





Prologue

"Put the gun down!" Taeyeon screamed. "Put it down, Tiffany!"

Tiffany gripped the gun tighter, her finger trembling on the trigger. "I've waited a long time for this," she hissed. "Did you know that? Now you know how it feels like to be controlled, at the mercy of someone else!"

"Tiffany!"

"Don't you think it was about time the slave played god for once?"

"Tiffany! Stop! Please put the gun down!"

"Answer me!" Tiffany's lips curved into a sick smile. She laughed maniacally. "You don't want to play? But I thought we had something special. You said it yourself."

Taeyeon writhed. The gash on her shoulder had bled profusely in a matter of minutes. It seeped through her clothing; the stench making it harder to breathe. She counted numbers in her head. She was losing consciousness and sight of Tiffany fast.

"No last words?" Tiffany cocked her head. "Alright then. It's game over for you." She aimed.

"Tiffany!"

"Goodbye. And thanks for nothing." Tiffany closed her eyes and pulled the trigger. She drew back the slide and released it again, pointing to her head this time.

Taeyeon looked on in horror. "Tiffany!"

Chapter 1

Kim Taeyeon quickly shuffled the papers on her desk, a neat pile born twenty minutes earlier than expected, and peeked outside her cubicle hoping no one would notice her getting ready to leave. The clock had only ticked quarter past four, but already she was in a pensive hurry. It was a Wednesday; too untimely in the week to have put off the transcripts her boss needed first thing tomorrow morning.

“Leaving again?” Sunny, who lived in the same apartment building as Taeyeon, asked when she saw the latter stand.

“Yeah. Why?”

“Nothing.”

“What? Stop looking at me like I should have my salary deducted for every minute I pass up.”

“What about those transcripts?”

“Typed and done. It’s already filed.”

Sunny clicked her tongue and turned back to her work. “Okay then.”

“Go check if you don’t believe me.” Taeyeon picked up her briefcase. She headed towards the elevator before Sunny could catch on there wasn’t a finished report—only half of it.

Normally, or almost a month ago, Taeyeon wouldn’t have minded Sunny or anyone else’s questions like this. She liked them enough to stay, even with her intense dislike for her job. Desk work. It bored the mind but paid the bills. Living alone—ever since her brother had died in a car accident a year ago—hadn’t made her scrupulous with her expenses though, in fact it was quite the opposite. Her brother had left her a considerable amount of money when he died. Death insurance, Taeyeon’s grandparents had explained then. She shrugged it off, never finding enough reason to touch it. Dead money was dead money. Monetary compensation for loss was pretty amoral in Taeyeon’s book, but now she had to admit, it did help with the bills, and it did keep the grief at bay.

Taeyeon didn’t have to fake a smile at anyone. Everyone in the office knew by rumour how much she hated the paperwork, and Kangin, the new boss since the last had been transferred, was too lenient to have cared anyway what she did or didn’t get done.

But Sunny had been asking too much lately—something that annoyed her more than it bothered. To shut away the curiosity and interrogations, lying would just have to do. What she needed most was peace.

“Bye Bill! See you tomorrow!” Taeyeon waved at the balding receptionist who punched their time cards down in the lobby. It helped that she never forgot his birthday. He’d been letting her slide and leave early without saying as much as a word. He smiled as she passed him.

Taeyeon pushed the double doors and stepped outside. The city hustled from all directions like waves; an endless tide of people that moved to and fro. She hailed a cab across the street, gave directions and tried to relax in the moment of solitude she was granted. She couldn’t.

Chapter 2

The smell of cigarette and alcohol mixing, coursing intensely through the night air, would have been enough to scare Taeyeon away for good. Burnt tobacco had always made her nauseous since she was twelve and her memory of the last time she had too much to drink wasn’t pleasant. She had gone home on bare feet. Her shoes, she supposed, she had left in the men’s bathroom when one of the bartenders in the club she frequented had to wash the vomit off her face. She had been miserable then.

Taeyeon stood in front of an old building addressed 22 Main located in one of the city’s upper districts. Red Curtain, this part of town was called, for reasons that were and weren’t obvious.

Red Curtain is notorious for housing the wealthy since the early 70’s; both born and made. Its streets are lined marvellously on a hill that whenever the sun set, a part of the neighbourhood is washed in

ethereal red (or orange) from the sun's dying rays. It only lasts a few minutes, but for the few that it does, the white houses at the peak look as if they're covered in alien blood.

Blood. This part of town spills much of it in the darkness. In back alleys and dead ends, drugs are sold and bought with whispers and winks. The last, and probably the biggest, bust the police ever had the chance of boasting was back in the 90's, when a local drug lord only known as Em had given the tip and a warehouse full of cocaine and heroin was seized. The media had gone on a scoop-frenzy. All has been quiet since then, or rather more of a compromised silence as the old folks liked to call it. It's speculated that the police launder money with the drug lords. Rarely did a deal surface in the daylight, and in the shadows, there was also another commodity that moved, but only few had access to—flesh.

For the most part, Taeyeon wouldn't have given Red Curtain much thought. She didn't belong here, among the city's spoils; she knew that. The well-manicured lawns, private parks and celebrity neighbours were enough to deem it elite and unreachable. That's what she saw too under the sun; the fancy cars and wide open porches that gleamed of power and wealth. At night however, it was a completely different matter.

Taeyeon glanced at her watch as she stood outside the glass doors. Overhead, the sun started to set. She scanned her reflection and hoped she was early, because in this world—in Red Curtain—every minute counted for something.

Chapter 3

The midnight sky had been pouring endless rain when Taeyeon decided to work overtime at the office. It was a month ago and the first night she'd heard of Red Curtain—even if it was occasionally mentioned in the newspapers. She had planned on taking a longer weekend, but there was no way in hell she was taking her work home with her. Kangin had appreciated her persistence when he saw her typing furiously away, feeding raw data into a database that was by no means interesting.

"Taeyeon, lock up when you finish alright?"

"Yes," Taeyeon answered without looking. She had badly wanted to finish the blasted report already.

Kangin left and Taeyeon gave up; either it had been too late already or she really needed a break. Taeyeon remembered it as both. She resolved to call it a night.

Outside, the incessant rain made Taeyeon's mood grimmer. She always walked home—a fair fifteen minute trip from her office—but without the patience and umbrella, she'd rather spend instead. The streets never died of life despite the late hour.

"Taxi!" She managed to wave one down and hurriedly stepped in. She was too busy trying to stay dry that she hadn't noticed another person step in from the other side.

"Hey! I—"

"Sorry, but I'm in an immediate hurry right now. I'll pay for your ride just let me go first," the woman said. She was soaked to her top. "22 Main, Red Curtain, and please hurry."

"Wait just a—"

Taeyeon stopped protesting when she got a clear view of the woman on her left. She would have been breathtaking, if not for the busted lip and ugly bruise on her cheek.

"Uh, are you—"

The woman noticed Taeyeon staring and let her long wavy black hair cover her face. "It's nothing."

"We should get you to a hospital."

"I appreciate the concern, but I've already said it's nothing."

Taeyeon kept silent as soon as the woman shot her innocent concern down. She looked outside her window, flushed that she had embarrassed herself. "Here," she managed to say. "It's clean. Promise."

The woman hesitated before taking Taeyeon's handkerchief. "Thanks."

A few minutes and the woman muttered “Shit.” under her breath. Only half the streets were filled, but rain made it harder to travel.

“Why are you in such a hurry?”

“What?”

“I said, why are you in such a hurry?” Taeyeon repeated. She had her gaze turned away from the woman, careful not to step on her privacy, even if she already had.

“I’m late.”

“I see.”

The woman rummaged through her bag, and wiped off the blood that had dried on the corner of her mouth. She winced as she did. Taeyeon noticed the driver look up in the rear-view mirror to steal glances at the woman. She didn’t like what she saw.

“We should leave,” Taeyeon moved to whisper in the woman’s right ear. Her hair reeked of tobacco and alcohol. “There’s no way you’re leaving me in this cab when the driver looks like he’s about to A, pass out or B, rape me—us. Whichever.”

The woman snorted. “Are you being serious?” she whispered back. Taeyeon held her breath when the woman leaned in. Her nose had felt a little stuffy the first time she drew close. Admittedly, she did want a better look. It was dark, but she swore the woman was tearing up.

“No, but I really do think he’s thinking of something malicious. I don’t know why.”

The woman paused for a moment before pulling out a wad of cash from her bag. She counted several bills. “Stop right there please.”

The driver smirked before asking, “So, how much?” He didn’t stop the car.

“We’re getting off,” the woman responded in a menacing tone. “Now!”

“Little bi—” the woman heard the driver grumble when she grabbed Taeyeon’s hand. Her hand was cold. The driver pulled up on the side and the woman shoved the payment onto his palm, but he held on to her. “Pretty.” He chuckled before letting go. The woman yanked her hand away and walked off, Taeyeon in tow. They turned at the corner and the woman stopped in her tracks. She started crying.

Chapter 4

“Wait! What just happened there?” Taeyeon called out. The woman had retracted when Taeyeon tried to soothe her. She searched for a cab, but few vehicles passed by. It had stopped raining.

“It’s none of your business,” she answered.

“No, no, it isn’t,” Taeyeon agreed. She kept up with the woman’s frantic pace. “But you’re obviously hurt.”

“I said I was alright, didn’t I?”

“Then why did you just suddenly burst out crying a minute ago?”

“Why are you asking me so many questions?” the woman looked at Taeyeon indignantly.

“Are you really this difficult?”

“What?”

“I said, are you really this difficult?”

“I heard you the first time. Look, it’s really none—”

“Yes, I know it’s none of my business. But I think I, at least, have the right to know for what reason cab drivers would want to rape me the next time I board one in this late hour.”

The woman glanced back at Taeyeon before huffing. “They won’t. It’s my fault.”

“What?”

“Didn’t you hear where I needed to go?”

“No.”

The woman trudged on, impatient for a cab. Drops of rain trickled again from the sky. "Dammit." She let her bag fall down on the pavement.

"You held my hand."

"Yeah. Sorry about that."

"You were scared."

"What?"

"Strangers don't hold hands. Why did you hold my hand?"

The woman looked at Taeyeon incredulously. "Why are you still talking to me?"

"There's not a cab in sight and it's one in the morning. What else am I supposed to do? Walk home?"

The woman sighed. "I'm sorry. I'm normally not this irritable but—"

"Look, I'll call my friend to pick us up. She owes me a favour anyway. Let us drop you off and we'll call it even."

The woman seemed to weigh Taeyeon's offer carefully. She didn't say anything when Taeyeon took out her phone to make the call. Taeyeon took her silence as a yes.

"Hello? Hyo? Yeah, sorry for waking you up, but I kinda need your help." Taeyeon held the woman's stare. "Can you pick me up? Long story."

The woman paced a little, but she stayed in sight. Taeyeon clicked her phone shut. Turning her attention back to the woman, "She'll be here soon," she said.

"Thanks."

"I'm Taeyeon by the way."

"Tiffany." The woman smiled for the first time.

"Now Tiffany, would you tell me exactly what just happened there?"

"It's probably best I don't."

"Why not?"

"It's too complicated."

"Try me."

"And you think I'm the difficult one between the two of us—" Tiffany narrowed her eyes.

Taeyeon laughed. "Actually no, I'm not very difficult once you get to know me."

"Why are you being nice to me, Taeyeon?"

Taeyeon hadn't expected the question. "To be honest, I don't know. Pity perhaps?" she blurted out.

Honesty must have hit a chord in her because Tiffany started laughing. "Pity huh? That's funny. I pity myself too."

"Wait, that's not what I meant—"

"Oh? Then what did you mean?" Tiffany clarified.

"Let me guess—abusive boyfriend slash fiancé slash husband?"

Tiffany smiled. "Life's filled with guesses. It's funny that way."

"Did I get it right?" Taeyeon looked at Tiffany earnestly. Tiffany's response had seemed a little cynical, but Taeyeon could tell there was more to it.

"Does it matter if you did or didn't?"

"No, probably not. But your lip does look pretty bad." Taeyeon slowly reached out to touch Tiffany's chin. "My handkerchief?"

Tiffany pulled it out from her pocket and handed it over. Her lower lip was swelling. Taeyeon used the corners to wipe around the wound's edge. Tiffany flinched.

"Sorry. You sure you don't want to go to the hospital?" Taeyeon's eyes lingered on Tiffany's bruise. It looked about the size of a small fist with a ring on it because of the faint scratch on her cheekbone.

"How many times have I said I was alright?" Tiffany said a little annoyed this time.

"Plenty."

"I'm okay. Really." Tiffany smiled again, but her eyes were dead.

"You still haven't told me what's going on. Or whether or not I was right."

"Didn't you just say it probably didn't matter?"

"Yes but—"

Tiffany raised her hand when she saw a cab suddenly coming into view. Taeyeon turned her head to see if it was Hyoyeon, her old friend back in college. Tiffany motioned for the driver to wait. "Hand me your phone," she said. "On Saturday. 9pm. Go to this address if you really want to know."

Taeyeon saved the information immediately. "Is this your address?" she asked as Tiffany got in.

Tiffany didn't answer, instead she said, "Bye Taeyeon! Thanks!" and sped off.

Chapter 5

Micky Sans, birth name Michael, was a tall, burly, middle-aged man who looked every bit the menace he was with a temper that matched. Beneath the high cheekbones and chiselled jaw—easily a handsome face—was a scoundrel who toppled and manipulated many. Ruthlessly. Few ever got into his way, and for good reason; he never thought twice to ice someone he didn't like, even if he had to do it himself. His riches—mostly spread abroad—were that from smuggling cocaine in and out of Red Curtain. He's been at it for nearly a decade. A one man syndicate.

Micky's lips were thin. His pawns had often teased him behind his back that it was because he never smiled. He rarely smiled. But when he does, his eyes turn into black beady orbs; the kind that haunts us in nightmares. Micky had learned of this little mockery and in less than twenty-four hours, those men were never heard from again. "Fun and funny aren't one and the same, yes?" he had said to his men through a wry smile. They had cowered in alarm.

"Mick, need another case?" Adrian, the new recruit, asked. He was on his way out to run some errands. Food was running low, but it was on alcohol they moved on, as normal as the intake of water.

"Why, yes." Micky brought down the book he held. "Yes, save me the effort, will you?" The dim light of the room casted a grainy look on his features, his raspy metallic voice cutting through the air.

"Yeah. No problem."

Adrian descended from the penthouse and walked to his motorcycle outside. He was clipping his helmet on when a short woman in a pencil office skirt approached him. Definitely not from this part of town—as urban as it was.

"Excuse me, can you help me find 22 Main? I think I'm lost," she asked. It was Taeyeon. She had decided to visit Tiffany to find out how she was doing, and more. But it was only Friday, two days since that rainy night.

"Eh?" Adrian asked, a quizzical look on his face. "It's this building right here." He pointed to his left.

"Oh." Taeyeon nodded. "Thank you!"

He eyed her from head to toe before saying, "No problem, miss."

"Do you happen to live here? In this apartment building?"

"Eh?" Adrian spared a glance as he climbed on his bike. "Yeah, why?"

"Would you happen to know a certain Tiffany? I don't know. On the off chance she's your neighbour—roommate. Whichever."

"Tiffany?"

"About this tall." Taeyeon estimated with her hand. "With long black wavy hair."

"Nope." Adrian shook his head, "Sorry, miss. Kinda new here myself."

"Oh." Taeyeon bowed her head. "Well, thanks again."

"Yeah," he answered and went on his way.

Taeyeon looked up at the building's height, and wondered what she was doing here in the first place. Tiffany hadn't even given her complete address; just the street and building. If Tiffany meant to mislead

her, she honestly wouldn't be surprised. After all, Tiffany had acted like a strange difficult fellow. But probably not, she concluded. She had recognized a bit of sincerity in Tiffany's farewell.

Looking up, Taeyeon dreaded the idea of knocking on each door on every floor level. It seemed desperate, no, it *was* desperate. But she was genuinely concerned for the stranger, especially since she hadn't explained a single thing that evening—the injuries and what the driver had said. Abusive boyfriend or not, Taeyeon felt like stepping in a foot to help, even if it was just one. Anything to help.

A few minutes of thought and Taeyeon resolved to come back tomorrow. 9pm. Just what Tiffany had instructed. Taeyeon chided herself. At least she would look a little less eager, like it would make a difference since she had brushed Tiffany's lip with her handkerchief. It had been an intimate second shared between strangers. Strangers kept their guard high, but Tiffany had let her.

"Ow! Hey—" Taeyeon groaned when someone from behind had grabbed her on the arm and started to haul her into the building. From the corner of her eye, she recognized those tresses. It was Tiffany.

"Sshhh. Just walk with me," Tiffany said through clenched teeth. She smiled nonchalantly at the people sitting in the lobby.

"Where—"

"Sshhh." They hopped on the elevator and Tiffany pressed for the fifteenth floor. She turned to Taeyeon and said, "I'll explain everything later. Just walk with me and don't say a word."

Perplexed, Taeyeon followed without saying anything. She noticed that the bruise on Tiffany's cheek that night had disappeared. Make-up? And the busted lip had stopped swelling, though still apparent.

Tiffany ran a manicured hand through her hair and straightened the creases on her skirt. She was wearing high heels and a crisp white blouse. "Remember. Hush."

"Okay, but—"

The elevator buttons had lit to the thirteenth floor when Taeyeon suddenly found herself slammed against the metal walls. Tiffany had pushed her, wound a hand around her neck, and placed her lips on Taeyeon's cheek. She kissed her on the mouth—crazed—when the elevator doors opened and Taeyeon found herself caught up in a fantasy.

Chapter 6

It had taken Taeyeon a good two minutes before she could breathe again and recover from Tiffany's attack. And when she had, she was already at the end of the narrow hallway. Around her the white paint on the walls were peeling and overhead, the exhaust pipes looked of rust and grime. The faint smell of tobacco clung to her skin easily like sweat.

Taeyeon's feet had walked without hesitation and she stood inside a handsome suite housed with white carpeting and steel furnishings. A small water fountain dripped water endlessly on a low clear coffee table before her. Outside, the lights in the hallway seemed to have gleamed red for a second. Taeyeon blinked rapidly, studying the room and her surroundings. She had been caught off guard again to remember correctly whether or not she had imagined the lighting outside.

Taeyeon was pushed to the couch when she heard laughter from behind the door.

"Yes, I promise. I promise." Taeyeon caught a glimpse of Tiffany's smile. She didn't remember seeing anyone else outside the hallway. Tiffany squeezed herself through the small opening of the door and immediately closed it without losing face. When the door slammed shut, her smile disappeared. She walked over to Taeyeon, ready and confident in her stride.

"What do you think you're doing here?" Tiffany whispered in Taeyeon's ear as she rested her hands on Taeyeon's shoulders.

"I came to—"

"Sshhh. Be quiet." Tiffany breathed down Taeyeon's neck and pulled up her skirt. She lightly raked her fingernails inside while she nibbled on her earlobe. She stopped to steal a glance at Taeyeon from the

corner of her eye. Taeyeon found her hands buried in Tiffany's hair, her fingers trembling from the heat seeping out of her body.

Without word and protest, Tiffany pushed Taeyeon further down on the couch until she straddled over her.

"What—"

"I said be quiet." Tiffany kicked her heels off and unbuttoned the first buttons on her blouse. She looked straight at Taeyeon's mouth and slurred, "Let's go." She helped her stand and led her further inside the apartment.

"T-Tiffany—" Taeyeon's voice cracked in the darkness. Tiffany had switched off the lights and all Taeyeon had to guide her was Tiffany's cold smooth hand. She jumped a little when she felt the end of the carpeting with her feet; the wooden floorboard just as cold.

"Yes?" Taeyeon's ears strained to trace the sound and face it came from.

Like an innocent, Taeyeon was drawn deeper into the tempting darkness until they turned the corner and Tiffany opened the door to a small modest room with only a single bed and a wall clock above it. She pushed Taeyeon inside.

"What are you—" Taeyeon's jaw dropped when she turned to look at Tiffany who already had her skirt down at her feet.

Tiffany stepped out of her clothing and held her stare. She didn't blink for the time she walked towards Taeyeon again, not forgetting to lock the door behind her.

Chapter 7

Taeyeon felt a draft of dry air course by her neck when Tiffany closed the door. Her cheeks flamed at the sight and embarrassment of seeing Tiffany's bare flesh. Like she had caught fire on herself, she stumbled backwards to contain the heat that burned inside her. If Tiffany touched her again, Taeyeon was sure that the thin garments she wore that evening would thin out and disappear. Tiffany's eyes were dark and deep, the shadows on her face giving nothing away.

"Are you scared?" Tiffany said mechanically when she crouched down at Taeyeon's feet. She held up the bed sheets as she pulled an old briefcase from under the bed. "Taeyeon?"

"What are we doing?" Taeyeon blurted with eyes closed. She looked like a child with her hands properly placed on her lap.

Tiffany looked up and smirked. "Look at you."

"I don't want to look." Delicate laughter registered in Taeyeon's ears. She opened her eyes slowly to see who or what Tiffany was laughing at.

"Look at you," Tiffany said again once Taeyeon had her eyes fully opened. Taeyeon's brow furrowed with bemusement—Tiffany was dressed in an oversized shirt and old faded jeans. The fluorescent lights above them made everything look normal.

Taeyeon cleared her throat when she realized she looked a little silly, but the situation was far from comical after the momentary flash of flesh and pleasure earlier.

Tiffany's smirk grew wider as she sat down on the bed. She reached behind to grab for a flat pillow and threw it at Taeyeon overhead.

"Hey! What was that for?" Taeyeon whined as she picked up the pillow that had landed on her feet. Tiffany continued to grin—innocence washed all over her expression. Taeyeon had honestly forgotten why she had come here in the first place if not for noticing Tiffany's bruised knuckles. Hardwired behaviour kicked in and she instantly asked, "What happened?"

"Huh?"

Taeyeon wasn't sure how she meant her question to be answered. Tiffany had raised too many in such a short span of time. "Your knuckles."

"Oh." Tiffany rubbed them with her other hand. "It's nothing."

"What happened?" Taeyeon paused, unable to voice and acknowledge what Tiffany had done. Tiffany was acting like nothing happened. "Back in the elevator? And back there at your couch?" She felt the heat crawl all the way up to her face again. Her thighs itched at where Tiffany had raked her fingernails.

"Are you scared?"

Taeyeon stopped herself from answering too fast. She couldn't say for sure what emotions tingled inside. "Yes."

"Fear kills a lot of opportunities. Wouldn't you agree?"

"No." Taeyeon clicked her tongue. She would have said yes, but Tiffany had destroyed too easily her physical boundaries. If fear killed a lot of opportunities, it certainly kept a lot of things in order on the other hand. "I can't say I completely agree with that."

"Did you enjoy it?"

"What?" Taeyeon asked a little too loudly, nervous for the conversation to veer onto the direction she suddenly wanted to avoid. Her heart was still burning in carnality.

"My kisses."

"Who are you?" Taeyeon dodged for cover from the honesty. Tiffany had been answering her questions in all the wrong ways.

"You'll know if I show you."

"Show me what?"

"What you shouldn't be scared of." Tiffany lifted her feet off the floor and crossed them on the bed. She grabbed Taeyeon's face with both hands, her icy skin sending currents down Taeyeon's back. The ticking of the clock steadied in Taeyeon's hearing as she stared back at her reflection in Tiffany's eyes. She felt frozen in place as Tiffany inched closer by the second.

"Taeyeon," Tiffany breathed. "This isn't going to hurt. I promise." She left a small peck on her cheek.

The hypnotic ticking of time continued, but Taeyeon lost sound of it as soon as she felt Tiffany's soft lips on her skin. Without thought, she brought up her hands to hold Tiffany's wrists. She gasped when Tiffany kissed her chin and just lightly licked her bottom lip before she drew back. Tiffany studied what she had done—Taeyeon's eyes shut closed, lips slightly parted.

"Now, that wasn't so bad. Was it?" Tiffany made no effort to hide the malice in her voice. She stood to turn off the glare of the fluorescent lights for the mellow of the city lights outside. By the time Taeyeon had adjusted her vision to the darkness, those lips that shook and trembled her were once more in touch, and Tiffany played angel again in the darkness.

Chapter 8

Water continued to leak from the faucet like a stifled drum, echoing in the stillness of Taeyeon's apartment the next morning. A small basin was placed under its pipe, catching water where it fell. Taeyeon got out of bed to empty the basin left full from the previous night. As tired and frazzled she was, she didn't want to be bothered with the possibility of mopping her kitchen floor dry in a few hours time. She intended on getting a good twelve hour sleep undisturbed.

The doorbell rang then and she quickly placed the basin back in its place. Another ring and she opened the door to find her friend, Hyoyeon, standing outside with a plastic bag of groceries. It was only ten in the morning.

"You look a little hung over." Hyoyeon eyed her and stepped inside the apartment.

"Oh shoot!" Taeyeon remembered. "Is today—"

"Yeah. You forgot, didn't you?"

"I'm so sorry. I completely lost track of time."

"No kidding." Hyoyeon walked around the kitchen, familiar of its space and contents. She took out a can of soda from the refrigerator and sat on a high stool behind the counter. "Don't tell me you made plans today. I really need that vacation, Taeyeon!"

"I know, I know."

"You promised you'd help me book that flight," Hyoyeon chided. "I even brought you some food as payment!"

"I know, I know," Taeyeon answered. She slunk back on the couch, feeling lightheaded. "I just forgot. That's all."

Hyoyeon scrunched the tin can with her hands after drinking the last drops. She watched Taeyeon from her seat, "Are you okay? You look out of it."

"I'm—" Taeyeon paused. The sensations Tiffany left her last night were still open and raw. "Perfectly okay."

"You sure?"

"Yup."

"Okay then." Hyoyeon opened the cupboards behind, "I bought and brought us noodles."

Taeyeon walked towards her kitchen and sat where Hyoyeon had. "Do you remember that night you picked me up?"

"What about it?"

"And that stranger I said I met?"

"Yeah."

"I went to the address she gave me."

"And? Wait, didn't you say she was annoying?"

"I spent the night at her place."

"What?" Hyoyeon clicked the tongs she held with one hand. "You slept with her?"

"Yeah." Taeyeon drummed her fingers on the counter. "Wait! No! Yes and no."

"Huh?"

"We slept together but not really together *together*."

"And?"

Taeyeon let the mental images inside her head run free. "It was the strangest thing."

"What do you mean?"

"We spent the entire night in each other's arms. We'd kiss and stop. Kiss and stop."

"Okay." Hyoyeon turned her back on Taeyeon. "I didn't know you were so easy."

Taeyeon remained silent upon hearing Hyoyeon's accusation. Though innocent, it did her worse to think of the judgment that laced her friend's voice. "She is—"

"Huh?"

"She's a prostitute."

The tea kettle let out its whine and minutes of silence passed between them before Hyoyeon could respond, "I see."

"We slept together but not together *together*. Yes and no."

"So, is this some kind of one night stand thing?"

"I don't know," Taeyeon said. "We spent the entire night awake. She'd hum and I'd listen. She'd turn to me and I'd hold her. We'd talk about small matters and we'd laugh. She'd kiss me and pull away. She'd—"

"Must you give me the intimate details?" Hyoyeon snapped. "It's very disturbing."

Taeyeon laughed. "My bad. But really, it was very strange."

"Why?"

"Because she's a stranger, but it didn't feel like it."

"You like her?"

Taeyeon fell silent again, without an answer. "I want to see her again."

"Are you high or something? She's a prostitute, Taeyeon. Didn't she say that herself?"

"But the thing is she's not just *that*."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, for one she lives in an expensive apartment. Twice the size of mine. And she has good taste in furniture. She seems educated."

"Okay, then what *did* make you think she was one?"

Taeyeon remembered the sad smile that accompanied Tiffany's words. "She said if I came back for fun, I should bring money. But if I came back for company, I didn't have to."

"I see." Hyoyeon and Taeyeon stared at each other.

Lunch was made and eaten without another word. Before Hyoyeon let herself out the apartment, she finally met her curiosity when she asked, "Are you going back to see her?"

Taeyeon didn't have to think twice before she answered "Yes." and estimated how much money she should bring.

Chapter 9

The Metropolitan Police Department was almost empty at this late hour. Hundreds of footsteps had walked its polished floors earlier in the day and never had a full hour passed without the phone ringing through the office's interior panels. Behind the high metal cabinets, black coffee steam escaped from its machine. Jessica Jung poured herself a cup and leaned back on her desk. Her eye twitched in exhaustion. The longest she'd ever let herself rest since she left the academy was four hours; anymore and she'd fall behind on her dreams of being placed as deputy head. It was sink or swim—but Jessica could only seem to float.

When Jessica was six, her father became part of the celebrated drug bust that happened in Red Curtain back in the 90's. The media had dubbed it 'Pill Spill' for the amount of illegal substances they managed to confiscate. Jessica's father had been the first to release fire when he saw a spotter on higher ground mount his gun. He shot, and the shootout lasted a few minutes. Police officers immediately encircled the old building and the sirens rang without end. The civilians inside surrendered and were locked up in the city jail. They were soon convicted for prison. Two weeks after, Jessica's father and his colleague were ambushed in a coffee shop. He died in the ER alone.

Jessica crumpled the sheet of information she had been studying for the last hour and threw it in the bin. Last night she dreamt of her dolls again, those little plastic figures with slender limbs. She shuddered to recall their smiles that seemed to have been etched in mockery. It was her father who had given them as a gift and in his funeral she threw them into his coffin with white lilies. She forgot to cry as she gave them away.

The low hum of the air conditioning system blended itself in the silence. Jessica was assigned by her superiors to track down drug operations within her area, but traces have been fairly quiet in the past year. Leads led to dead-ends and informants disappeared as soon as they were paid. Jessica knew that something was amiss. A city couldn't be washed of its sins in as little as year, let alone overnight.

The phone rang and she let it ring twice before she answered it. Listening intently, the spark was found and her eye glinted with hope.

"Got it. Thanks, Ad. I owe you." She put down the phone. Yes, tomorrow would be a better morning.

Chapter 10

There was something odd in the lack of formality Taeyeon had towards Tiffany when she dropped by her apartment two days after that night. Having only known her for less than a week, Taeyeon expected

to fare miserably with the awkwardness when she faced Tiffany again. She had too easily given in that night, but there had been neither enough time nor space to think properly.

Taeyeon sat on the same couch that had cultivated and dissolved her fear. It had earlier taken Tiffany a few moments before she could open her door and when she had, they fell fixed staring, as if both were surprised to see the other so soon. Tiffany smiled, hugged Taeyeon tight, kissed her on the cheek and ushered her in.

"Didn't think I'd see you here again so soon." Tiffany sat down beside Taeyeon and crossed her legs. The entire apartment was lit from corner to corner.

Taeyeon looked around, the mental images in her head having found home. "Yeah, I left pretty abruptly. Sorry."

"Not at all. Not at all."

"Tiffany." Taeyeon felt her voice jitter along with her nerves. "About that night—"

"What night?"

"That night I met you in the cab. That rainy night?"

"What about it?"

"I remember the driver looking at you." Taeyeon looked down. "He really did look like he was intending on doing something bad. I wondered why you stormed away and when you cried, I didn't think it would be because of that—him. But now—"

Tiffany remained silent and her lips arched. "What makes you think I cried because of that?"

"Wasn't it the reason?"

"What? The driver?"

"Yeah."

"Of course not."

"But—"

"I get hit on all the time, Taeyeon," Tiffany said in a low tone. "I'm used to it. If you think that I felt disrespected then you're wrong."

"Tiff—"

"Tell me. Is it because I *slept* with you and told you about the money involved that you took the liberty to reason out my feelings with my services?"

"No, no! I didn't—"

"If you came here to step on how I choose to live my life, you can leave."

Taeyeon shook her head. "I didn't come here to do that. Believe me. The last thing I'd do is look down on you."

Tiffany's eyes softened then. "I don't expect you to understand."

"Maybe I can."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

Taeyeon felt her indifference. She found it hard to look at her straight in the eye without remembering the way she had been touched. "I was hoping you'd explain things."

"What things?"

"Um," Taeyeon hesitated. "Why did you kiss me? And *sleep* with me?"

"Is that what you're so worked up about?"

"N-No."

"What happens if I tell you why?"

Taeyeon frowned, unable to find a decent answer. "Nothing."

"Did you enjoy it?"

"Huh?" Taeyeon felt her throat cave in. Her motivations for visiting Tiffany were confusing enough.

"Last Friday. The time we spent together."

Taeyeon avoided Tiffany's gaze. Before she could answer, Tiffany had moved closer to catch her eyes. She smirked like a sly cat, having caught its prey. "Do I have to force an answer out of you?"

"Um—"

"It's not that hard of a question, Taeyeon."

"I—"

"You only have to choose from between yes," Tiffany spoke slowly, "and no." She bit down on her lip, savouring the last word.

Taeyeon stopped breathing. Tiffany smelled like a gentle whiff of lavender, but she was too close for comfort again. "Yes," Taeyeon whispered. "Yes, I did enjoy our time together."

"Well, then. That's all that matters." Tiffany leaned back and stood up.

Taeyeon watched her walk away towards her kitchen. She closed her mouth before opening it again to say, "Hey, let's have dinner somewhere."

"What did you have in mind?"

"Well, what do you like to eat?"

"I like anything," Tiffany said.

"I like anything too."

"Then what are we having?"

Taeyeon smiled as she shrugged. "I guess we have the entire night to decide."

"Yes." Tiffany smiled herself. "Yes, I guess we do."

Chapter 11

Taeyeon knew that the circumstance in which she had met Tiffany would get its slew of judgment and ridicule if she weren't careful. Hyoyeon had already just mildly insulted her dignity for staying with Tiffany before, but she didn't mind. It surprised her too that she wasn't in a hurry to get the answers to her questions. Tiffany had a knack for throwing back the inquiries thrown her way that Taeyeon often found herself facing dead-ends.

"So, how did it go?" Hyoyeon said on the phone. "I called you last night but you weren't answering."

"Yeah." Taeyeon stared blankly at her computer screen. "Sorry. I didn't come home last night."

"You spent the night at Tiffany's again?"

Taeyeon debated for a second, but friendship won over. "Yeah."

"So, I'm guessing you look like an absolute train wreck at work right now."

"Yeah. I guess."

"You're useless without sleep."

Taeyeon laughed. "Useless sounds too harsh."

"But it's true anyway."

"I'm alright. Coffee will keep me going."

"So, you didn't get to sleep at all?"

"Just a little. It's not like—"

"Ha! Okay, okay. Spare me from the details. I think I know why." Taeyeon listened absent-mindedly. She wasn't sure if she was even awake in the first place. "So, I'm guessing you weren't able to call the travel agent yesterday—"

Taeyeon made a face. "I can't believe you!"

"What?"

"You called me just to ask about that, didn't you?"

"Well, yeah." Hyoyeon laughed from the other line. "And I was curious about this thing you got going on with Tiffany."

Taeyeon looked around. "I can't talk about that here."

"Duh."

"Look, I promise to call the agent as soon as I can. Stop calling me here. It just shows your desperation," Taeyeon teased.

"Hey—"

"Bye, Hyo. Work calls," Taeyeon said and put down the phone. She closed her eyes to rest them for a while. Her head was splitting from the remaining alcohol in her system. Tiffany had invited her over to have a few drinks at her apartment after pizza and out of courtesy, she managed to finish a few bottles. It had been more than enough to make her lie down comfortably in Tiffany's arms.

Taeyeon tried thinking of something else. She leafed through the papers on her desk, but dim images from last night floated too near the surface. Just vaguely, she remembered Tiffany reaching as far as getting her out of her top and shoes, but she woke in the early morning fully clothed in a different room. Tiffany was wide awake, perched by her kitchen having a bowl of cereal while she watched TV.

She had smiled sweetly when she saw Taeyeon approach. "Good morning."

"How long was I out?"

"Long enough."

Taeyeon felt her mouth dry. "Can I have some water?"

"No." Taeyeon was taken aback with Tiffany's tone. "I'm kidding. Here."

After a glass, Taeyeon remembered that another week was looming upon her. She panicked when she saw the hands of the clock at 4:58—the week had already begun. "Shoot! I have to get to work!"

Tiffany didn't move from her seat. "Have fun."

Taeyeon waited. For what, she didn't know. She looked at Tiffany stir her cereal lazily. "I'll go now."

"Take care and have fun." Tiffany winked.

"Can I—" Taeyeon stopped. "Can I see you again?"

Tiffany stood and held Taeyeon's hand. She walked her to her door and placed her hand on Taeyeon's cheek. "Oh, I expect to see you again," she said before giving her a light kiss.

Taeyeon rubbed her temples and struggled to concentrate on her task. Her boss had been planning on expanding the company's operations and reports were starting to get hefty. She took a sip of coffee and began typing the lull away. At the back of her mind, the twinkle she saw in Tiffany's eye that morning before she bid goodbye continued to shine.

Chapter 12

Jessica hoisted the equipment bag from the back of the old police cruiser and dug for her Glock 22. Her father's initials were engraved on the gun's slide—JJH. She rested her head on the steering wheel, and regulated her breathing. The two-way radio hissed inaudible noise. Midday, but she was already dead beat. Her hands left wet streaks on the wheel when she let go.

Come on, come on. She licked her lips as she surveyed her surroundings. Steam escaped from underground in a far alley. Down the street, a young woman in a pleated blouse pushed a baby carriage while several men in their Italian business suits shined under the sun. She clenched her jaw, tense for anything that might be remotely suspicious.

Ad had earlier tipped her to look out for a busted Mustang plated CCJ-9502 that might drive by at 13:20 sharp. She didn't want to believe that anyone would be bold enough to purchase an illegal amount of drugs in the broad daylight, but this was Red Curtain—anything and everything had a way.

"Hello," she whispered, her eyes following a young man wearing a fatigue jacket and flip flops cross the street. She watched him slow his pace when he reached the cracked pavement on the other side. Californication played from behind then, out of a boom box in an old Corolla. Jessica held her breath after the car passed and turned at the corner. CCJ-9502. *Bingo.*

She started the engine and followed the noise. The cruiser she drove was unmarked; its light bar gone and body painted plain white. Jessica could faintly hear the song end and she sped up. The Corolla turned at the corner again, entering the boulevard this time. Jessica kept a car's distance behind, sticking close now that they were in a yellow swarm of taxis.

The stoplight coloured red and she speed dialled for Ad. Her call was still unanswered by the time the light changed.

Eventually, the Corolla broke away from the main road and traffic, taking a right and another once past the street block. It stopped in front of a small pawnshop, two miles from the spot where Jessica had been waiting and watching earlier. She blinked when she saw the same man in the fatigue jacket and flip flops step out of the Corolla with an unlit cigarette in his mouth. He kept his hands inside his jeans as he went in. Jessica and the Corolla waited.

Out of cash mister? Californication resounded when the man came out of the store. He knocked at the driver's window and waved. Jessica let the car drive away. She would need backup for that.

Inside her jacket, the Kevlar vest she wore weighed heavy. Jessica walked briskly in her low slingbacks, timing her step with learnt and practiced calmness. Fifteen meters away and the man picked up his pace. Jessica's path was blocked by a group of middle-aged ladies walking leisurely in tracksuits. The man reached the intersection and disappeared from view.

Jessica dashed, holding up her hand to stop traffic. The man was in sight again. She hit the back of her leg on a rear bumper as she hurried.

The neighbourhood was looking immaculate. Vintage cars lined up the curbs and white uniformed picket fences proclaimed property. Children played with a water hose in one of the backyards. She walked on, her eye keeping close watch at the sides. She *felt* she was being watched.

The road sloped down and the man stopped in front of a black SUV. "Sir!" she said. The man glanced at her and hurriedly staggered away. Jessica ran after him.

During her years at the academy, Jessica did fairly well in her physical examinations. She was thin, but also lithe as a cat. It always worked to her advantage that people underestimated her frail looking physique.

Jessica sprinted, but the man's long limbs covered more ground. She almost missed the narrow alley he entered because of her shoes. At the end of the passage, the man hurled himself on the steel net and climbed out to the other side. Jessica quickly ducked behind a dumpster when she saw him pull out a Magnum from his jacket. Gunshot and she reached for her gun in her holster. She was ready to aim, but her target had already escaped.

Dammit! Jessica stood to inspect her surroundings. The shadows on the ground gave the apartment complexes around her a sinister feel. She walked over to the metal fence and kicked it. She grinned when she looked down at her feet because there, before her precious slingbacks, was a zip lock of about 5g of cocaine.

Chapter 13

If the Bible commanded an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, Micky Sans went as far as claiming the entire human body as a measure of compensation. When one of his men had made the mistake of teasing him and his lips, he carved out the fleshy folds of the prankster in his sleep. Blood had gushed out, like water from an open fire hydrant, staining red the bed sheets, his hands and utility knife. The man was perpetually stunned and in his shock, his face remained in its ghastly expression as he was stabbed in the chest.

Micky sterilized the knife and framed it. Since then, he has consciously stroked his lips, feeling the little suppleness it had against his fingers. Today, he felt them to be chapping.

"Don't make me say it again," he growled. "You heard me! Hand it over!"

"I-I said I don't have it!"

"It's not my business how you claimed to have lost it! Give it to me!"

"I was chased! Dammit!"

"And?"

"I don't know! I must have dropped it while that lady cop went after me!"

"What cop?"

"Some lady in a suit followed me from Max's and—"

"A woman?"

"Yeah! She followed—"

"Enough!" Micky barked, stomping his foot down on the dusty rooftop. The skyline was bright orange and the city looked calm and orderly below.

"I swear I don't have it!" The man in the fatigue jacket backed away, hands in the air. He fell on his back as Micky lunged at him. "I don't have it! Look, give me a few days and I swear I'll return what I got!"

"You scum! The only thing I'll be giving you is what you deserve—death!"

"W-Wait! Don't!"

Micky pulled out his gun and dabbed the cold metal on the man's tear streaked face. "You think it's that easy, don't you?"

"T-Tonight! I can give it by tonight! Just give me a few hours!"

"So, you do think it's that easy."

"I-I don't!"

"But you do." Micky straightened and turned his back, his temper in check, "A few hours? What do you take me for? Stupid?"

"I promise! I promise I can get back to you later this evening!"

"No." Micky cocked his gun and strode forward until the man was pushed only a foot away from the building's edge. "No. There won't be any evening."

"P-Please! Please! Wait!"

"You should know." Micky jabbed the gun center on the man's forehead, giving a slight nudge. "You should know, Adrian. The only thing easy is death." He pushed the gun forward and walked away as the man's wail behind him died second by second.

Down below, several car alarms howled while people hovered.

Chapter 14

"You should have taken Choi with you, Jung!" the Metropolitan Police Deputy Head snarled. "I don't keep her around here eating donuts for nothing for crying out loud! You could have been shot and worse we just lost a major development in tracking down these damn druggies!"

"She's taking a leave soon and I didn't break protocol," Jessica calmly replied. She stared at the broken sea foam green Venetian blinds of the windows. "I could have let him walk away just like that or run after him. I simply made a choice."

"Damn the protocol! I didn't assign you this just to have you screw it up!"

"My informant seems to have changed numbers." Jessica ignored the small specks of spit that landed on her arm as her boss shouted until he turned red in the cheeks. "I've been trying to reach him since but I keep getting disconnected."

"Has he been paid?"

"Not yet."

"Sure? You haven't released the statement?"

"No."

"Let me know in twenty-four hours if he turns up." The Deputy Head massaged his brows. "Jung, I'm getting you a job somewhere else. I think you need some change."

Jessica stared back hard at the pompous face in front of her. She was exhausted at the very least and as much as she wanted to protest, she knew she'd sink deeper in troubled waters if she did. "Alright. I'll have the guys check the area. Something might turn up at the pawnshop down 25th Avenue."

"Jung, you know you're one of the best here. I didn't reserve this spot for you for nothin' but breathe a bit. I know you've kept behind here working for the last few months."

"It's my job."

"Your job isn't your life. At the end of the day, that's what it is. Win some. Lose some."

Jessica continued to stare, boring holes here and there. "I'm not losing this chance."

"You won't. I'll see you in six months. Dismissed."

Jessica got up to leave. She felt tempted to talk her way out of getting transferred, just like how she had managed to persuade him she was fit for this assignment, but a better idea knocked loudly.

Outside, Choi Sooyoung juggled two phones on both her shoulders and made peculiar faces as she made calls to various departments. "So, what'd he say?" she asked when Jessica approached her desk.

"Hands off for now but it doesn't matter." Jessica smirked. "You and I are going to go look for our little friend."

Chapter 15

"And where do you think you're going?" Hyoyeon looked agape at Taeyeon's effort to look her age when she dropped by her apartment that evening. A rarely worn blue cropped blazer over a white studded tank, dark jeans and open toed heels. Her memory could only seem to recall that Taeyeon's closet consisted of her pajamas and work clothes.

"Uh, out?"

"Oh no, no, no, no, no! You're not going anywhere, sweetheart. You're going to stay here with me and help me plan my vacation." Hyoyeon stormed past Taeyeon by the door and let herself inside the apartment.

"Humor me. Why do you need me again?"

"You're the one who's already gone to Maldives! And I've already convinced Sooyoung I have everything planned out so a little help, yeah?"

"Yeah, but I told you I didn't arrange it. My brother did." Taeyeon stared at the mirror on the wall by the door.

"It doesn't matter. This is the price you pay for bragging that trip in front of my face for a whole week. I was so sick of it." Hyoyeon looked at Taeyeon tie her hair up. "Sooyoung's going to get so mad if I tell her now there's been a sudden change of plans."

"How can you even lie to her?"

"Because I can."

"That's stupid and pointless and—"

"Come on, Taeyeon! I only have a few more weeks to plan this."

"I'm sorry, Hyo. But I've already made plans." Taeyeon reached for her bag behind the door.

"With who?"

"I'll get to it as soon as I can, okay? I just have to find that itinerary somewhere and—"

"Oh my god. Don't tell me you're going to meet Tiffany again."

"Yeah, so?"

Hyoyeon paused. "Seriously?"

"What?"

"She's a prostitute! Are you sure you want to be hanging out with that kind of company?" Hyoyeon stood from the couch and stepped closer towards Taeyeon.

"You don't know her okay?"

"Like you do."

"Look." Taeyeon deliberately avoided Hyoyeon's gaze. "I don't want to talk about it."

"You've known her for less than a week and—"

"Can you just stop? Stop judging the poor girl."

"I'm not."

"You are."

"I'm just saying you don't know her," Hyoyeon said, "We both don't."

"You know what? You're acting like my mother. I know what I'm doing. I'm not a kid okay?"

"Oh? Because you sure look like one." Hyoyeon chortled.

"Ugh," Taeyeon grunted loudly. "I'm going out."

"Wait! Wait! I was kidding! I didn't—"

Taeyeon mumbled, "Bye, Hyo." and slammed the door.

Chapter 16

There really wasn't anything wrong nor unusual with Hyoyeon's concern over Tiffany; Taeyeon knew that most of all. Since that small blunder in her apartment almost a year ago, Hyoyeon had brought it upon herself to check on Taeyeon's well-being from time to time and to watch over her. It happened a few days after the holidays, a month after Taeyeon's brother had died, Hyoyeon had found a lone cigarette on Taeyeon's desk when she came over to have dinner. Knowing her friend's disgust and nausea for smoking, it had raised an alarm in her to have seen it among her things. Hyoyeon knew Taeyeon needed someone and since then, she would drop by with groceries, DVD's and occasionally, even clothing. It helped they were around the same height.

Taeyeon frowned at the memory. She was well aware of who took her cigarette and why the person had done so. She only hoped they didn't smoke it, not like how she had and almost choked herself to death alone in her bathroom.

"Miss." The driver interrupted Taeyeon's thoughts. "Miss, we're here."

"Oh." Taeyeon looked around. "Oh. Right." She fumbled for her wallet and handed the cab driver her fare. Just as she was about to get off, Taeyeon saw Tiffany leaning over the reception desk inside the building. She wore a red strapless dress that stopped short above her knees. A tall man stood beside her, his hand at the lower of her back. Taeyeon quickly hid herself behind a car parked across from the entrance.

Tiffany nudged and pulled on the man's arm as she talked with him. Her face brightened and evened out his dull appearance. He wore a tie and a suit, held a thatched briefcase and patches of balding hair could be seen at the crown of his head. Taeyeon was more than curious who the man was and why he could stand so close beside Tiffany.

Taeyeon debated between leaving and staying for a few more minutes. This really wasn't her business, she admitted, but something had nipped at her senses for seeing an oddly matched pair. Tiffany was young and attractive, beautiful without batting an eyelash while the man was common place, dreary like a worn out gear cog. She really couldn't help but stare. The smiles Tiffany showed this man were miles apart from the ones she had seen this morning before she left her apartment. Her smiles were lopsided, whimsical even, but in front of this man she laughed heartily.

Tiffany and the man continued to talk in the middle of the lobby. He eventually put down his briefcase on the floor to hug Tiffany with both arms. Tiffany stood still, one of her hands patting him gently on the shoulders. She kissed him on the cheek and he left.

Taeyeon scrambled towards the entrance before Tiffany could board the elevator. "Tiffany!" she yelled. Two men who sat on the couches turned their heads to look. "Tiffany! Wait!"

Tiffany stepped inside the elevator despite the loudness of Taeyeon's call. The doors were an inch apart from closing when Taeyeon caught Tiffany's eyes from behind.

"Excuse me." The receptionist came. "Miss?"

"I've been here before," Taeyeon answered him without looking. She stared at the number on the panel screen ascend. "Unit 1302."

"And your name madam?"

"Kim Taeyeon." He nodded and left.

Taeyeon pushed the upwards button repeatedly. She was sure Tiffany had seen her before the doors closed. Tiffany didn't even look the least bit surprised when their eyes met so she was sure too that Tiffany had heard her call earlier.

Up on the narrow hallway of the thirteenth floor, Taeyeon felt the same nervousness and perplexity that hit the first time she set foot on this passage. She had been dragged by Tiffany the first time and by herself the second. This time, however, there need not be a reason for any of that because Taeyeon's heart was already way ahead of her feet.

Chapter 17

The walls remained neglected and ordinary. Taeyeon had always found the greyish interiors of the building to be completely lacking in warmth; even the red carpeting didn't ease the drabness. Every step seemed to echo and the entire floor heaved in silence. Always in silence. Taeyeon speculated if Tiffany even had any neighbors since the corridors always felt so bare.

She rang the doorbell twice and knocked. "Tiffany? It's me! Taeyeon!" Looking at her feet, she thought of how quickly she was soon back outside her door. "Tiffany?"

The door swung wide open and Tiffany, still in her dress, yelled, "What? What do you want?"

"I-I came over to—"

"I'm tired, Taeyeon. I just want to sleep."

"Oh." Taeyeon looked away. She cursed her impulse for having chased her. "Yeah, okay. I just thought we could stay in, order some food but yeah, you definitely need rest."

Tiffany paused before answering, "I do." in a low voice.

Taeyeon let herself be trapped for a moment under Tiffany's eyes. They were dark and glossy, impenetrable as she had first seen them. "Sorry. I didn't think—" she was cut off because Tiffany had kissed her.

Tiffany circled her arms around her neck. "Are you really going to leave?" she whispered.

"I didn't mean to disturb," Taeyeon whispered back. "I can always come back tomorrow."

"I don't have much, Taeyeon. Just time."

Taeyeon hugged Tiffany securely. Something heavy pulled at the pit of her stomach, making her spirits rupture in concern. The atmosphere had suddenly changed with Tiffany's somber response and Taeyeon kissed her until they were inside her bedroom, on the bed and on top of each other, shoes off and hands linked. "I suddenly don't feel the need to eat anymore," Taeyeon said after catching her breath. She chuckled when Tiffany frowned.

"I have some noodles in the pantry. That'll be quick enough to cook. Or do you mind eating cereal for dinner?"

"I'm really not hungry." Taeyeon shook her head.

"You're a pretty bad liar," Tiffany cooed. She rolled over Taeyeon and rested her head on her shoulder. "Liars go to hell and your hell will be your hunger."

"I won't die if I miss a meal." Taeyeon laughed. "Besides I think I need to go on a diet anyway." She looked down at Tiffany. Tiffany had closed her eyes. "Tiffany?"

Taeyeon calmly brushed Tiffany's fringes away from her face and wondered what it must be like to die of hunger. She didn't think too much of it though because by some stroke of luck, a strange kind of heaven had fallen asleep in her arms.

Chapter 18

The stranger didn't really feel like a stranger—that alone was strange enough. Taeyeon barely knew the girl sleeping soundly in her arms, but the comfort of having someone close eased the loneliness she'd been harbouring since her brother's death. It wasn't easy to be alone and Taeyeon pondered if Tiffany could understand, at least to some degree, the loneliness she woke up to every morning and slept with every night.

She gently pulled away from Tiffany's grasp. The girl had clutched at her arm in her sleep and hadn't moved from her position since her breathing evened. Taeyeon thought it would be romantic if Tiffany woke up to a tray of food by her bedside.

Tiffany's apartment was spacious enough for a small family of four to live with privacy from one another. Her kitchen occupied majority of the apartment, almost a third of the entire floor space. The warm look of wood against ceramic made Taeyeon reach out her fingertips to touch every surface she chanced on, muted colours and sleek clean lines with restraint in the use of accessories. Adjacent to the main sitting room was the balcony, overlooking a skyline of midnight blue above and specks of white and yellow down below. Further beyond was Tiffany's bedroom and the guest room, Taeyeon speculated, the one that had only a bed and a wall clock inside it.

In search for a phone, Taeyeon invited herself to wander around Tiffany's apartment. She discovered that she hadn't seen the other door beside the guest room before, across the room Tiffany slept in. Its lights were turned on, conspicuously seen underneath its door. She turned its knob, but it was locked.

Taeyeon drew back to the kitchen. She opened the fridge and to her surprise, it was barely filled—only a carton of milk and orange juice, four bottles of beer, a pack of sliced cheeses, a tub of Vanilla ice cream and a half bitten apple. No meat, no vegetables. Her pantry wasn't any better either, pack after pack of noodles and two huge boxes of Cap'N Crunch. Taeyeon shook her head.

"Why did you leave?" Tiffany appeared, sleep still in her eyes. Taeyeon almost jumped like she was caught being nosy. "Taeyeon?"

"I thought it'd be nice to make dinner." Taeyeon closed the cupboards. "Except there's nothing here."

"You cook?"

"Sometimes."

"Are you good?"

Taeyeon laughed. "Good enough, I guess."

"Who do you feed?"

"No one. At least not anymore."

Tiffany, barefoot, walked over. She raised Taeyeon's arms around herself. "Will you cook for me?"

"Of course." Taeyeon kissed her. It seemed almost automatic how the distance between them grew shorter by the days, hours even. Tiffany often kept close, holding Taeyeon's hand, grazing her cheek and kissing her lips whenever the chance permitted it. Taeyeon was always on the receiving end but now, she admitted to herself, she was braver to initiate contact.

"Are you going to stay?"

"Am I?"

"Yes," Tiffany said with finality in her tone. It made Taeyeon imagine coming back for the rest of the week, and the weeks after it. "Let's just have a big breakfast tomorrow."

“With what?” Taeyeon chuckled. “Cereal?”
 “You don’t like cereal?”
 “I’m lactose intolerant.”
 “Really? But you can just eat it on its own.”
 “I was kidding. Cereal sounds great to me! Good ol’ Cap’N Crunch!” Tiffany jabbed her at the sides.
 “Ow!”
 “You ought to know better than to sneak around someone else’s house,” Tiffany said flatly. “You don’t know what you might find.”
 “Huh?”
 “Like empty cupboards.” Tiffany winked. “And empty beds.”
 “I really didn’t mean to snoop around. You have a wonderful apartment though. So much expensive stuff.”
 “Yeah, I guess so.” Tiffany sat down on her couch and raised her feet on the coffee table.
 “You like it classy, huh?” Taeyeon seated herself on the far end, looking around. “Modern minimalist?”
 Tiffany smiled her lopsided grin and shrugged her delicate shoulders. She reached for the television remote and surfed through the channels until she decided on a cooking show.
 “That looks yummy,” Taeyeon commented. “Thirty minute meals. I should remember this, that way I can cook faster and when you wake up, tada! Food!”
 Tiffany changed the channel. “It’s okay. I can always eat out you know?”
 Taeyeon frowned. She thought Tiffany would fawn and melt over her thoughtfulness but it didn’t seem to be that way. “Yeah, but home cooked meals are the best. There’s nothing quite like eating something you made yourself.”
 “So, who did you cook for?” Tiffany turned her head. “Your boyfriend?”
 “No, my brother. I haven’t exactly been with anyone since early college.”
 “I see.” Tiffany turned off the television. “And why is that?”
 “I dunno.”
 “It’s not like you’re unattractive.” Tiffany scooted to close their distance. She patted Taeyeon’s arm like she were her pet. “In fact, you’re cute. I like you. Very much.”
 Taeyeon felt her face flush red. She had wanted to ask Tiffany the same question back, if she were attached to anyone at the moment, because the man earlier in the lobby had seemed to have an odd level of intimacy with Tiffany. “Are you seeing anyone?”
 “I’m seeing you now, aren’t I?”
 “Is that a no? You’re not seeing anyone aside from me?”
 Tiffany remained silent, her hands snaking behind Taeyeon’s back. She licked her lips before she said, “If I were, would it make a difference?”
 Taeyeon, though magnetized by the intensity of Tiffany’s eyes, shrunk back on her seat as soon as she considered the possibility. “I guess.”
 “Stop thinking about it.” Tiffany kissed her on the cheek. “It was just a question.”
 Taeyeon nodded. She could only hope that it was indeed, only a question, because for some unknown reason, she knew it most likely wasn’t just. “Well, that was a very hard question.”
 “Oh? Enough of that then.” Tiffany kissed her on the chin. “And more of this.”
 Taeyeon closed her eyes. She really didn’t know what hit her, this stranger that was suddenly all over her face and body, pulling and tugging on her clothes and skin. Skin. Taeyeon knew Tiffany had managed to crawl her way under her skin because once again, in the pit of the night and in Tiffany’s apartment, she surrendered and she really didn’t mind that she did.

Chapter 19

Friday. The alarm buzzed its call for the last time that week, for the nth time since Taeyeon had decided to discipline herself and get her act together. Time had been lost since she started living alone and without reason and motivation to get up, walk and live, it had been easy to sink in the mundane details of dirty laundry and Chinese take-out every chance she could. Of course, Hyoyeon made sure her friend at least had a clean pair of underwear to change to everyday. It was the least she could do rather than nudge and prod her friend to hurry and accept a death that no one had seen coming.

The phone had persistently rung at three in the morning before Taeyeon could stagger out of bed to answer it. "Hello?" she said, sleep weighing her tiny voice down. "Yes, this is she—"

Her brother had been pronounced dead on arrival from a hit and run and Taeyeon tried hard to hold back her tears. Just the night before they had been making plans of travelling once more to Europe. She had seethed with anger at the lack of power and control the police had over the situation. There hadn't been any witnesses, not a single trace of who had wrecked and damaged her life forever.

Taeyeon fumbled for the alarm. The red digits blinked 6:00AM back at her like they always have in the silent grey morning. She groaned as she pulled her blanket over her eyes.

Never again had time passed as slow and insignificant like the past two days had, like the first time she remembered no one would start the morning coffee for her. Now, almost a year after she had found normality and routine again, she had almost forgotten what it was like to crawl and keel over the blankness of thought and emptiness of feeling. But this morning was different as she got up to draw open the curtains and to butter her toast, someone unexpected had reminded her.

Taeyeon let Tiffany and her mystery enter her mind indulgently again, and the impact of her surprising jealousy, her illogical insecurity of seeing Tiffany with another man last time, made her wish she had the courage to visit her again so soon.

This was not, however, the way she wanted to present herself to Tiffany—eager and hungry for any amount of attention she was given, no matter how little it would be. And as it happened, despite how tempting and attractive the offer was to have someone like Tiffany spend the night with, Taeyeon forced herself to wait, wait for the weekend to pass with her pride and aloofness still intact.

Hyoyeon had been on the receiving end of Taeyeon's self-imposed sacrifice, but even if time with her over the weekend had eased the little tension between them since the last time they spoke, it had only brought her twice the turmoil of her frustrations at how interested she actually was to get to know Tiffany and to be with her. If only it seemed that easy.

Chapter 20

Down the end of 25th Avenue and its quiet walk of surplus and vintage shops stands an old two storey house left abandoned by the death of its tenant not too many years ago. Heavy metal chains bar the doors and though the windows are dusty and broken, planks of wood are nailed from the inside to prevent trespassers from entering. The brick walls have turned an ugly shade of brown and large marks of vandalism could be seen on it from a block away.

Two men talked in the dark, drinking and smoking, inside a cluttered room full of old books and tattered posters of what should have been landscape portraits. "And what happened to him?" the shorter of the two men calmly asked, blowing a small circle of smoke in the little daylight.

The other man shook his head. "I tell you one thing and one thing only, he definitely was up to no good. He gone. Wasn't thinking. Poor lad."

"Alex said some lady ran after him and that he saw her gun."

"Mm. Is true. Definitely made out shape through her clothes."

"Track her."

"We asked the boys. She a cop."

"Well, obviously." The shorter man laughed and feigned humour. "Get a name and get her plate. Micky needs to hear this."

"Too late for that. He knows."

The shorter man slapped his hand down on the table. "Always on the move! The sly cat! Has he left instructions?"

"Nope."

"Hmm." The shorter man sipped his drink. His yellow stained teeth looked even dirtier in the dark, "What else do we know?"

"The boys saw her turn up at the station. Saw her with the chief."

"Wait—what happened to Adrian's stash?"

"Gone."

"The entire pack?"

"Mm." The other man leaned back on his seat. "He go bye bye 'cos of that."

"It took me a more than a week to get that to him!"

"Mm."

"Stupid boy! What else?"

The other man chuckled, red circles appearing on the fat of his cheeks because of his drink. "She pretty."

The shorter man chuckled with him. "Pretty, you say?"

"Mm. Boys followed her around. She and her friend pretty."

"Another cop?"

"Mm. Tall one this time."

"I see." The shorter man finished his cigarette, letting the information sink and simmer in him. "Feels just like yesterday when I had to tell you what to do every single time."

"It ain't yesterday."

The shorter man laughed again. "I know, I know. So, should I ask further what else do we know?"

The other man smirked. "She Jessica Jung," he said and the shorter man smirked instantly right back.

Chapter 21

Beads of cold sweat could be seen on Jessica Jung's forehead in the grainy light of the early morning. She had been dreaming again, this time of empty houses with collapsed rooftops and oversized furniture. In her dream she had been holding a small pair of red Mary Jane shoes precariously, walking her way through the corridors of a bungalow looking for its owner. Someone she seemed to have known but couldn't immediately make out the identity of their features or catch the familiar recall of their name. She wandered around, realizing she wasn't holding the shoes anymore but a hammer instead. She hammered, bludgeoning one of her hands, waking up to the phone ringing.

"H-Hello?" Jessica croaked, one hand on her chest trying to calm down. She awoke to the phone ringing. "Sooyoung? What time is it?"

"Uh, 5?"

"Saturday?"

"No sweetie, it's only Friday afternoon. Hey, you alright? Did I wake you?"

"Yeah, I was asleep."

"Aw dang," Sooyoung said from the other line. "Knew I should have just called you later. Anyway, sweetie, go back to sleep okay? I just called to say that the track number's a bust. I asked Charlie to trace the call log backwards but it seems our little friend has only been contacting you."

"I knew it."

"I know. I'm on my way now to scout the neighbourhood you chased him into. Something tells me his running there wasn't all that random."

"Of course. Why would anyone run in a direction they weren't familiar with? If he hadn't done so, I might have had my hands on him right now."

"Yeah, yeah. Go back to sleep. I got things covered okay?"

"Thank you."

Jessica lied down again and closed her eyes. She thought of the rush in her legs as she ran and jumped over the cracks in the pavement. She hid under her blanket, covering every inch of skin she could. She had suddenly remembered she used to dress her little dolls with her old Mary Jane's.

Chapter 22

There was a drag to Taeyeon's stride that morning she walked to her office building. Nine days have passed and not a single call or word had come from the stranger. It troubled her more than it should have how easily Tiffany could slip in and out of her life.

Aw shi- The sudden splash of brown on white destroyed the train of thought in her head. Taeyeon had spilled her morning brew on herself while weighing the circumstance of another visit. *Nine days and you don't even miss me?*

"Taeyeon." Sunny swivelled around in her chair. "You spilled coffee on yourself."

"I know."

Sunny made a face. "You didn't seem to have noticed."

"I did."

"Oh. Coffee wasn't hot?"

"Just a bit."

"Thank goodness then it wasn't as hot as—"

"Yes, thank goodness." Taeyeon wiped the stains on her shirt.

"I know right? Nothing like a steaming cup of coffee to snap back into reality," Sunny said. "So, want another cup?"

"No, thank you." Taeyeon breathed deep, dismissing the building annoyance.

"Okay. I need those documents by the way."

"I'll have them in an hour or so." Taeyeon opened her briefcase. Unearthing the files Sunny needed, Taeyeon silently walked herself through a variety of possibilities on how she would talk, or more appropriately, confront Tiffany for the latter's bewildering behaviour.

Red or pink? This was the kind of problem Taeyeon needed in her life. Red or pink? She held up two bouquets after getting off from the office. She didn't have a particular fondness for flowers. The only resonating memory she had of them was when she laid down a bunch in front of her brother's gravestone. She had picked them up randomly along the way, from the neighbours' gardens to strangers' porches. It was a walk she wanted to feel, taking her time in the bleak afternoon shine.

"I'll get them both." Taeyeon nodded and continued down the sidewalk. The drag in her step this morning was easily replaced then by a short and brisk one, almost in a hurry. "Taxi! Taxi!" she yelled.

"22 Main. Do you think we can get there in twenty minutes?" She stared back at the driver from the rear-view mirror. The similar angle of the man's eyes made her remember the night she and Tiffany had first met, the stares and lingering glimpses of lust.

"Dunno."

"Just hurry up please." Taeyeon sank back. The anticipation of seeing Tiffany again blocked out all other things in her head, all other irrelevant spurs brought about by her surroundings. Nine days and she could still just as easily recall how it was like to touch Tiffany and be touched by her.

Chapter 23

The second of their first touch had been more than enough to stir Taeyeon.

"Taeyeon! What a surprise! For me? Oh, you didn't have to!"

Taeyeon's head pounded. Her fringes covered her eyes but it barely covered the view of being on top of Tiffany.

"Come on in, I'll just put these somewhere. How've you been?"

She lingered down Tiffany's jaw line from her nose, tracing the soft skin with her lips.

"Like I said before Taeyeon, you work too much. So, did you come here to unwind? To have some fun?"

She shifted her weight, snaking one of her hands under the lower of Tiffany's back. Making her way up slowly, she felt the curve of her sides with her palms. She unclasped the hook she was looking for.

"No? My bad then, for enjoying too much the time we spend together. It's really good to see you though. Dinner?"

Nuzzling her face and her neck, she let her fingers roam around on their own. Tiffany's fingers too wandered around, leaving trails of heat where they had been. They kissed.

"Yeah, I already made plans for tonight. Sorry. Maybe tomorrow? Another time should be fine."

Taeyeon moved lower and lower. The warm breath on her skin made her own breathing race as she welcomed every inch she could find in the dark.

"Who? Why do you want to know? I should actually be getting ready by now. If only you had let me know earlier, you know? I could've prepared."

With the last of the clothes strewn on the floor, she stopped to kneel to get a better view. She gently blew the strands of hair away from Tiffany's face and nibbled her ear.

"My actions? Oh, they are what they are. It's as simple as that. No, that's the only explanation I have, quite frankly."

Tiffany wrestled. Under her now, she closed her eyes in surrender. She found her body to be responding on its own.

"Why? What are you going to do about it? What are you going to do about it Taeyeon?"

Lacing her fingers with hers, she pushed herself closer to her body. Taeyeon felt her heart not to be the only thing pounding anymore. She gasped.

Chapter 24

Taeyeon sprawled her arms underneath the cold sheets of Tiffany's bed. It had all happened too fast. One minute she was fumbling and choking on her words in front of Tiffany, of having seen her again, and then she was suddenly getting desperate and aggressive the next. She closed her eyes. Maybe she shouldn't have held Tiffany by the arm like she that when the latter had stood to get ready to leave. It didn't seem to have hurt or angered Tiffany though because she could have sworn she saw a glimpse of satisfaction in Tiffany's eyes. *"I'm not going to let you leave that's what."* Taeyeon's own words surprised her and echoed in her ears.

She rolled to her side. Only the dim light from under the bathroom door could be seen in the early dark morning. Just faintly, she could hear the splashing of water against the tiles, against Tiffany's body. Taeyeon firmly grabbed the bed sheets at her side. She didn't feel like she was there, in actual control of her own will. Her body ached and demanded for more of Tiffany's touch but there was a dull and distant mechanical longing that was anchored at the back of her mind too. She knew her own intentions were suspicious enough but this was loneliness. This was Tiffany. Someone who burned and doused her flames without even trying.

Taeyeon swung her legs over to the side of bed, looking down on the floor. Her skirt lay a few inches away from her feet while her underwear was all the way at the other side of the room. She stood to gather her things, also picking up Tiffany's clothing along the way.

"You're up." Tiffany appeared with a towel draped over her. "Couldn't sleep?"

Taeyeon smiled. She never really quite got to appreciate and study Tiffany's beauty properly in the daylight and without hurry. They were always somehow in the dark, literally and figuratively, in the shadow of their own relationship's vagueness and ambiguity. But Taeyeon could feel her dull and distant longing be replaced with sudden warmth. Standing in front of Tiffany, Taeyeon found it easy to smile. "Yeah, I couldn't sleep. I kept thinking about you."

Tiffany chuckled. "That's nice."

"I kept thinking of what I was even doing here." Taeyeon paced her words. "You didn't call. Not even a message."

"Was I supposed to?"

"Did you want to?"

"Maybe." Tiffany sat on the bed, putting on lotion on her legs. "Maybe not. I don't really know."

Taeyeon held her stare. She tried hard to study Tiffany's movements, her words and her thinking. *Her name is Tiffany. She lives in an expensive apartment. She likes to eat cereal. She doesn't like pepperoni on her pizza. She bites her straw every now and then. She has a deadly smile.*

"Or maybe I do know, just that I'm not sure yet." Tiffany shrugged. *She has a bit of raising her eyebrow when surprised. She loves nail polish. Her favourite color is pink. Her eyes could be as intense as they are soft.*

"Hungry?" Tiffany looked up at Taeyeon.

"Cereal?"

"What else?"

Taeyeon moved to sit beside her. "I could cook for you if you want."

"Maybe another time."

"Tiffany."

"Yes?"

"I-I—" Taeyeon started, "I'm confused."

"Over what?"

"This. Us."

Tiffany held Taeyeon by the arm, looking straight at her in the eyes. "There is no us."

"Not ever?"

"I think you're tired. You haven't slept."

"Tiffany—"

"What?"

"Help me out here. I'm doing my best. Really."

Tiffany stood. "There isn't anything that needs to be done, Taeyeon."

"But I want to get to know you. Can't I?"

"You can." Tiffany walked to her closet. She pulled out some clothes. "Go ahead. I'm not stopping you."

"Does this mean you're giving me a chance?"

"I give everyone an equal chance."

Taeyeon struggled to keep up. "Then my chance is as good as anyone else's."

"Yes. Basically."

"Basically?"

"Yes, basically."

"Then what's the rest of it? Tell me, Tiffany. I want to know."

Tiffany smiled with her whimsical eyes again. "Everything is out there for you to know." She opened her drawers, pulling out her things and putting them into her shoulder bag. "Like this."

"What?"

Tiffany looked down at her watch. "As a matter of fact, I'm already late."

"Huh?" Taeyeon stood, pulling the bed sheets along with her. "Late for what?"

The doorbell suddenly buzzed and Tiffany hurried with her shoes. She kept silent as if she didn't hear Taeyeon's questions.

"Who's that? Who could be visiting you at three in the morning?" Taeyeon called out after Tiffany who left to open the door.

"Tiff—" the words swallowed themselves in Taeyeon's throat. It had only taken Taeyeon a second to recognize that the sharp heavy punch to her insides was actually blow to the building feelings she grew to have for Tiffany. Tiffany had opened up herself into the arms of another man. He was kissing her neck impatiently by the doorway.

Chapter 25

"Stephanie, let's go?" The man pulled away from Tiffany's neck. "We might miss it."

"Ready," she answered.

The door closed. Taeyeon remained by the hallway. *Stephanie?* She didn't think the man had seen her but if he had, he didn't even spare so much as a glance, like he was used to walking in on Tiffany's business. Taeyeon retreated back into Tiffany's room.

The bed still stood in its place, the sheets left crumpled from their forms and some pillows had dropped to the floor. The lights in the bathroom were left open. Steam had fogged up on the mirrors. Taeyeon splashed her face with cold water, wanting it to seep through her skin to wake her from this ridiculousness. She put on her clothes slowly despite knowing the longer she stayed, the more sickening it would feel at how easy she had been. Tiffany had played her well.

Once at her apartment building, Taeyeon passed by Sunny's room, which was a floor above hers, to excuse herself from work in a few hours. Banging on her door at five in the morning, it didn't dawn on Sunny to ask further about the matter. Taeyeon had looked a little tired and weary indeed.

A day off meant unnecessary time. Taeyeon stared at the ceiling while she lay in bed. Sleep eluded her and work wouldn't have made it better, she convinced herself.

She dialled for Hyoyeon. "Hello? Yeah, it's me."

"What's the matter? You sick?" Hyoyeon answered.

"No."

"You sound like—"

"No, no, I'm fine. I'm not sick. Really." Taeyeon insisted.

"Then what's up?"

"Well, I just got home—"

"And?"

"I'm over her."

"Wait. Who are we talking about again?"

"Tiffany."

"Ah, right. What happened?"

"She's seeing someone else."

"She told you?"

"No." Taeyeon's voice was dead. "I just figured out that much."

"You okay?"

"I don't know but it sure is eating me up inside."

"Then you're obviously not over her."

"Oh, did I say that?" Taeyeon sneered. "I can't do this."

"Hey, calm down. Everything should be fine."

"I can't have myself scrambled and distracted like this." Taeyeon seized her pillow. "I just can't."

"Then don't. Don't let it."

"It's kind of pathetic."

"You know what? Hold on. I'll be right over. Don't move and don't do anything stupid."

"Like I've ever—"

"Don't argue. Okay, I'll be right over." Hyoyeon hung up.

Taeyeon left the phone between her head and shoulder, looking outside her window at the sky, and as she willed her eyes to close, to hide her sight from the sun about to rise, miraculously she did fall asleep, as miraculous as wanting to get away from Tiffany in the first place.

Chapter 26

"Oh, hi. Hi Sooyoung." Taeyeon opened the door an hour later. "I didn't know you were with Hyo."

Sooyoung gave Taeyeon a slight squeeze on the shoulder. "Sorry to wake you. We brought pancakes!"

"Thanks." Taeyeon moved to her kitchen. "Thanks. You didn't have to."

"Well of course we had to!" Hyoyeon said. "If I hadn't come, I'm sure you wouldn't have eaten anything for the day."

"So, what happened? You don't mind me prying now, do you?" Sooyoung rummaged over the plastic bags they brought.

"Prying on what? My life or the food?" Taeyeon quipped.

"Hey! I've been up for thirty-six hours straight you know. I'm basically running on sugar and autopilot."

"There's just this girl I've been seeing," Taeyeon started. "I don't think I could see her anymore—should see her anymore."

"I see." Sooyoung looked up. "And how long have you known her?"

"A few weeks."

"Yeah, but that's just time. It doesn't really reflect anything," Hyoyeon said.

"What do you mean?" Sooyoung looked at Hyoyeon.

"What I meant was even if Taeyeon has only known her for a couple of weeks, they've spent a fair amount of quality time together already, if you know what I mean."

Sooyoung tried to ride on Hyoyeon's train of thought. She finally said "Oh." and continued, "So what? People sleep and mess around all the time."

"Yeah, but she's a prostitute."

"What?" Sooyoung turned her glance to Taeyeon. "You've been that lonely?"

"Excuse me!" Taeyeon defended herself. "Your eyes are judging me. Let me do the talking here. I didn't know she was one. I only found out after I visited her and even if she is, she's definitely high class."

"Oh?" Sooyoung was surprised as ever. "Like how much?"

"You don't want to know." Taeyeon looked down at her plate. "Either way, I've never paid for her company."

"Is that why you're confused? Because she's been spending time with you for free? That she might have liked you genuinely?"

"Oh, I know she likes me. She made that much very clear."

"I'm confused. So what exactly is the problem?"

"I just saw her with someone else," Taeyeon answered. "Twice actually. Although the first time wasn't as bad as last night."

"Spare us from the details," Hyoyeon said. "I can read it all from your face."

"It hurts." Taeyeon stabbed at her pancake. "I don't what to do."

"How well do you know her?" Sooyoung continued. "Well enough?"

"No, not really. Just trivial things here and there." Taeyeon ate a small piece. "It's hard to explain. The way she talks and the way she acts—"

"Keeps you interested?"

"Interested would be an understatement."

"And the prostitute bit? That doesn't bother you?"

"Well, after seeing it with my own two eyes, of course it does!"

Sooyoung clicked her tongue. "I think you're in denial."

"Over what?"

"No, not about your feelings." Sooyoung explained. "I don't think it has sunk in deep enough that she's well, you know."

"But she's more than that. She's more than what she does."

"How do you know?" Sooyoung put her utensils down. "Time may not reflect everything but it still reflects something."

Taeyeon kept quiet, mulling over her options or lack thereof, while Hyoyeon filled in her silence with the little she knew about Tiffany and Taeyeon to Sooyoung. She didn't know much but that didn't matter. Her impression of Tiffany remained the same.

"They met in a cab," Hyoyeon went on. "She called me at one in the morning to pick her up."

"My, my." Sooyoung teased to lighten the mood. "Some serendipity you got there, Taeyeon!"

Taeyeon grunted in response.

"Hey, cheer up." Sooyoung patted her on the shoulder. "If she's anything like what the both of you have said, then I think you should give her a chance."

"I think I'll go see her later," Taeyeon decided.

"No!" Hyoyeon protested. "At least wait a day."

"Yeah, get some sleep first," Sooyoung agreed. "By the way, what's her name?"

"Stephanie," Taeyeon answered, hesitantly.

Chapter 27

After Taeyeon had fallen asleep in her living room, Hyoyeon and Sooyoung proceeded to clean the kitchen and pick up a few items from the nearby grocery in preparation for lunch. "I don't know who this Stephanie is." Hyoyeon lead the way. "From what I know her name is Tiffany."

"It could be her street name," Sooyoung guessed.

"Probably."

"Yeah, to protect her identity and everything."

"Huh." Hyoyeon made a face. "What's the point of hiding her identity if she's showing the public her face anyway?"

"True."

"And inviting her clients in."

"Very true."

"Haven't you encountered anything like this before?" Hyoyeon looked at Sooyoung. "You're like, you know? A cop?"

"Which gives me sufficient grounds to look her up in the database?" Sooyoung accused. "Right."

Hyoyeon smirked. "Come on. Just a quick background check."

“You really want her out of Taeyeon’s life?”
 “Look.” Hyoyeon stopped walking. “Is prostitution even legal here?”
 “Plainly put, such operations just aren’t given the right amount of priority.”
 “But tax-free income!” Hyoyeon held up her hands. “Are you kidding me? Isn’t that enough?”
 “I’ll see what I can find okay?”
 “I’m just saying it’s better to be safe than sorry.”
 “Ha!” Sooyoung mocked. “You’re like Chief. Precaution this, contingency that. What I need is some real get down and dirty busy action.”
 “How’s it been so far anyway?”
 “Still manning the lines and desk on occasion.” Sooyoung placed several cans of juice in the cart.
 “Other than that, I’ve been helping a colleague with her deferral.”
 “Aw.” Hyoyeon teased. “You’re so sweet.”
 “There hasn’t been much development though. How can you find something that doesn’t want to be found?”
 “Is that a trick question?”
 Sooyoung sighed. “Maybe we should take Taeyeon with us.”
 “Hey.” Hyoyeon thought about it. “That’s not a bad idea.”
 “She could use some time away. Besides, she has no reason not to accept. She hates her job anyway.”
 “I know right?” Hyoyeon walked to the cashier. “Even I wonder how she could survive a nine to five job. But then again she doesn’t need the money anyway.”
 “You think she’ll pay for our trip?” Sooyoung’s eyes widened.
 Hyoyeon laughed. “You wish!”
 “I do!”
 “Let’s tell her later together!”
 “Oh this is so—” Sooyoung’s phone suddenly rang. She hastily searched for it in her purse. “Hello? Jessica? No, I’m out.”
 “Hand me that.” Hyoyeon motioned for the cart from Sooyoung’s hands.
 “Okay, I’ll be there in twenty,” Sooyoung said on the phone. “Wait for me.”
 “Bat signal?” Hyoyeon assumed.
 Sooyoung nodded as she placed several packets of biscuit in her pocket. “To the bat cave!”

Chapter 28

Jessica sweated concentration. She jerked straight up from her chair when Sooyoung came rushing in the basement of the Metropolitan Hospital. “What happened?” she said out of breath. “Rushed here as fast as I could.”
 “Ad’s dead,” Jessica answered robotically. They stood alone in the middle of the hallway. The hospital morgue rarely had visitors. “A dead and open end for us.”
 “What?”
 “I received a call earlier this morning, tipping me to check out one of the freezers. The body has been here several days already but up until now, nobody has claimed it.”
 “What’s this one in for?”
 “Apparently they declared it as suicide—jumped off from a high rise building. But I’m still waiting for a copy of the autopsy.”
 “Who called? What did they say?”
 Jessica kept a straight face. “It was an unknown number. They said to go and tell the guard I knew a certain Adrian Lyn kept in Box 5.”

"Give me the digits." Sooyoung walked inside the hallway, leading to the chamber. Jessica followed her. "Let's run it over down to Charlie."

"Someone's watching over us," Jessica finally whispered. "Me."

Sooyoung continued to walk, keeping composure. "Now?"

"I'm not sure but either way someone is."

"Any suspicions why they called?"

"No." Jessica pushed open one of the doors. "The only obvious reason is they wanted me here. They wanted me to find him."

"Where is he?" Sooyoung asked. She looked around the tiny room. "Where's his body?"

"Right there." Jessica pointed to a vault. "Bottom, last column on your left."

"How do you know this is him?"

"The guard handed me his shoebox for verification. I found several identification cards in his wallet."

"Yeah, but there could be a thousand other Ad's or Adrian's in town. How do you know this one is ours?"

Jessica held up an old phone from her pocket. Sooyoung stuck out her tongue. "Found your number on his phone?" she guessed.

"Not on the log, no." Jessica smiled. "But it was registered in his phone book."

"Sick." Sooyoung held her hand out. "Anything else?"

"Other than the fact that this phone has been tampered with, no, nothing else."

"A dead and open end. Goodbye our little friend." Sooyoung rested a bony hand on the freezer's surface. "Are there any messages?"

"Negative."

"And the log?"

"Erased."

"Did you try calling from there to your phone?" Sooyoung walked out of the room. The chills had reached her spine making her hair stand on ends.

"Yes, and it's not his number."

"Is that right?" Sooyoung scratched her chin. "I think we should keep that phone with us."

Jessica winked. She evidently came alive at the hint of a trail. "In my pocket already."

"Do you plan on telling Chief?" They exited the hospital and walked towards the parking lot where Sooyoung had borrowed Hyoyeon's car.

"Not yet," Jessica answered. Sooyoung suddenly looked at her from the driver's seat. Jessica didn't have to say a word because they both knew exactly what the other was thinking—that someone was following them.

Chapter 29

The fine sand from construction of a nearby building had mixed with the wet soil under their shoes leaving foot prints behind as they walked. Sooyoung noticed this earlier on, keeping her glance down as she neared Hyoyeon's car. There was a visible track that uncannily stopped by the driver's side of the road. Jessica had taken notice too, after looking at Sooyoung, and she tried matching the prints in size and design. Her estimation of the owner was over six feet.

"You came alone, right?" Jessica asked. Sooyoung nodded.

Once inside the car, Jessica grabbed Sooyoung's arm as she was about to turn on the engine. The smell of gas instantly assaulted Sooyoung's nose.

"Check the trunk." Sooyoung stepped out, popping open the hood. She checked for leaks on the fuel hose and ran her fingers quickly through the engine compartment. "Anything?" Jessica shook her head. "It might be better if we split up."

"No, we can call a towing service and go from there. The last thing they want right now is attention." Jessica looked around her, at the wooden panels fencing the construction area. It looked quite abandoned from the outside. No workers, no sounds. "Still smell anything?"

"No." Sooyoung paused. "Not anymore."

"Let's go. We can't stay here." Jessica got in the passenger seat. "Just get a cab the next time we meet."

Sooyoung drove through the bowels of the city, feeling her paranoia rise with each press of the gas pedal. She was absolutely sure she hadn't imagined the nauseating smell earlier. Jessica had smelled it too. Did that make the both of them paranoid? She wasn't sure. She couldn't directly link the pair of footprints either.

Upstairs in her apartment, Jessica placed the stolen phone on her desk. Holding it tightly with her fingertips, she examined the device once more. On the phone's edge looked what seemed like dried residue of blood. She placed it back on the desk and stared at it.

The afternoon's events reeled slowly. She had just gotten out of the shower when the phone rang. "Hello? Who is this? Hello?" At the hospital morgue and being greeted "Good afternoon Miss Jung." Jessica's heart raced. Why did the guard know her name? And more importantly, why did he hand over Adrian's personal belongings without asking for any identification? She stood up and looked for the phone directory. "Yes, hi. Good afternoon. This is Jessica Jung from MPD. I'm looking to have a copy of all your employed personnel including your security guards on temporary shifts. Yes, I'll hold. Thanks." She concentrated on his face. She would need to sketch it as soon as she got off the phone.

Jessica's room hasn't changed much since the day she decided to trust herself and only herself in this lifetime. With her father in his coffin and her mother by her side as she threw the last of her lilies into his pit, she had struggled very hard to say goodbye properly. Tears? There had been none of that. There were no tears to shed for the man who forgot promises of time and ice cream to his only daughter. But Jessica didn't understand that back then, what a job meant, what a vocation like this took. She couldn't possibly have understood yet that the country had the right to claim her father first, that Ji Hoon Jung was chief head first and father second. She had only been six after all.

The painstaking years of her stay at the academy had dried her of emotion. Emotion? What was that? To Jessica, emotion was simply delayed reaction now. She felt things after they happened, when she finally felt safe reacting from memory. In her memory palace, that's where she let hell break loose, where she built and clawed the walls of her own restraint.

Chapter 30

"You're kidding!" Hyoyeon squealed. "Okay, no, I take that back. Please tell me you're not kidding!"

"I'm not. Really. I'll pay for our trip," Taeyeon said. It didn't take very long for her to decide. She knew she needed a break and tagging along with Hyoyeon and Sooyoung seemed like a good idea. Besides, she knew she had been a horrible friend lately. She knew her horribleness but the knowledge remained just that—knowledge. She didn't do anything about it even though she could have and this seemed a good way to make up for it.

"I'm touched you even invited me in the first place. You think Sooyoung will mind?"

"Aww hell no! It was her idea."

"Really?"

"Yup."

Taeyeon smiled. She didn't realize how big of a heart Sooyoung had too, like Hyoyeon did. I guess birds of the same feather did flock together.

"Oh wait, you haven't contacted the travel agency right?"

"Not yet."

"Great. I don't want any rescheduling, just in case you can't book the same flight."

"You mean, you want to make sure I show up and pay right?"

"Of course not!" Hyoyeon slapped her friend on the arm. "I really do think this will be fun. Plus, it helps you've been there. I mean, I know Sooyoung's a cop but her sense of direction is terrible. She wouldn't even know left from right holding cheeseburgers in her hands."

Taeyeon busied herself that afternoon, calling, arranging flights and ferries. It was a relief to be thinking of something else besides Tiffany. She was secretly glad that this was one escape she could afford financially speaking. If she couldn't buy herself inside Tiffany's affections then she would buy herself *outside*, out and away from Tiffany's sight and space. No use fighting fire with fire.

There was a time Taeyeon loathed the money she had received from her brother's death. It pained her to be reminded, to be given a ridiculous coloured piece of paper that supposedly meant life security. But what's security against loneliness?

Taeyeon thought fondly of the times she and her brother went on trips together, most of which had been unexpected. Spontaneity was something they both shared. Or she might have been influenced, if she thought about it. Taeyeon's brother was so loving and generous that he often spoiled her with gifts and weird novel things that had no purpose or function. Taeyeon missed him terribly. She wondered what he might have said had he known about Tiffany and her occupation. But maybe not. The last thing she wanted was to wrestle him over her. They were siblings after all. Taste and preference could possibly be genetic, Taeyeon chuckled to herself. Am I that into deep that I even have to imagine fighting him over her? What an all-time low. An all-time low, Taeyeon stared at her computer screen.

Hyoyeon had left the apartment to "live her own life" in her own words. But in reality, she just needed to prepare dinner and finish the house chores before her own mother caught on. "Taeyeon, please don't do anything stupid while I'm away, okay?" she teased.

"What could I possibly do now?" Taeyeon answered. Actually, she had plenty of answers for that.

"Don't get me started."

"I said I was over her remember?"

"Yeah, but that was six hours ago."

"Hyo!"

"I know you." Hyoyeon was serious. "I think I know you well enough," she said kindly.

"I promise I won't see her. Yet? I won't see her yet?" Taeyeon tried. "I won't go to her apartment. Promise."

"You don't have to give me your word you know."

"I know." Taeyeon walked her to the door. "But I mean it. Right now, all I'm pumped up for is our vacation." She gave her a high-five. Taeyeon closed the door and actually looked forward to planning the remaining details of their trip. She even thought of extending to another location just to surprise the two but when her doorbell rang after an hour however, she rolled her eyes thinking how too much of a parent Hyoyeon was becoming and that maybe she needed to go on a solo trip instead, soul-searching and flings and all.

"Are you a loyal do—" Taeyeon said as she opened the door. But dogs couldn't possibly reach such a high doorbell, let alone be this stunning.

Chapter 31

Stunning. Taeyeon suspected herself to be a sadist because to the average Joe, Tiffany in this state was not stunning. Tiffany's make-up was running on her face, eyes blotched red from crying maybe, cheeks tear-streaked. Taeyeon was shocked.

"What happened? What's wrong?"

"Everything is." Tiffany stood barefoot, her heels behind her. She was in that red dress from the night at the lobby.

Taeyeon sat her down in her kitchen and gave her a glass of water to slow down. Tiffany seemed shaken to the core.

"Tiffany?"

Tiffany didn't respond and continued to stare down at the table. Taeyeon sat across her, far out of Tiffany's immediate reach. She had hesitated to sit too close.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry for invading your privacy like this."

"How'd you find out where I live?"

Tiffany faked a tiny laugh. "I followed you of course. That first night you came to my door. You didn't know it but I did. I don't think you realize how important security is for me, in my profession. I just had to make sure."

"Make sure of what?" Taeyeon hesitated again. She didn't know whether or not she should be flattered by this admission.

"It's just for security. In case you know, you do something funny, I can call the cops and give them the necessary information. I followed you up until outside. I guessed your apartment unit when you turned on the lights that night."

"Well," Taeyeon looked around her apartment, "I guess this is it. This is home. Not like your expensive cave." She smiled weakly at her humor.

"I just didn't know where to go." Tiffany looked down again.

Taeyeon stared, studying word per word that was thrown. Her own hurt and the betrayal was winning out. "But you always push me away. I don't understand why you're here. Why me?"

"Because you care. At least I think you do."

Ouch. Tiffany threw back her own vulnerability at her. "I do!" Taeyeon said. "You know I do!"

"Yeah, I think you do."

"Believe that I do." Taeyeon reached out for Tiffany's hand. "I really do care for you."

"It's just not that easy, Taeyeon. You know we can't be together."

"Why not? Who said so?"

"This isn't something I can just buy myself out of—"

"Yes! Yes, you can! I can buy you out."

Tiffany paused. "Taeyeon. I'm serious. This isn't just about money—"

"Then what is it about? Besides from money."

"There are very powerful people running this business. Remember that this is a business. *I'm* the business."

"What do you mean? You have a boss? Somebody owns you? You're the only girl? What?" Taeyeon went on. "Tell me. I really want to know. I really want to help you."

Tiffany shook her head. "No, there are plenty of us. Twelve, I think. I haven't met all of them since we all work alone."

"How did you even get there in the first place?" Taeyeon shouted. Now that she was finally getting answers, it actually hurt. Seeing Tiffany hurt hurt. "How can you even call this work to begin with? I just don't understand. How can someone like you, you who's smart and clever and can corner me so easily be in a place like this? You're not dumb, Tiffany. I don't think you are."

"What does my intelligence have to do with this?" Tiffany said. "Well I guess you're wondering why I couldn't have chosen to be a sly thief instead. But the thing is—I didn't. I didn't exactly have a choice. I grew up without anyone and the man who took me in, my boss, saved me."

"Saved you? How can this be saving?" Taeyeon stood. "Are you even listening to yourself right now?"

"Taeyeon." Tiffany stood to meet her. "Calm down. Please. It's not what you think. I chose to do this. I chose to do this out of gratitude. It's not him. He didn't force me or ask me—"

“What? *This* is your way of payment? Your way of gratitude—”

“I don’t expect you to understand, Taeyeon. I just expect you to listen.”

Taeyeon shut her mouth. She knew she hurt Tiffany somewhere with what she said. Tiffany looked like she was about to cry again by the way her chin started to quiver. “Yeah, it’s hard to understand,” she finally said.

“My parents died when I was young or so at least that’s what I think because I grew up in an orphanage so I don’t really know. I ran away when I was eight. I didn’t reach very far and you can imagine what running away seems like to a kid. Freedom but without will and wit, what can happen? My boss saved me from the cops because they were after me for stealing. He saw me being chased and let me hide inside his house. He fed me and let me stay for the night. The next morning, he offered me a place to stay in exchange for house work. He lived alone, manning the brothel behind his house. He and the older girls there raised me. I don’t see how I could have said no at that time.”

“It sounds awful,” Tiffany continued. “But really, it’s not. When you live on a day to day basis long enough to forget your past, you don’t really care much for the future. Since what counts is today, you change today. You make today count. You change each day.”

“Then change now. Change this,” Taeyeon said.

“I can’t change it completely. That’s the thing, what’s there to change for?”

“You don’t owe him anything. Not up to this extent.”

“It’s all I can do. It’s all I have. Remember when I said I didn’t have much, just time? Yeah. Pretty self-explanatory, don’t you think?”

“Why are you so resigned?” Taeyeon said. “Look, Tiffany. You came here because you know you want to change it. I can help you.”

“No, you can’t. No one can.”

“I can!” Taeyeon held Tiffany’s hand. “If you say that time is all you have then I’ll buy your time. I’ll buy all of it. I’ll buy it all if it means no one will ever hurt or lay a finger on you again. I’ve always noticed your bruises, you know? Your hands, at the back of your shoulders, on your knees—”

“Even so, it’ll eventually run out. Heck, even I can buy my own time with the amount of money I get.” Tiffany said. “You have a nine to five job, Taeyeon. It’s okay. Your intention alone to help is enough.”

“Trust me on this.” Taeyeon stared hard. “I can help you with the money.”

Tiffany seemed convinced. “I don’t want to talk about money or this anymore. And it’s getting late. This helped though. Thank you. I should get going.”

“I insist you stay.”

“They might look for me. I don’t think it’s—”

“Tiffany.” Taeyeon pulled her back down to sit. “Stay. Please. Stay for the night.”

“Why are you being nice to me?” Tiffany eyed her darkly.

“You asked me that before. The first time we met.”

“I know. But maybe, the answer has changed.”

“Of course it has,” Taeyeon answered and kissed her to prove her point.

Chapter 32

Micky Sans does not indulge much in regret, but Adrian had been so promising he was almost sorry to have parted ways with him permanently. There were details of Adrian’s incident he would have liked to know. He would have liked to be given a minute by minute account of how Adrian had reacted upon realizing that someone was following him.

There was no grief to overcome. He put his body bag down. Inside were passports of the best print, cash, bankbooks—whatever made the world spin on top of his finger. Up on the rooftop, the city below

looked tiny and insignificant under his feet. He walked to the ledge, where he had pushed many victims before, and mused at the futility of the system.

He was well reaching his forties but his hairline kept suspicion away. A flock of pigeons descended around him and he reached into his body bag for the day's round of crackers. It was another exercise of power and mercy, for he could just as easily refuse them their fill but he thought himself generous. He had given Adrian the chance to explain, to say whatever he needed to say before he left this plane. Micky found this amusing. You're getting old and a little soft around the edges.

His phone rang but he answered it wordlessly. He never spoke first.

"So, she's on the run?" he finally said. "Good. It's about time we met her."

Chapter 33

Sooyoung decided it was about time she used up her vacation leaves. Not that her absence will affect the day-to-day operations, but she was only worried whether taking off right now would affect Jessica. The girl obviously needed to breathe a little bit. "Is there a match yet?" she asked while on the phone. The Metropolitan Police Department's Identification Section had technicians who worked during the day but the law was in order and Jessica couldn't easily bypass the high and private fee for the work to get done.

"I wouldn't be here if there was."

"I understand your frustration. We almost caught a fish in this draught but you might get into trouble if you get in the way. Don't forget this isn't your case anymore. Chief seemed pretty clear about that when he asked me what I was doing with my extra rounds of field work."

"You know he can't even connect A to B even if his life was at stake. B, Sooyoung! Just A to B!"

Sooyoung laughed. She had to hand it to Jessica. The girl knew how to insult without being insulting. "Exactly! So how can you expect him to see that you can connect A to Z?"

At the other end, Jessica slid further down on her couch. Her small coffee table was brimming with paper, copies of recently filed criminal activity. "Isn't anyone else around here an intuitive? Why is the world filled with so many sensors?"

"That's not fair. I'm a sensor," Sooyoung said.

"You have to be. Otherwise you wouldn't be able to smell the scent of the trail."

"Was that a pun?"

Jessica didn't answer. "We're already unmanned as it is. He *knows* he needs all the leg and limbs he can get."

"Well, he's going to lose another pair."

"Whose?"

"Mine," Sooyoung answered. "Been planning to disappear for weeks already. Do you want to come with us to Maldives? All-expense paid! My friend's friend is treating us."

"For what occasion? Sounds like it costs a fortune."

"I heard she inherited it or something like that."

"Or she could be a drug lord."

Sooyoung sighed. "You know, for someone so calm and stoic in the face of danger, you can be pretty bitter in normal everyday situations."

"I just can't shake off the feeling that this is *my* case." Jessica thought back to the chase down at the alley. She wondered if things would have turned out differently had she only brought Sooyoung along with her. "I'm going to go back to the morgue once I get a copy of the autopsy."

"Call me if you find anything."

Jessica allowed herself to breathe. Breathing was good. Breathing was essential. When she first failed her firearm examinations at the academy, she almost suffered a panic attack. She thought she blew it. But this was different and we're not in the firing range. Breathe, Jung. Let the emotions go and think.

"I know he's out there."

"Who?"

Jessica zoned out in the silence. How could she even hope of catching her father's murderer if she couldn't even solve this?

"Who killed Adrian. That's who."

Chapter 34

"Do you have any idea how much extra work you caused me?" Sunny ignored the stares her voice was attracting. "Taeyeon! Are you listening?"

"Wha-?"

"Yo!" Sunny threw her pen. "What is wrong with you?"

"Hey!" Taeyeon picked up the pen and threw it back. "What was that for?"

"You said you finished that report! You said you even filed it already!"

"I did!"

"No, no, you didn't!"

"Wait, which report are we talking about?"

"Good—"

"Oh!" Taeyeon opened the folders on her desk, looking for that report she had lied about earlier. Thankfully, she had managed to finish some of it at home. "This one?"

Leaving the office early to spend time with Tiffany was starting to take its toll. Sleep showed up in the early hours of her morning and in the way of the daily grind. But she didn't mind. Ever since Tiffany had showed up at her doorstep, things were starting to look up.

"Leaving again?" Sunny asked.

"You know they ought to promote you," Taeyeon said dryly. "I'm sure Bill could use some company. He's getting old."

"Ha-ha. Very funny." Sunny swivelled to her cubicle. "Anyone with half a brain can see you've been acting weird."

"Whatever."

"Are you pregnant?" Sunny pushed on. "Daily check-ups? Doc told you not to stress—" But Taeyeon had already tuned her out. Though the office walls were painted an industrial white, all Taeyeon saw was how white the fine sand was and how blue the waters were in Maldives. It was almost sinful. And indeed it was, it *was* sinful to be in a paradise like that, moreso with company like Tiffany. It was also her money. Hyoyeon and Sooyoung had no place to object. And they both knew it because they didn't say anything when she told them she was bringing Tiffany along.

What could she do for Tiffany to make her walk away from whatever it was she needed to walk away from? The only thing that seemed to make a difference was money and Taeyeon poured *a lot* of it. Tiffany was often surprised at how much Taeyeon had, but she made little of it by joking it was because Taeyeon had lived a "boring" life before meeting her. Half of it was true while the other half was buried ten feet deep into the soil.

"What exactly did your brother do again?" Tiffany asked over Taeyeon's stove. By virtue of business, she was to spend the entire night there. "Did you ever find out?"

"He was just a simple guy."

"Angels don't make millions, sweetheart."

Taeyeon pursed her lips and nodded. "I'm not completely sure but whatever it was, it wasn't good."

Tiffany noticed how grim the topic had become. "Well, that's alright. I'm no angel myself and I sure as hell don't make millions."

Chapter 35

In Stephanie's house, the floors are always swept and fresh cut flowers are always in place. Aside from the immaculate curtains of the panelled windows, the cherry wood furniture was warm and welcoming to look at. It was like spring in a box, except the smell of cigarettes could be faintly traced. She sat in front of her dresser, combing her tresses with her fingers. A white vase held the yellow daffodils she gathered this morning from her backyard. Far away from the city, far far away from Red Curtain, she enjoyed her own silence.

She brewed herself some tea. Darjeeling because it sounded funny and it resembled the word 'darling', the term of endearment her grandmother chose for her. Today her grandmother had decided to roast some garlic and vegetables in the oven for them to eat. Stephanie made sure they hadn't burnt.

This was almost two years ago, several days before her birthday, several days before her grandmother was rushed to the hospital. Their house still stands and her grandmother is still alive, but the air is different and the same silence now comes with a deafening echo. It is lonely in the house, especially since her grandmother is too weak to be left alone by herself. Stephanie sends a small prayer, wishing her love to her grandmother who is all the way at the south of the city.

Still in front of her mirror, she concludes she hasn't changed but the fine lines of her worry are starting to etch deeper on her face. She doesn't hesitate as she grabs for a pair of shears. With one big swoop to her neck, she cuts her tresses gone, leaving jagged layers and textures.

Not bad, she grins. As she stands to get herself another cup of warm tea, she prays that her grandmother receives her love and sends her back some in return. After all, two years into madness, she doesn't think she believes in love anymore.

Chapter 36

Taeyeon hadn't given it much thought. Aside from taking a sudden leave of absence at the office, there was the conundrum of putting Tiffany and Hyoyeon under the same roof. Naturally, Tiffany and Sooyoung would have been the conundrum—cop and prostitute. But given the circumstances, and how Hyoyeon had always played undercover, the fireworks were expected.

Except there were none and the two had actually somehow gotten along, like water and ice.

"No, I've never been anywhere else," Tiffany said. Her short hair gave her a new glow. "This is my first trip out of here."

"Really?" Hyoyeon answered. "Oh but you absolutely must travel! It's my only vice."

"Never really thought about it I guess."

"Don't worry." Sooyoung patted Tiffany on the back. "I haven't been around much myself. But thanks to Taeyeon here, I get to go to one of the most beautiful places in the world for free!" She cackled on about her merry luck. "That alone makes up for five other destinations!"

"Thanks." Tiffany smiled with her eyes. "It's thoughtful of you to have invited me, Taeyeon."

At first, Taeyeon was unsure what to make of Tiffany's drastic haircut. She would miss running her fingers through them, yes, but Tiffany looked much more approachable now. With the princess-like sophistication gone and glamour toned down, her face was brighter. Taeyeon kind of liked it.

"So, how long have you been in the service?" Tiffany turned to Sooyoung. The two kept their heads down as they peeled some fruit. "You're not going to arrest me for my 'activities' are you?" she joked.

"Not unless I catch you during my rounds."

"Sooyoung!" Taeyeon protested.

"Kidding." Sooyoung grinned. "Hands off the lady love. Right. Got it boss."

"That wasn't very polite." Taeyeon stuck her tongue out. "And I'm not your boss."

"Well, just to be clear about things," Tiffany interrupted, "I don't think you'll ever catch me during your rounds. At least not out on the streets anymore, if you know what I mean."

Sooyoung let out a hoot. "Thank God I've never set foot into Taeyeon's bedroom!"

"What makes you think you have to set foot there to *catch* something?" Hyoyeon joined in.

Taeyeon checked her throat. A change of topic right about now would be nice as she felt herself growing smaller and smaller by the minute. Not that she was embarrassed, in fact, it was quite the opposite. She just couldn't believe how much of a catch Tiffany was, that's if one could look past her mixed bag. Taeyeon obviously saw through everything.

"Sorry." Tiffany reached for Taeyeon's arm when she saw the other girl getting flustered. "I'll stop now. I'll just talk about how you snore at night instead."

The girls laughed. They entertained thoughts of their soon-to-be adventure and Taeyeon talked about other places they could see. Japan, France, all the way to Germany. It wasn't really going to happen with Sooyoung and Hyoyeon in tow of course, but the score was made and Taeyeon felt happy; Tiffany couldn't take her eyes off of her the entire night. Whether it reflected her to be a little utilitarian, it didn't matter. Taeyeon knew it wasn't that. It was the talk of endless possibility, of dreams and ideas that freed both their minds.

Hyoyeon and Sooyoung took the last bus ride home. They lost track of time in the midst of drinking and conversation. They warmed up well and thought Tiffany an old friend.

"You know, even if I talk like I'm going, I'm not actually sure yet." Tiffany helped Taeyeon with the dishes. "I just don't want to get your hopes up." They were leaving in a week.

"I thought everything was set?"

"Yeah." Tiffany lingered. "But we'll be gone for a while and I'm not sure of the implications. The serious ones."

"What do you mean?"

"What I mean is by doing this, it would really seem as if you're no longer a *customer* of mine." Taeyeon continued with her washing. "Of course, we both know you're not. But they don't know that."

Taeyeon didn't have much to think about Tiffany's affiliations. To her, these affairs were black and white. Bad people were bad people. "Sooyoung can help—"

"She can but it's not safe for anyone involved."

"We can go into hiding. You already have the perfect disguise with your new hair." Taeyeon tried to lighten the mood.

Tiffany shook her head. "No one even knows."

"It's just hair."

"It's not *just* hair. There's a perfectly sound psychological function for it."

"Like what?"

"Admit it." Tiffany teased Taeyeon. "You didn't like it at first, did you? I saw your face! You looked at me like I was bald or something."

"No! Did not!"

"Did too!" Tiffany laughed. "I'll admit when I first saw myself in front of the mirror, my first reaction was 'Bananas! I just cut my sex appeal in half!' It was quite dramatic."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Taeyeon said coolly. "You look fine."

"Do I?" Tiffany checked her reflection on the back of a spoon. "Oh well. New look, new life."

"I'll pick you up at your apartment right after lunch." Taeyeon looked at Tiffany. "It doesn't matter if you're only bringing the clothes you're wearing that day. You're going with me."

"But what—"

"No buts. We'll figure out the 'serious implications' later when we get back but until then, can we just have some fun and sunshine?"

"Forget the sunshine." Tiffany dropped what she was doing and grabbed Taeyeon's hand. "We can have some fun right now."

Chapter 37

"She's mine." Tiffany said to no one in the dark; instead she pressed the flesh of her palm hard against the plastic casing of her phone. She was close to speaking through clenched teeth as she held it against her ear. "No. She's mine and I said I had it covered, didn't I?"

"No. What makes you think I will? Of course I won't spend your money! I know what I'm doing, okay? You better hold up your end of the bargain." She walked down her apartment building. The night breeze swept by and her short locks stayed in place. "Give me some more time," she said. "I'll have everything ready in a few days. You just better be sure you're ready to say goodbye."

Chapter 38

Jessica came out of the city library in a hurry. She had just pored over dozens of newspapers dating nearly two decades ago to the time of her father's murder. But the city archives could only give her so much information and headline after headline had only made her unsatisfied and worse, feeling lonely. Without a clear understanding of how Adrian died, she found herself back at square one. Often back at square one.

It was impossible to completely wipe out the city's addiction to drugs because the economy moved, not along, but for it. Jessica was determined she could find something in history that might help. She didn't count on being pointed at the right direction, but she could try and find the patterns if there were any. The thing with movement was it could be nailed down to two philosophies; either don't fix what isn't broken or never stay in one place too long. The lords of Red Curtain operated with the former.

The gossip at Joe's Donuts always had the same score every morning; that the Metropolitan Police laundered money with the criminals and that was clear as day. With little reported activity, these scum bags would always overestimate themselves and this was what she hoped to happen. It was only a matter of time before someone slipped and it would light up the trail to everyone else.

She carried home with her several clippings of news. The sensational drug bust of Pill Spill in the 90's made for a good case study, though it brought some anguish because her father had been part of it. She ran over the same names and the same details, scanning the tips of the circle but one auspicious question surfaced. Who was Em, the local drug lord who had given the tip, and what was in it for him? Grief and remorse couldn't have driven years of sin and luxury into extinction. A religious plea wasn't a very strong one.

Jessica made her way to Metropolitan Headquarters to retrieve the city's prison records. However big the chance was that Em also ended up in the slammers, she couldn't say for sure. Paper trail was easy to make and fake.

There was one last stop before she could sink back to the comfort of her bed. Jessica no longer had any sense of time, just cyclical forces of sugar and caffeine.

The Chief Inspector from 1985 to 1997 was a tall policeman during his time, but the natural decay of aging stooped his shoulders and his hands moved with an involuntary jerk.

"Mr.Kent," Jessica spoke strong and steady. "I'm here to investigate what happened down at 25th and Crowfield on September 14 of 1995. If you would be so kind to answer several questions for me, that might prove helpful for our case."

"You a student reporter or something like that?"

"No, sir." Jessica quickly flashed her ID. "I won't take up much of your time."

Reluctantly, the old man looked at her with intelligence. "That was the single greatest coverage of my career. The phone rang non-stop. People were always knocking on my doorstep. I often regret it." Jessica followed him inside his crusty apartment. On the walls were antique photographs of his time and the city.

"I'll keep this short, sir. What do you remember about the man who had given the tip?"

"I'll keep this short myself and ask what role do you have to play here?"

"You might remember Officer Jung."

Mr. Kent bowed his head lower to meet Jessica's eyes. "Well, I'll be! You're Jung's little girl, aren't you? The last time I saw you was—"

"Yessir, at his funeral."

"Stay away from this. Boy, what happened was a tragic alright, but it was his time to go. He was a good man and I bet on the heavens he's happy to have a beautiful girl like you."

"I'm not wired." Jessica read his face. "This is off the record."

Mr. Kent paused and gathered himself. "Yes, as you probably already know he lead the operations. Someone had tipped him—"

"He received the mole?" Jessica was surprised. This was new. "In any case, what did the informant get in return?"

Mr. Kent paused again. With the composure of someone who only had a few more years to live, he answered, "We cleared his records."

Now Jessica was no longer surprised. The bust had managed to confiscate drugs worth millions of US dollars. It was a dream bargain for Mr. Kent and his team. She wouldn't be surprised either if Mr. Kent had received a portion of this bargain. "I need a name."

Mr. Kent fetched himself a cup of coffee. "Shelby Johnson," he said. "Shelby L. Johnson. White male. American."

"Is there anything else?"

When Mr. Kent shook his balding head, Jessica stood to leave. The sun was about to set but if she hurried, she could still unearth Shelby Johnson's files at the station. As she stepped out on Mr. Kent's porch, she heard the old man call out, "I'm sorry, young lady. I really am."

Jessica walked on. I'm not a young lady.

Chapter 39

Shelby Johnson's leather shoes were dusty from walking. Broken glass was everywhere in this old warehouse. The wood beams overhead smelt rotten and the rusty iron fixtures of the posts looked fragile. He set down his body bag and checked the electric control panels of the building.

The staircase leading to two offices upstairs were missing floor boards and the neon lights installed not too long ago cast a disturbing glare on the area. Some wire netting dangled from the second floor ledge. The place was filthy and empty, just the way he liked it.

"Heyyo Micky, where do you want this?"

"Right there."

The man dropped the wooden crate he was carrying. "What's in this anyway?"

"A chair." He played with the lights, turning them on and off, on and off.

Puzzled, the man didn't respond and used a crowbar to prop open the lid. Inside was a simple black steel chair without arm rests. It was brand new.

"One has to be hospitable," Micky said. "We can't let our guest sit on the floor. That would be rude and unwelcoming." He sat on the chair. "There's no cooperation without comfort."

"Right." The man grumbled, thinking of something else he could add. "It's a nice chair."

"Of course." Micky clapped his hands once. "It's the least I can do for her services. Think of it as a gift. A final thought. But I'm done and I'm ready to take back what's mine."

Chapter 40

Taeyeon had gone through her packed belongings at least five times now. She didn't think it funny that it was at least half her size. She would only look more like a kid.

Apparently, Hyoyeon had the same sentiments. "Woah! I didn't know we had to bring the entire house!" she quipped.

"Ha-ha. Good one," Taeyeon answered. She had a hard time parting with her three bath towels. One should be enough. With one, one was a girl scout. "Should I bring shampoo? The hotel ones might not smell good."

"Well, they're samples for a reason."

"But it's five-star."

"Free ain't free yo."

Taeyeon took out her bottle of shampoo from her bag. "My hair's picky."

"Then pick there," Hyoyeon said. She had dropped by to double check and finalize their itinerary and pick up Taeyeon's luggage. "Anyway, I called the travel agency and said we're good to go. Call us when you arrive at the airport. Sooyoung's still stuck at the grocery." She headed for the door.

"Hopefully, Tiffany brought just as much stuff as I did," Taeyeon said to her when she left.

With a few hours to spare, Taeyeon gathered her paper work on her desk and clipped them into a bunch. She didn't think she could last another day at the office. Work was boring and there was always the opportunity of starting over somewhere else. Somewhere new, somewhere far, somewhere other with Tiffany and her friends if she was lucky. Indeed, she did feel lucky with the company she had right now. The loss of one brother gave her two sisters and a lover. Who wouldn't thank their lucky stars?

"Hey, it's me," Taeyeon called Tiffany. Their flight was in six hours. "You good? I'll be right over in a few minutes. I leave in ten."

On the other line, Tiffany had just finished packing. "Yeah, just finishing up over here."

"Hyoyeon and Sooyoung are already on their way to the airport."

"Oh crap! I just realized I ran out of napkins—"

"You have your—"

"No, no, I just wanted to bring some just in case. You never know."

"You say that like we're talking about pregnancy here." Taeyeon laughed. "I have some over here. Or we can just buy on the way—"

"No, it's okay, I can run down over to the store and get some. Besides I think I want to buy some snacks."

"Are you sure? We can just buy—"

"Yeah, it's no problem." Tiffany hurried outside her apartment. "I'll be real quick. It's just down the block. I'll leave my door unlocked. Just let yourself in if I'm not back yet. I think I'll pick up some emergency medicine along the way."

"Okay," Taeyeon said. "Buy me some snacks too."

"What do you want?"

"Whatever you're having."

"Okay. See you in a while!" Tiffany answered and hung up.

The convenience store down her street was a five minute walk away. As she said, she left her apartment door unlocked for Taeyeon. Outside, the sky was cloudless and the sun couldn't be seen.

She took her time walking down the street because she had her heavy bags with her.

Chapter 41

The cab rides to Tiffany's apartment often caused Taeyeon to drift off and daydream. She didn't feel very chatty with the drivers and that incident the first time she met Tiffany was enough to induce apprehension. Prejudice and judgment aside, it made her seriously consider buying her own set of wheels instead of spending for public transport. Taeyeon loosely calculated her finances.

"Tiffany," she said, knocking on Tiffany's apartment door. "Tiffany."

Figuring she wasn't back yet, Taeyeon let herself inside. "Tiffany, where are you?"

No response. Taeyeon walked around the kitchen. She opened the fridge only to find an empty carton of orange juice. She settled with a glass of water.

Amused with the suspicion that Tiffany had packed just as many things as her, Taeyeon headed to Tiffany's bedroom. Her bags might be there.

Where were her—Taeyeon stopped dead in her tracks. Her peripheral vision must be imagining things. Craning her head to the right, to the now open locked room she had tried entering before, was a massive wall of pictures.

Her pictures.

Pictures from all imaginable angles and distances. Pictures of her walking down the street, of standing in front of her door, eating pizza, alighting a cab, even at work. Half of Sunny's face was blurred and captured, having been aimed through her cubicle window. Taeyeon froze. "What the—"

She recognized that some of the pictures were dated months before, years even. There she was at the bar, the night she lost her shoes. Taeyeon's eyes hastily scanned left and right.

The wall was a chilling timeline of her life, of her daily activities. Taeyeon walked to her left, where she found her picture at the bar posited near the ceiling. She looked downwards and followed the movement. I'll be damned if I remember every single day of my life.

Quickly scanning them as she walked, Taeyeon realized they were arranged in an inward spiral. She stayed in the middle of the room, letting her eyes do the circular work. Her mind filled with dread with what the last and most recent picture would be. There she was walking at the lobby. The next her opening the fridge and finally, her drinking water.

Suddenly, one of the photographs fell to her feet. Taeyeon looked down, seeing her small back photographed standing inside the room alone.

She screamed.

But no one heard her because a gloved hand from behind had stifled it.

Chapter 42

The state city hospital down south of the metro was running amok; doctors and nurses were scrambling like ants because of a fire that had broken out near the residential compounds of the district. Tiffany stood in the middle of the hallway, witness to the sights and sounds of the emergency. Thinking of her grandmother, she felt sorry for the several families who had just lost their home.

It's been nearly a year since Tiffany's grandmother was admitted due to complications in the lungs. The hospital felt more and more like a second home now to Tiffany. This was where she could allow herself to hope for some peace and attention needed for her grandmother's ailment. Heaven didn't exist. That was the biggest lie. Heaven was hell and if one couldn't roll with the punches, one would simply die. Tiffany knew that better than anyone. It hasn't been easy being away but this was the moment she was waiting for. Today, with the promised freedom from debt and gratitude, she could finally go home with her grandmother and tend for her.

That's if she could find her first.

Tiffany entered the room to find nothing except for a made up bed and a clean dresser. She ran immediately to the nurse station.

"Excuse me! Where's my grandmother? Room 405?"

"Pardon?" said the male receptionist.

"Where's the head nurse? I need to talk to her! Where's my—"

"Miss, please. This is a hospital. Don't raise—"

"Where is she?" Tiffany sized the man up, "My name's Stephanie. Stephanie Hwang. I'm related to her. She's my grandmother."

"Patient 405 was discharged last night," the man finally said, looking up from his clipboard. "Are you sure you're her granddaughter?"

Without thinking, Tiffany scurried to the elevator, pushing the button with her thumb non-stop. If she hurried, if she carefully planned her steps, she could still make it back to Taeyeon before it was too late. *Dammit!* Tiffany scowled at the elevator to open. *I can't believe I trusted him! I should have known!*

Tiffany gritted her teeth as she harassed the cab driver to hurry down further the south of the city, to where she and her grandmother used to stay. Barging in quickly with her house keys, she raced to the kitchen and knelt in front of the sink. She turned the drainage pipe clockwise and removed it from its base. Smacking the sink hard with her hand, she reached inside for her .45-caliber pistol.

The house looked exactly like how she left it the other day, with white cloth draped over the couch and drip coffee in the machine. She tiptoed to reach the back of the fridge to retrieve a box of cartridges. The gun felt heavy in her hands.

Stopping to smell the air, she quickly looked over to the other side of the house where the answering machine had been blinking red.

She pressed play.

"Stephanie, my little lamb, did you enjoy my surprise? I hope the hospital didn't give you too much trouble. Now, give it some thought. Let it settle down in your stomach before we continue. There. Is that better? I really can't afford to lose that pretty face of yours. Drop your bags and hurry back to your apartment. Louise will be waiting for you there. Now come on, smile. Grandma Neesa is doing just fine. We'll visit her first thing on Sunday, it's the feast of St. Augustine. You didn't forget did you?"

Tiffany kept silent, relieved that her grandmother was alive.

"I hope you won't stay angry at me for too long. 'Thou must be emptied of that wherewith thou art full, that thou mayest be filled with that whereof thou art empty.' Remember? You are a fighter, my dear. One of the bravest to admit weakness and treachery. Smile, it's the smile of the devil. I'll see you on Sunday."

Tiffany pressed play again and closed her eyes as she listened to it. Micky certainly knew how to twist her into believing this was hell.

Chapter 43

Kim Taeyeon was in darkness. Dark spaces swamped her sight as she tried to make out the fuzzy shapes and shadows around her. She breathed in heavily, the dust up her nose, her throat thick. In the short rocky seconds of sleep, she jerked awake screaming against the cloth on her mouth trying to find an escape from where she sat, arms and legs tied, body pinned straight.

A hand from behind caressed her cheek as she did. "Such a small, delicate face." Taeyeon tried to turn her head to see who the figure was. "Are you sure you're not his twin?"

Taeyeon did not know how long she had been taken. Her pictures on Tiffany's wall flashed in her mind, it being the last trail of daylight on her eyelids.

"Sorry, we don't give any potty breaks here." The man laughed hard. "You're quite pretty, Taeyeon. Almost too pretty it hurts. It hurts because you remind me of him." The man walked around and hunched down to meet her eyes.

Taeyeon squinted, seeing the shadow of the man's nose bridge. She bit the cloth, trying to stay awake with her fear. Where was Tiffany?

The man was on his feet, untying the gag on her face. Taeyeon choked, trying to catch her breath for some clean air. Her lips were dry and painful from hours of biting.

"You know when I told your brother I was going to kill him, he didn't believe me."

Taeyeon froze. "What—"

"I said to him 'Jiwoong, the only way out is through!' but he still ran away. Such a fool. Are you a fool? Are you a family of cowards? Why is everyone such a coward these days?"

Taeyeon heard the man move and walk away, the sounds of his shoes meeting the floor going further and further from where she was. Suddenly, like an orchestrated show, the fluorescent lights lit up one by one after the other. Taeyeon looked away, the glare blinding her with shapes and spots of colour.

"I suppose I don't look familiar to you," the man said. "Not at all?"

Taeyeon forced her eyes to look at him. He didn't look at all familiar. He looked too old to be one of her brother's peers.

"Right. Well, enough chit-chat. I'm here to take back what's mine. Give me my money."

"Huh?" Taeyeon said. "I don't—"

"You heard me, my dear. I want my money back. I know Jiwoong left them to you."

Taeyeon kept silent. Her arms were scraped red from the rough patches of rope bound tight to her skin. She felt dizzy, lightheaded from the lack of blood and oxygen. There was no space, no control, like time had seemingly decided to stop.

"He's dead!" Taeyeon said. "I don't even know what you're talking about! I don't have any money!"

"No money?" He laughed. "You don't see it yet, do you? Well, explain to me this trip you were supposed to be on your way to right now. First class seats? Four first class seats? My, you really are like him. Quite the generous and lavish spender." He wagged his finger and touched his lips. "Yes, Stephanie told me all about your financial plans. Or should I say Tiffany? Yes, do you see it now? I don't mean to break your heart, my dear. I just want to hurt your pocket. Now, give me my money!"

Taeyeon's eyes glazed over. She felt weak, thirsty too from the sheer terror she was sweating. Tiffany told him what? "Tiffany? Where's Tiffany?"

"Nowhere you need to know. Listen, Taeyeon, I'm a very busy man and admittedly, I don't have a lot of patience. Tell me where you hid it now or else!" He took out his gun and shot an empty beer bottle on the floor, shattering it into tiny pieces. "I'll kill Tiffany next."

Chapter 44

It didn't take long for Jessica Jung to put two and two together. When Mr. Kent's eyes shifted left and right as he apologized to her for having so little information, Jessica knew he had been protecting himself. Indeed, he did spew out the facts just as he was asked, but this was Officer Jung's little girl. At least let the girl choose and find her own ending.

The background database at the station was outdated to say the least, ever since the technology boom had left it to sweep its own crumbs, but that's exactly what Jessica needed. Old forgotten profiles that were no longer touched nor compromised.

Shelby L. Johnson, no criminal history, no address and no SS number. Great, Jessica scanned. Not even a damn photo. The only listed entry was a phone number. Jessica punched it in. St. Mary's Orphanage and Life Academy queued up on the screen. She barged outside the station and hurried her way downtown. She never went to Church but she didn't think she was a sinner in God's eyes.

St. Mary's Orphanage and Life Academy was primarily known for admitting sexually abused children. They had a small building for therapy and support group circles that volunteers often went to. The sisters wore a distinct purple veil around their heads and often carried a pocketbook Bible in one hand. Jessica made sure to keep her visit short and sweet.

"Slow down," the mother superior said, "I will try to help you as much I can."

Jessica kept to her feet, ready any minute now to run. "Sister, please. I'm in a desperate hurry. I need any information you have that has to do with a certain Shelby L. Johnson."

"I'm afraid I can't give you—"

"I don't have a warrant and I sure as hell want to respect your institution's privacy but I need answers. You're my only hope."

The elderly sister blinked, taken aback by Jessica's crude tone. She changed her demeanour immediately. "Do you have a sob story to sell me?"

"Like most of God's children do."

"We are born with original sin. We have to accept that," she said. "I don't mean to waste both of our time but I want to know what you're doing in this profession." Jessica closed in thought. "Alright, you don't have to answer."

"I've tried praying."

"But?"

"It's a dead end."

"My child, Psalm 46:10 'Be still and know that I am God' tells me you're doing it right."

"I hope so."

The mother superior reached out to pat Jessica on the arm. "You're always forgiven. Now, about that record, I'm afraid I can't give it to you."

Jessica centered herself. "How many times must I forgive my neighbour? Seventy times seven. Give me that chance. Please."

After a few minutes, the mother superior nodded and led Jessica further inside the convent. The gun at the small of her back felt hot and dangerous, like a ticking bomb against her skin. She kept silent, bowing her head in the holy presence of God's prophets. After all, she already got what she came for.

Chapter 45

Tiffany didn't have a lot of time to explain. On the way back to her house, she already knew she only had one shot at this. This wasn't a game with an endless supply of reset. One shot gave away one life. If Micky wasn't going to keep his end of the deal, which he obviously wasn't, someone has definitely got to go. It didn't matter really, whether heaven or hell was on earth, there was no space big enough to hold her hatred for this man.

Sooyoung was in the middle of paying her taxi fare at the airport terminal when her phone rang. "Hello?"

"Sooyoung, it's Tiffany. Taeyeon's in trouble."

Sooyoung immediately hopped back in the taxi. With one hand on her phone, she used the other to dig for her ID and pistol. "What? Where are you?"

"Listen carefully. Head for 22 Main, Unit 1302, there's a spare key under the coffee table in the hall lounge. Turn the knob but don't open it. Wait for the door to open, duck and then tackle him. He'll be alone waiting for me there. He'll be armed but if you knock him out, we can buy more time. Hurry. Please."

"Where are you?" Sooyoung tapped the window of the driver and held up her ID. "22 Main and hurry!" she said to him. "Tiffany, where's Taeyeon? She was kidnapped? Is she hurt? Tell me!"

"No, no, he won't kill her." Tiffany hurried down alone to an old warehouse a few blocks from the orphanage she grew up in. This was where she met Grandma Neesa who had been walking her purse dog that afternoon. It was play time for the girls of St. Mary's and Tiffany had decided to climb the steel fence and jump over to the wide streets outside. She ran blindly, almost hitting Grandma Neesa if she hadn't swayed to the right, skidding to the ground. Grandma Neesa helped poor Tiffany up and asked her where she was headed. "I came from there," Tiffany had said, pointing behind her where the purple tin roofs of the convent made it look artificial. Grandma Neesa took her home, bathed her with warm water and decided then there she was keeping her. Micky came home that day with a black eye and a missing tooth. He smiled upon learning to have a new sister since he was an orphan himself.

"He'd have to kill me first if he does."

Chapter 46

When Jessica heard Sooyoung's voice on her phone, she dropped all leads to Shelby Johnson and picked up her pace. Sooyoung was headed for Red Curtain and Jessica smelled the trail right after her. Apparently Sooyoung's friend was kidnapped in the broad daylight and her prostitute lover didn't want to risk too much police intervention. Jessica clicked her phone shut, her pocket money almost squeezed dry from the number of taxi rides that afternoon. She had lost authority to bring the station's old cruiser.

"Sooyoung! News?" Jessica arrived in time. Several of her colleagues were securing the perimeter of the building and Sooyoung was shouting orders on her radio.

"The whole building's got activity. Probably half a dozen white males. Threat level's yellow. We're busting in."

"What about your friend?" Jessica asked, impatient for something to do. "Did Charlie run them over yet?"

"Still tracking them. We might get answers if he cooperates. We can only wait." Sooyoung's forehead creased a deep line. Hyoyeon stayed behind in one of the police wagons, alert for a phone call from Tiffany. Her friend's life was in the dirty hands of these sinners.

"I haven't found anything on Adrian yet. But I did find something with my father."

"What?"

"The man who killed him grew up in St. Mary's Orphanage and Life Academy and was adopted by a French national named Neesa Durant."

Chapter 47

Taeyeon spat out blood. The cold metal face of Micky's gun on her cheek was a welcoming sensation to her raw skin. Sitting down for how long had numbed the lower half of her body and she had trouble keeping her head up.

Micky had already killed her before she physically died. Tiffany set her up? Her brother was a drug lord? Taeyeon felt her consciousness slip past her, only the throbbing pulse in her small fingers registered. She gave him a short side-glance as he walked in front of her. Taeyeon closed her eyes.

She heard walking. Taeyeon looked up to see Tiffany rushing to Micky's side.

"Did she cough out yet?" Tiffany asked him.

"Didn't think you'd want to see this," Micky said, "or did you want to have the final honours?" He stepped on broken glass. Tiffany pursed her lips.

"Where's Louise?"

"I sent him home." Tiffany answered. *Dammit! Turn around you monster! No. He knows I didn't meet him. He's going to kill me.*

"I didn't think he'd be so easy to disobey orders," Micky said. "But then again did you give him your body too?" He placed his hand on Tiffany's waist, near the leather of her holster. He looked down at his hand.

Tiffany didn't move. When she didn't move away from Micky's touch, when she didn't take her eyes off him, he knew. "Yes," she said in reply.

Their eyes met and they saw it. Micky smiled at her and withdrew his hand. "Is there ever something that face of yours won't get?"

Move Tiffany! Move! She let him come closer, his smile never leaving his face. "You'll forgive me, won't you?"

Move! She reached for the gun, one smooth move with two firm hands, Micky right in the centre of her aim. "It's game over."

He sneered.

"Hands up. Now. Slowly."

Shoot him! Shoot him in the leg! Shoot his hands! Just shoot him! If you're not going to grab for that opened cage, he's going to lock you in there forever!

"I want out, Micky. There's only two options. One of us has to go. You or me."

Micky, with hands up, just put them down. Tiffany, both hands on the gun, arms straight, stepped sideways when she should have fired when he moved. He opened his lips and she shot the lights directly above them, glass breaking on top of their heads. She ran towards Taeyeon behind him and pushed her towards the wall. Taeyeon fell sideways, her left shoulder scraping against the pipe. Micky turned around, his gun moving where Tiffany ran. She grabbed for the fuse box and shut down the lights. She turned and shot the darkness, eyes wide. She fired again, unsure of where the bullet landed. A dark cough came out.

Sooyoung and Jessica waited quietly outside but when they heard the first gunshot, they called in the men to settle into position. "Move! Move!" Jessica ran with her gun. "Get ready!"

Tiffany fumbled back to the wall, her left arm feeling the fuse box while her other squeezed her gun. She opened the lights and found Micky on the floor bleeding. He got hit in the torso. She kicked his hand and his gun went flying. Tiffany aimed for his head.

"I didn't choose this. I never wanted to be part of your *family*. I just want to live in peace. Who cares if I'm alone?"

"We'll see each o-ther in hell." Micky clung to his side, a dark pool of blood under him. "Heaven doesn't exist. There's nowhere for you to go."

"Shut up!"

"Tiffany!" Taeyeon screamed from behind them. "Don't! Put the gun down!"

"You don't get it too do you, Taeyeon? He killed your brother! He deserves to die!"

"I want his answers." Taeyeon writhed. "Jiwoong would never get himself into trouble."

"He's dead too, Taeyeon. Would you have his life be put in vain?"

"No last words?" Tiffany cocked her head to him. "No last prayers?" She shot him on the shoulder and pointed to her head. "I'm not that kind to let you have an easy death. How does it feel, pain?"

Meanwhile the last gunshot sent Jessica into alarm. With one quick heave of her foot, she kicked the tattered door behind the back of the warehouse and shouted, "Freeze!"

"Tiffany!" Taeyeon called out. "Don't do it!"

"Taeyeon!" Sooyoung barged in. Several officers circled them and took the gun away from Tiffany's hands.

Micky looked up at the ceiling on his back, laughing to himself. "So there really is a God," he said.

"Shelby L. Johnson, you're under arrest." Jessica felt the fire in her hands. When Tiffany had told them earlier that her grandmother's name was Neesa and was French, Jessica immediately asked if St. Mary's Orphanage and Life Academy had anything to do with her life. This was the moment she had waited for.

"You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say may be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you."

Tiffany took one last look at Micky before her knees found their way on the ground. We can't go to hell together.

Chapter 48

When Tiffany woke the clean smell of laundry greeted her. For a second she thought she was already dead. But heaven and hell didn't exist so where was she now? The IV drip tucked shallowly in her skin was the first thing she saw. Taeyeon was on the bed to her right, sitting up, awake with an IV fluid too.

"Taeyeon, how are you feeling? Is your shoulder okay?"

Taeyeon looked her over. "It's fine. No need for a cast."

"I suppose you want to know."

"Sooyoung told me." Tiffany fell silent, unable to dig for anything inside to say. "I wouldn't have guessed. But then again, I never knew my brother was a drug lord. Guess I'm pretty oblivious," Taeyeon said, her voice shaking. "I didn't suspect a thing. You really got me."

"Taeyeon—"

"Not now. My mind's too dead to talk properly. It's too much to take in. Too many sudden answers. It's just—wow. Jiwoong, a drug lord. How the hell did he end up there? And you, growing up in that orphanage and Micky—"

"I can't apologize if that's what you're—"

"I know, I know," Taeyeon said, her face blank. "I'm not expecting an apology. Not that it would be enough anyway." She laughed quietly.

"I won't expect your forgiveness the same way I won't apologize for what I had chosen to do."

"You didn't kill him."

"But I nearly had you killed."

"I've been dead for some time now, Tiffany. Ever since he left."

"You still have your friends."

"And you?"

Tiffany looked away, "So is this goodbye?"

"I don't know." Taeyeon smiled. "We'll see."

Chapter 49

Jessica Jung returned home only to change her clothes. After Micky was handed over to the Drug Force Authority, she bought a bouquet of sunflowers and donated the spare change to the local parish. She had managed to borrow Sooyoung's car before she could report it back to the station.

It was nearing sunset and only the care taker was around, sweeping the dried leaves off the grass in the cemetery.

Jessica looked up, hopeful of the orange sky and its promise. It's been awhile since she last came here, the last memories were when she was still a little girl in her red shoes, lost in a sea of black and prayers. She didn't feel she could face him. Not yet, not without any news to make him happy.

She kneeled in front of her father's grave and said her prayers.

May you rest in peace.