Are you okay, Dunni?” I asked urgently, concern flooding my mind as I scanned her for injuries. She nodded, but her face was pale, and I could see the worry in her eyes.

“I protected the baby,” she whispered.

“Mom, you pushed Dunni off the stairs? And what was all that about Dam? You did all this? How? How could you? I’m your son!” My voice broke, tears filling my eyes as the reality of the situation hit me like a punch to the gut. I let the tears fall freely as my mother knelt before me, desperation in her gaze.

“Ha Neul, I’m sorry, but you have to understand. Dunni was changing you, and you didn’t feel like my son anymore. Please, forget what you heard. I didn’t mean them, and I never did anything with Dam! Please!” She grabbed my leg, but I stepped back, wanting to distance myself from her touch.

“No. We are moving out today. Consider me an outsider from now on. You are no longer my mother.” I turned to Dunni, who was watching the scene unfold with wide eyes.

“Dunni, wait in the car,” I instructed, and she nodded.

As Dunni left to go outside, I felt a crushing weight of betrayal settle in my chest. I turned back to my mother, who was still on the floor, tears streaming down her face. I couldn’t allow myself to feel sympathy for her now—not after everything she had done.

I marched upstairs, my heart pounding, and began packing our things. I moved quickly, gathering whatever I could—everything that was important to us, everything that felt like home, everything except the memories that could not be taken.

As I packed, I felt a mix of anger and sorrow coursing through me. I couldn’t believe this was happening. I had to protect my family—my real family—and that meant leaving behind the chaos my mother had created.

Dunni was my priority now, and I would do whatever it took to ensure she felt safe and loved.

Once I gathered what I could, I hurried down the stairs, ready to leave this nightmare behind and start anew with Dunni by my side.

“Ha Neul! Ha Neul! Don't go! Mom is sorry, please, Ha Neul!”

I didn’t respond, shoving her hand away as she reached for the suitcases. I had already called Secretary Kim to take us to my condominium —the one we should have been living in ever since we came to Korea. But my mother’s pleas had kept me back home, and now I was regretting it deeply. I let her bully my wife, and God knew what kinds of things she had done to Dunni. I would make sure to sit down with Dunni later and have her tell me everything. No one had the right to hurt my wife—not even my own mother.

I informed my father and brother about what had happened. They begged me to hear my mother out, but I stood firm; no one could force me to do what I didn’t want to do. She should have never hurt Dunni in the first place.

Once we arrived at the condominium, I felt a weight lift off my shoulders, even as the tension still lingered. After showering and getting settled, I turned to Dunni, who looked a little apprehensive. “Ha Neul, are you upset with me?” she asked quietly.

I smiled at her. “Of course not, baby. I'm upset with myself for not seeing what my mother was doing to you. Why didn’t you tell me, Dunni? Do you really think you were doing this for my sake? Hurting yourself for me? Tell me something—if I had not seen my mother push you down the stairs, would you have told me?”

“Uhh...I don’t know,” she admitted, her gaze dropping to the floor.

I exhaled deeply, feeling the frustration bubble inside me. “Please, Dunni. Don’t ever accept mistreatment because of me. I'm your husband. You have to tell me everything and not hide things from me. I don’t want you to be in harm’s way because of me. Please, don’t keep it away from me again.” My tone softened, and she nodded, wrapping her arms around me in a warm hug.

“I won’t hide anything from you again, my love,” she promised, and I leaned in to kiss her softly, relieved to have her in my arms, safe and sound.

“Good girl. You're okay now. You're safe.” I smiled, but a playful glint flickered in her eyes as she straddled me.

“Am I a good girl?”

I chuckled gently, enjoying the shift in mood. “Do you want to be a bad girl then?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“Why?”

“Because bad girls get spanked.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Go out and touch some grass,” I teased, laughter bubbling up between us.

She pouted playfully but couldn’t hold back her giggles. I pulled her closer, feeling grateful that we had each other—stronger and more united than ever.

“So...how about that spanking?”

Epilogue



As we prepared dinner, Tessa broke the silence. "So, Dunni, have you forgiven Ha Neul's mother for what she did?" Her words cut through the air, causing me to pause mid-motion, the knife still in my hand above the onions.

“Tessa...” Vanessa warned gently, while So Hyang glanced at me, her eyes filled with concern.

Tessa, realizing the weight of her words, sighed. “I’m sorry, Dunni. I shouldn’t have brought it up,” she murmured, turning her attention to the stew.

I swallowed hard, forcing a smile that felt brittle. “No, it’s okay, Tessa. It’s been two years. I’m over it.”

Vanessa rested her hand on my shoulder, her touch both grounding and tender. “Don’t lie to us, Dunni. We know you're still struggling. You can’t eat without someone else tasting your food first, and you freeze up at the sight of stairs. You don’t have to hide it from us.” Her voice softened even more. “Hyeon Sook told me Kim Dam was sent to Japan after everything that happened. Honestly, good for her! And... I’m sorry, Dunni. I found some of the letters your mother-in-law sent in the storage.”

A lump rose in my throat, and I exhaled deeply, feeling their unspoken compassion enveloping me. “I knew I couldn’t hide anything from you all. It’s hard to forget, but having you here, by my side, makes it easier to heal.” I looked at each of them, gratitude swelling in my chest as I spoke. “You have no idea how much it means to me.” Without hesitation, I pulled them all into a tight embrace.

I felt a small, gentle tug at the edge of my pants.

“*Eomma*, I'm hungry.”

“*Aigoo*, is our So Ra hungry? Mummy will bring your food right now.”

I pinched my toddler's cheek and scooped her up into my arms, her little giggle filling the air. My friends watched with admiration.

“She’s so cute! She looks just like Dunni’s mom,” Tessa remarked, her tone full of affection. I chuckled softly.

“*Which kain*? She’s Ha Neul’s twin,” Vanessa chimed in, rolling her eyes in disbelief.

I laughed, but quickly refocused. “Guys, let's concentrate on the food. The guys are on their way.”

Vanessa fed So Hyang a bite of the green onion kimchi. Almost immediately, So Hyang grimaced, rushing to spit it out in the trash can. “It tastes horrible!”

“Are you sure? It’s not that bad, is it?” we all tasted it ourselves. To our surprise, it tasted just fine. Only So Hyang had a problem with it. I gave her a suspicious look.

“So Hyang, are you pregnant?” I asked, narrowing my eyes playfully. Her cheeks flushed bright red.

“No, I’m not!”

“You are!” Vanessa and Tessa exclaimed in unison, and I couldn’t help but laugh as I fed So Ra her food.

“So, are you going to have a shotgun wedding too?” Tessa teased.

“How can you say that, Tessa?” So Hyang frowned, but Tessa quickly hugged her.

“*Oya, sorry na*. I was just joking. There's nothing wrong with a shotgun wedding! Look at me—I was one month pregnant before my wedding, and did I die? No! Now my little La El is peacefully sleeping in the living room, just like her father.”

“Tessa, I’m telling Chae Min when he comes,” I teased, and she stuck her tongue out at me.

“How are you all mothers and still acting like this? I’m appalled,” Vanessa said with mock seriousness, flipping the eggs. “Anyway, I just got married; there’ll be no babies until two years from now.”

I rolled my eyes. “Vanessa, your wedding was a year ago. Please don't even start.”

Vanessa hissed, and Tessa turned back to So Hyang, “Does he know you’re pregnant?”

So Hyang shook her head, looking uncertain. “I only found out two days ago. I’m not sure if he’ll be happy. He just got promoted, and work’s been crazy. This baby’s timing is... not ideal.”

“*Eya*, I understand, but don’t worry. Hyeon Sook loves So Ra and La El so much, there’s no way he won’t love your child too. This is good news!” I reassured her, wrapping her in a comforting hug.

“Thanks a lot, Unnie. I’ll tell him tonight at dinner,” she smiled, her spirits lifted, as she took So Ra from me.

Just then, from the sitting room, Vanessa called out, “Tessa, your baby *o*!”

Tessa groaned dramatically. “Why can’t we return babies?”

My jaw dropped, and I covered So Ra’s ears. “Tessa!”

“Mummy, Aunty Tessa is scary,” So Ra whispered, hiding her face from Tessa, who was left looking flabbergasted.

“So Ra Kimberly Han! How can you say that to your aunty? Dunni, is this what you’ve been teaching her?” Tessa feigned hurt before heading to soothe her daughter.

“So... are you happy to be a mother, Dunni?” So Hyang asked as we started arranging the dishes.

I smiled warmly, glancing at So Ra as she played nearby. “Of course. So Ra is the apple of her dad’s eye. We love her so much. And her grandfather and uncle? They adore her just as much.”

"That's really good. Has Ha Neul's mother seen her?" So Hyang asked gently. My smile faded as my thoughts drifted back to over two years ago when So Ra was born. No one else knew, but I did.

“She came by the hospital when I gave birth to So Ra,” I admitted quietly. “But she never came into the room. She just watched from a distance and ran away when I saw her. I send her pictures of So Ra from time to time.”

So Hyang patted So Ra’s back gently as she rocked her to sleep. “Does Ha Neul know? Wouldn’t he be mad if he found out?”

I nodded. “He would, but I do it anyway. They fell out because of me, So Hyang. No matter how hard I try, Ha Neul still hates her. But I forgave her that day at the hospital. I saw how sorry she was—her eyes were filled with regret when she saw the baby, and she cried. But she wasn’t brave enough to come inside. I even had to beg Ha Neul not to take her to court. If he had gone through with it, I’d never have forgiven myself." I sighed deeply. "I won’t force Ha Neul to forgive her, but I hope that one day he’ll read her letters and realize how sincere she is.”

“I hope so too,” So Hyang said softly. “So Ra needs her grandmother. Your mom only stayed for six months before leaving.”

I giggled, breaking the tension. "Shola gave birth again, so my mom had to leave, but my parents are visiting in two months. They can't wait to see

their granddaughter again!"



WE CONTINUED CHATTING as we finished setting the table. Soon enough, I heard Ha Neul's car horn from outside. So Ra, now wide awake, raced to the door to greet her father. He scooped her up immediately, and she squealed in delight.

Hyeon Sook and Chae Min followed behind him, bringing dessert.

"Babe," Ha Neul hugged me tightly and kissed my temple.

"How was work?" I asked as he exhaled heavily.

"Terrible," he groaned. "I might have to retire early, or my joints will end up like my father's."

I slapped his arm lightly. "Don't talk about your father like that! Now go and get changed, dinner's ready."

Dinner was lively and filled with laughter. Everyone was there with their partners, except Vanessa, whose husband Cheng was on a business trip in Jeju Island. She decided to stop by in Seoul before heading back the next day. When I asked her about her visit to Jeju Loveland, she gave me a horrified look and told me never to mention that place again. Tessa, who had also visited during her honeymoon, added a few weird comments, but we all quickly brushed off the overly intimate details.

Later in the evening, So Hyang shared her pregnancy news with Hyeon Sook, and we all congratulated them with excitement. The rest of the night passed joyfully, filled with laughter and dessert. After everyone left, Ha Neul and I did the dishes together after putting So Ra to bed.

"*Ọkọ mi*," I called softly, and he looked at me.

"Yes, *Iyawo mi*?" His affectionate gaze made my heart race, knowing what I was about to bring up.

"Ha Neul, have you forgiven your mother?" The question lingered in the air, and his smile disappeared.

"Dunni, we've talked about this. I told you not to bring it up again!" he said, his tone shifting.

"But baby..." I tried to continue, but he cut me off sharply.

"Don't talk about her, Adunni. Have you forgotten what she did? She cursed you every day for being with me! She conspired with Kim Dam to tear us apart. And So Ra? She poisoned you, Dunni! She pushed you down the stairs and tried to kill you and our baby—twice!"

His voice was trembling with hurt and anger. “She’s not my mother. I don't care about her anymore.”

My heart sank. “Okay, *Ife mi*. I’m sorry for bringing it up,” I whispered. He walked out of the kitchen, visibly upset, and that night, he didn’t cuddle with me. His usual warmth was absent, and I missed it terribly. But I knew I had overstepped. I had promised never to bring her up again, and now he needed space.

The next morning, after dropping So Ra off with Ji Min and Mi Na, his wife, Ha Neul and I went out for a coffee date. It was refreshing, a chance to reconnect after the previous night’s tension. We talked about our week, but as the conversation flowed, I grew anxious, knowing what I had planned.

“*Yeobo*, are you okay?” Ha Neul noticed my worry and reached for my hand.

“I’m fine,” I forced a smile. “You just look really handsome today, baby.”

“**Noona**, don’t make me blush,” he teased, his cheeks turning pink.

But soon after, I couldn’t hold it in anymore. “I’m sorry, Ha Neul,” I said quietly, my voice trembling.

He looked confused, but then I nodded toward the woman sitting behind him. When he turned, he froze, his face tightening in disbelief.

“Adunni, what is the meaning of this?” he asked, his voice rising in anger.

“I’m sorry, Ha Neul. But please, just hear her out,” I pleaded, my heart pounding.

His body shook with fury. “I don’t know this woman,” he said coldly, grabbing my hand and my bag in the other. “We’re leaving.”

I heard his mother calling out to me, but I couldn’t turn back. The pain in Ha Neul’s eyes was too much to bear.

“Mother!”

“Don't call her that,” Ha Neul warned me, his voice tight with fury. I swallowed my words, choosing silence as he opened the car door and gestured for me to get in.

But I hesitated, hoping for one more chance. “Baby, please,” I whispered, my voice shaky with emotion.

His response was immediate, laced with frustration. “Adunni, you better get in this car right now, or I'll force you to.” His eyes locked onto mine,

blazing with anger. His body trembled, and I knew I had pushed him too far. With a sigh of defeat, I got into the car, nervously picking at my nails.

As Ha Neul turned on the engine and sped away, I silently prayed that he might stop, that he might wait for her. But my hopes shattered as we continued driving, only for him to slam the brakes suddenly when we saw his mother standing directly in front of the car. Ha Neul shouted in alarm, clutching his chest in shock. The realization of how close he'd come to hitting her drained the color from his face.

“Oh my God. What is she thinking?” he muttered, staring at her in disbelief.

I watched, my heart pounding, as his mother slowly dropped to her knees, bowing deeply with tears streaming down her face. The sight of her broke Ha Neul's defenses. His eyes welled up with tears, and after a moment of hesitation, he stepped out of the car. I watched them from afar, seeing the tension between them dissolve as he gently helped her to her feet. They spoke in hushed tones, and eventually, they embraced, both of them sobbing.

I stepped out of the car, approaching cautiously. When Ha Neul's mother saw me, she smiled, though it was a smile heavy with sorrow. She reached for my hand and held it tightly.

“Dunni, I’m so sorry. I will never forgive myself for what I did to you. Please, forgive me. I was so foolish, so cruel. I don’t expect you to forgive me, but I hope one day, you can.”

I felt tears prick my eyes. “Mother, I forgave you a long time ago. Let’s move forward and be happy from now on.”

Her hug was warm, and we both shed tears, with Ha Neul looking on, smiling through his own. It was as though a heavy burden had finally lifted from all our hearts.

We had lunch together afterward at the family house, and Ji Min brought So Ra to meet her grandmother. Though his mother seemed nervous at first, So Ra’s bright smile eased the tension. Soon, she embraced her grandchild, and in that moment, it felt as though everything had come full circle. The rift in our family had healed, and Ha Neul finally had his mother back.

Later that night, Ha Neul massaged my legs as we relaxed after the long day. “Baby, thank you for reuniting us. I’ll forever be grateful to you,” he said, his voice filled with gratitude.

I smiled, touched by his words. “I’m just happy you two are together again. And you don’t have to thank me. I did what was right.” Then he teased with a mischievous grin.

"Noona, do you want to eat ramen?"

“Ha Neul! So Ra is right beside me!” I squealed, flustered, as he quickly took her to her room. Within seconds, he was back, his grin widening.

“Should we try for baby number two?”

“Goodnight, Mr. Han.”

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Book two comes next year!