

## HATE ME

### CHAPTER 1

"I'll see you next week, Tiffany." The middle-aged woman kindly smiled. "Are you sure you'll be okay on your own?"

She bowed. "I'll be fine, Mrs. Park. This is not my first time riding the subway, you know, and I'm graduating soon. I'm big enough to travel alone."

The lady smiled, "Okay then. Go straight home and let me know when you've arrived."

She smiled back – grateful for the kind attention of the person she had known since she was in grade school. "Yes, Mrs. Park. I will." She waved and turned around, "See you next week!" She cheerfully made her way down the stairs and out the building.

It was still light outside and she walked with a skip to her step, her pink flute case swinging in her hold. She was about to turn towards the direction of the subway station when her eye caught the road sign. She smiled. *The market!* She suddenly craved for snacks so she changed direction followed the sign.

She took longer than expected as she ate and browsed around the market and realized with a bit of fear that it was already dark when she was finished. She quickly made her way towards the subway station.

She was walking quietly when she suddenly heard rushed footsteps and before she realized what was happening, she felt her bag being yanked roughly from her shoulder. "YAH!" She managed to hang on to the strap and the ragged looking kid – not older than herself – who held the other end of it glared at her.

She was afraid but she wasn't going down without a fight. Her mind snapped back to work and she began yelling, "Help! Purse snatcher! Help! I'm being robbed! Somebody! Help!"

The young man pulled harder and harder until she felt her fingers burned and involuntarily let go of her hold. He ran and she was about to run after him when someone went by her so fast it was a blur to her eyes. She slowed down as she saw what she thought was a girl with blond hair running after the punk in high speed and jumping him from behind.

When she had managed to reach the person, she saw her kicking the guy's butt until he fell face first on the ground.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?!" She snatched the purse from his hand. "This is *not* a way to earn a living."

"Shut up!" He shouted back.

She kicked him again and moved to punch him. "You dare talk back to me?!" Her voice echoed and passersby turned their heads, keeping their distance. He shielded his face from the fist and scrambled to get away.

She delivered one last kick to his butt as he ran away from her. "Stupid punk." She grumbled.

She turned to find Tiffany looking at her – half in fear, half in amazement. Tiffany was still trying to catch her breath, clutching her flute case in one hand.

"What are you looking at?"

"N-nothing..." Tiffany stuttered as she noticed that this girl was probably around her age too. A bit shorter, clothed all in black and had shoulder length blond hair.

The girl handed her the purse. "Here. And I apologize for that idiot. He's actually harmless, just very stupid."

Tiffany slowly took it. "Thank you."

The girl shrugged. "Be more careful next time, okay? A girl like you shouldn't be walking around here alone at night." She turned and walked away.

"Wait!"

"What?" She turned around.

Tiffany quickly opened her purse, fishing for her wallet.

The girl saw it. "Keep your money." She turned and started to walk away again.

Tiffany didn't care. She took out some bills and went after her. "Thank you for helping me." She ran until she was in front of the impassive looking girl. She extended her hand and the bills in them. "Please? As a sign of my sincere gratitude."

The face didn't change as the girl looked at her quietly for a few seconds. She then moved around the surprised Tiffany.

"Wait!"

She kept walking.

"At least tell me your name? I want to thank you properly!" She kept shouting since the girl didn't stop walking.

A hand was lifted and the girl crossed the street and turned the corner, disappearing from her sight.

Tiffany frowned at her strange rescuer as she quickly put the bills and wallet into her purse, afraid of a sequel to what just happened. Her heart was still racing. It all happened within minutes, seconds. The shock of being robbed hadn't even registered properly and here she was, standing there unharmed and with every possession intact – as if nothing had happened in the first place.

She took a deep breath and turned on her heels, quickly making her way to the subway station to get straight home.

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She stopped and turned around, slowly making her way back to the corner and peeked. She saw the girl shouldering her bag and turning on her heels, walking briskly away.

She took a deep breath and came out of her hiding. She made her way slowly back to where she was really going before she heard the shouts and saw her high school junior doing yet another stupid reckless act.

She walked slowly, enjoying the night and replaying what had just happened in her mind. The amount offered to her was quite large. She could really use it but she had sworn to never take other people's money unless it's the reward for her honest, hard work.

*That girl was looking for trouble, being clearly high class and walking around alone at night strutting her branded bag, she thought. She was very pretty though, she chuckled as she shook her head and continued on her way.*

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"What's wrong, Samchon?" Tiffany asked the older man in the driver's seat when the car considerably slowed down all of a sudden.

"I think we have a flat tire, Miss Hwang. And the spare tire is also flat, unfortunately." He apologetically met her eyes through the rearview mirror, "I haven't had it checked after the last time."

"Oh. No problem. There must be a garage or something nearby."

He nodded, "There is, luckily. A good one too, although quite small." He made a turn.

“Okay. Let’s just go there now. I’ll let Mrs. Park know that I’ll be late.” She took out her phone and dialed her flute teacher’s number.

The car slowly made its way to a small garage and Tiffany noticed how young the mechanics were. She stepped out of the car, following her driver.

“Taeyeon!” The man walked up to a pair of boots sticking out from under an old VW Beetle. “Still tinkering with this junk?”

A pair of surprisingly small yet dirty hands came out, followed by a short stature clad in oil-smeared blue overall. “It’s not junk, Samchon. I’ve told you that at least a hundred times.” The girl sat up.

He chuckled. “It hasn’t made a sound in more than a decade. It’s junk, Taeyeon-ah.”

She stood up and wiped her hands on the towel hanging from her pocket. “I will make it purr like a kitten, Samchon.” She grinned. “Just you wait. Herbie will have nothing on this baby.”

He laughed. “You and your Herbie obsession. You’re turning 23, Taeyeon. Shouldn’t you stop the childish dreams?”

“Childish dreams are what keep me going, Samchon. You know that.” She fixed her short ponytail. “Anyway, what brings you here?” She looked at the car behind him and noticed the person standing by the passenger door, staring at her with large eyes. She recognized the pretty face. She lifted her eyebrows and nodded a little towards Tiffany, “She’s with you?”

He nodded, “I have a flat on the way to her flute lesson. You know her. I’ve told you about her many times.”

“Ah. Your boss’ daughter?” Taeyeon walked towards him and they approached the girl.

“Yes,” he said. “Miss Hwang, this is Taeyeon. She runs this little shop.” He smiled kindly.

Taeyeon extended her hand after wiping it again with the towel. “Sorry, it’s a bit dirty.” The words were courteous but the tone was still as flat as when they first met. It was different than when Taeyeon talked to the old man, Tiffany noticed.

Tiffany slowly shook Taeyeon’s hand.

“So now you know my name.”

Tiffany nodded, still somewhat dumbfounded with surprise.

“You two’ve met before?” He asked as he looked at Taeyeon and then at Tiffany.

Taeyeon nodded, making her way around the car as she searched for the flat tire. “Last week. By accident.” She saw the problem and squatted down. “It’s pretty bad, Samchon. I’m glad you made it here without damaging the rim.” She stood up. “Might be a leak. We’ll fix it quickly for you.” She called out to one of the young men. “Jiseok-ah! Can you find the leak in this one and fix it asap?”

A young man readjusted his cap as he walked towards them and whistled. “Nice ride, Ahjussi. This is your daily ride?”

The older man laughed, “Yep. Beautiful isn’t she? Can you also check the flat spare tire?”

The guy nodded and smiled, “Of course, Ahjussi. Anything for you.”

“Thanks. Be careful okay?” he kindly smiled and gave him the key to the car.

“For sure, Ahjussi. Wouldn’t want you to get in trouble with the boss now, would we?”

He chuckled and patted the capped head.

“Thank you too, Taeyeon.” He called out to the smaller girl who was making her way to what looks like the office part of the garage.

“You know it’s not a problem, Samchon. Come inside.” She called back out.

“Miss Hwang?” The old man gently addressed the girl who was still quietly observing everything in a bit of a daze. “Let’s wait inside. This won’t take long but it’s better to sit down while we wait.”

“Oh. R-right.” She walked with him inside the small office.

“Make yourself comfortable. Sorry for the mess but it’s a garage so...” Taeyeon was sitting at a desk, writing something down in a tattered notebook. “Do you want something to drink? We have sodas, coffee and water.” She looked up at her. “And that’s basically it.”

“I’ll take the soda.”

Taeyeon pointed with her pen to a large cooler near the entrance, “Take your pick.”

She stood up and pulled the large glass door open and browsed through the content. After making her mind, she walked back to the sofa and opened the plastic bottle in her hand. “Samchon, do you want something to drink?” She suddenly remembered the man who was now sitting on the chair in front of Taeyeon’s desk.

He smiled, “I’m fine, Miss Hwang. Thank you.” He lifted the cup in his hand. “Taeyeon knows what I like.”

Taeyeon looked up at the mention of her name and smiled at him. She then reached for a calculator from the far end of her desk and her face turned serious again as she kept writing and punched in numbers.

Tiffany looked around the small shop. Although it was half-littered with car parts, she found it surprisingly organized and clean. It didn’t stink or was covered in dust, oil or whatever unhygienic substance. She nodded to herself in approval.

She then turned to the man who was now reading a magazine. “How long have you two known each other anyway?”

He looked at her and grinned, “As long as I’ve known you, Miss Hwang.”

“But that’s... a very long time.” She furrowed her brows. Mr. Lee, the family driver, had been with her family since she could remember. He was assigned to be her personal driver when she was in grade school and had kept that job until now. Her parents told her that he had been working with her father since before she was born. They also told her how Mr. Lee used to have a family too, with a daughter who was a bit younger than her. Unfortunately, his wife and daughter were taken away from him when the plane they were on crashed. He survived. He was depressed for months and the Hwangs took him in, letting him stay at the small space above the garage. He hadn’t moved out after more than twenty years. He asked to be their driver instead and let go of his office job. Tiffany loved the man like she loved her own uncle. He was almost her second father, actually. And she probably reminded him of her daughter.

He chuckled, “Yes. But we’ve only gotten close since Taeyeon was still in... high school was that?” He turned to the girl who was still busy with whatever it was she was doing.

Taeyeon nodded.

“Oh? Where did you meet?”

“Here.”

“Here?”

He nodded. “Her father owned this place. He was a dear friend of mine.”

She hesitantly asked, “Was?”

“He died when I was in high school.” This time it was the flat voice of the girl. “Samchon helped me out with the place.” She didn’t look up from her book.

He smiled, “I’ve always loved cars. Tinkering with them or just be around them strangely soothes me.”

Tiffany understood and asked nothing more.

“Where did you two meet by the way? Forgot to ask that...”

“At the market,” Taeyeon answered coolly before Tiffany had a chance to say anything. She furrowed her brows – not really understanding why Taeyeon didn’t just tell him about their encounter.

“Oh.” He said nothing else.

Tiffany took out her phone and decided to just play a game to pass the time.

“Samchon...” She heard Taeyeon’s voice again but kept her eyes on the screen in her hands.

“Hmm?”

“Do you happen to know anyone who can get me pistons and cylinder kits at a cheaper price for the car?”

“For that junk?”

“Stop calling it junk, Samchon.” Taeyeon pouted for a second.

Tiffany noticed the slight change of tone and glanced just in time to see the pout and was surprised but kept her silence. Her eyes reverted back to the game.

He chuckled, “I’ll ask around. What’s wrong with the ones you have now?”

“They’re old.”

“That thing *is* old.”

“Yes, and that’s why I need new parts if I want to get it purring like a kitten again.”

“It’s a beetle, Taeyeon. A bug. Those don’t purr.” He grinned, clearly enjoying making fun of the girl.

“Samchon...” Her tone was threatening.

He laughed. “I know, I know. Sorry. It’s always fun to tease you about that ju-...” He stopped himself, “That car.” He was still smiling. “Got a budget?”

“Well...” There was a shuffling of papers and Tiffany glanced again to see Taeyeon leaning over the table, showing him the notebook she was diligently writing in. “I calculated.”

He looked over the numbers and lowered his tone. “And you don’t intend to eat next month?”

She leaned back and groaned a bit. “I forgot about that.” She stopped to think. “Can I skip food for a month?”

He smiled, “Don’t think about that for now. I’ll supply your food.”

“No.”

The tone made Tiffany looked up – just in time to see Taeyeon taking the notebook somewhat harshly from the old man’s hands.

“Kim Taeyeon...” He sternly said.

Taeyeon shook her head. “No, Samchon. We’ve talked about this.” Her answer was just as stern. She put the book down and gave him a very scary and serious look that made Tiffany flinch. It was the same impassive look she gave her that night, only a hundred times scarier. “I’ll recalculate.”

He sighed. “Why are you so stubborn?”

She didn’t reply and went back to scribbling and pressing the numbers on her calculator.

“They’re ready, Ahjussi.” The cheerful voice of the young man broke the tension and they all turned towards him.

“Great!” Mr. Lee stood up and got the car keys handed back. The two men strolled out to check the result.

Tiffany stood up too. “Err...”

“Go on.” Taeyeon said without looking up.

Tiffany was a bit surprised at the words. “Y-yeah. Right.” She rounded the small table and started to leave but decided that she needed to tell her how she felt on the matter. She turned on her heels. “Uhm... Thanks again, by the way... for last week.”

“Don’t mention it.” And it stopped at that.

“I’m still a bit offended that you wouldn’t accept my sincere token of gratitude, you know. You deserve it after all.”

Taeyeon finally looked up – still with the impassive face. “Thanks but I don’t need a reward.”

“But I want to-...”

“Don’t you have a flute lesson to go to? I think you’re already late as is, right?” She cut her off and nodded towards where the car was. She then looked at Tiffany for a second before going back to her book.

Tiffany sighed at the stubbornness and coldness of the girl in front of her. “Why are you like this?” She couldn’t help it.

“Why am I like what?” Taeyeon didn’t look up.

“Why do you refuse the help of people who sincerely want to help you?”

“Why are you so nosy?”

“Excuse me?!”

She looked at her with cold eyes. “With all due respect, Miss Hwang. My life and what I do is none of your business. I think Samchon’s done.” She pointed with her pen and Tiffany turned to see the man walking in their direction.

Tiffany sighed, “I still think I’m right.”

“And I still think you’re nosy.”

Tiffany pursed her lips. She wasn’t used to being denied or rejected – at least not twice by the same person within a span of seven days.

“Everything looks great,” the man walked passed them and placed some bills on the table. “Thanks.”

Taeyeon looked up with a start and gave him that scary look again. “Samchon!”

“What?! You’re not running a charity here, Taeyeon.” He sternly replied.

“But-...”

“No buts, young lady. If you won’t let me help you as your samchon then at least let me pay for the services as a customer.” He was clearly hurt by their little talk earlier and both Taeyeon and Tiffany realized that.

“Samchon...” The tone softened.

“We’ll talk about this later.” He muttered under his breath.

Taeyeon sighed and looked down.

He smiled a bit and reached to ruffle her hair. “Later.” He then turned to Tiffany. “Shall we, Miss Hwang? Mrs. Park would be waiting.”

“Ah yes, of course. Let’s go.”

He walked out of the office and she was about to follow him before she stopped and turned towards Taeyeon. “Thank you.”

Taeyeon only absentmindedly nodded a little. Her gaze was fixed on the money on her desk and Tiffany could see the jaws clench. She decided to just leave since saying anything else would clearly get her into an argument with her.

Tiffany got into the car and leaned back – looking out the window as they drove through the city.

She arrived at the lesson an hour late and couldn't focus so Mrs. Park understandingly let her go home after just half an hour.

"That's fast, Miss Hwang." He looked at her from the rearview mirror as soon as they were ready to go.

"Just not in the mood, I guess."

He nodded quietly and drove.

She looked out the window. Her mind traveled to the mysterious Taeyeon and her curiosity got the best of her.

"Samchon?"

"Yes, Miss Hwang?"

"What happened to Taeyeon's father? Your friend?"

"Cancer, Miss Hwang."

"Oh. Sorry to hear that."

"It's okay." He sadly smiled. "I can't say I'm used to the people leaving but I manage." He looked at her again, "Don't worry, Miss Hwang."

She nodded. "Where's her mother?"

"Died at her birth, unfortunately. It was always just the two of them."

She held her breath. *That must be so hard for her*, she thought. She felt lucky to have both her parents although she could relate to the loneliness with no sibling around to play or bicker with.

A few seconds passed before he spoke again. "I know that you think she's cold and rough. I don't blame you. A lot of people think that. But she's a good kid. Life just made her that way. They were never rich. His life was that garage. He was obsessed with cars," he chuckled fondly. "He passed it down to his daughter. I don't even know whether she had ever own a doll. I've always seen her with a toy car."

She smiled at the image of a small Taeyeon playing with a toy car. *Must be cute*, she thought as she remembered the split-second pout.

"When did you really meet her?" He asked. They were at a stoplight.

"Remember that purse snatching incident last week?"

He nodded. It was the reason why her parents wouldn't let her go anywhere without him anymore.

"She was the person who helped me."

"Oh?" He was clearly surprised.

"Apparently she knew the guy who did it. She literally kicked his butt." She couldn't help but smile at the memory.

"Ah I see. Must be one of those rascals again." The light turned green and he drove on.

"What rascals?"

"Well..." He hesitated a little. "She would kill me if she knows I'm talking about her like this," he grinned. "She takes in high school drop outs and gives them second chances." He paused. "Some really turn over a new leaf while others, well... you've met one of them, I guess."

She was surprised at the news. "Take them in? Where? How?"

“At the shop. By giving them jobs. Some proved to be good mechanics and even moved on to better jobs at large car dealers or make money restoring antique cars. Some just clean up the shop.” He sighed, “I told her that she should start thinking big and start taking the business seriously if she ever wants to improve her living but you’ve witnessed her stubbornness.” He glanced at her through the rearview mirror again.

Tiffany nodded.

“So you know that she’ll never listen to me.” He smiled a little.

Silence filled the car again.

“How old is she?”

“Same age as you. Slightly older by a few months.” He stopped the car in front of the large gates and waited.

“Where does she study? I mean, which university?”

The large gates opened and they drove in slowly. He chuckled, “Do you think she has enough money for college tuition? I offered to pay for her, or lending her the money if she doesn’t want to accept it as a gift but...”

“Stubbornness?”

He nodded. “We got into quite a huge fight.” He took a deep breath, “At least she graduated high school.”

He parked the car in front of the entrance of the large building and the butler ran down the steps to open the car door. He turned to look at her, “She’s a good kid, Miss Hwang. She doesn’t believe that she should accept other people’s money unless it’s earned through her sweat – her hard work. And she’s used to putting up a strong front so she doesn’t let people help her. That’s her only flaw.” He smiled kindly. “Other than that? She’s the perfect girl, a great daughter and friend.”

She understood and smiled back. “I’ll keep that in mind, Samchon.” She reached and patted his shoulder. “Thank you for the ride and the adventure.” She winked before stepping out of the car.

He chuckled, “My pleasure, Miss Hwang.”



## CHAPTER 2

She glanced briefly at the two other people sitting at the table. Both looked calm and their conversations so far were pleasant. It was Saturday, after all. And by the look of things, her father wasn't in one of his hectic periods. He was chewing his breakfast slowly, leaning back in his chair with a relaxed look.

"Daddy?" She put down her fork. "I want to take my car out for a drive today, okay? Will meet some friends at the mall later. Mr. Lee can take the day off."

He paused his chewing and looked across the table. "Why can't he just drive you?" The look on her mother's face asked the exact same question.

"I'm going to be 22 soon, Daddy. Will be graduating and everything. I don't need a babysitter."

"He's not babysitting you. He'll just drive you there and back home again. He won't even tag along. You know that."

"I do but come on, Daddy. I'm 22! I've had my car and driver's license for a year and I can count on my hands how many times I went out driving." She lifted her hands and showed them eight of her fingers. "My friends all drive or go out on their own. I'm the only one with a driver waiting for me. It's kinda embarrassing at this age." She lowered her tone towards the end and pouted a little, knowing that if she pushed the right buttons, her parents would not be able to refuse her. As usual.

"We only want to ensure your safety, Miyoung," her mother said.

The appearance of her Korean name could only mean one thing: she needed to step up her sulking quickly.

"But Mommmm~..." She pouted and whined. She wasn't proud of doing this at 21 but if it gets the job done then why not. She sat back and folded her arms.

"Remember what happened last week?"

"But that was not my fault!" Although inside she knew it was her fault for wandering off alone at night. "It could happen to anybody, you know. You can't keep me in this golden cage or bubble or whatever... forever." She took a deep breath. "I'll be fine." She looked at her mother then at her father. Both were looking at her with questioning expressions. "How can I live independently if you won't let me start learning now? I'm not going to depend on you forever, you know."

She realized she was spoiled and that her parents would practically give her the world if she asked for it. But they'd also never stopped reminding her that all this might not last forever. Although they had been living lavishly ever since she could remember, they told them that there was a time when they couldn't even afford a wedding because they had no money. So they tried their best to limit their spoiling, making sure that she didn't grow up to be an obnoxious girl.

She had always found this contradicting sides and advices of her parents quite amusing and not to mention easy to manipulate – being the only daughter and all. She knew exactly which buttons to press. And pressing she was.

When her parents still didn't reply, she switched to her frustrated act. She threw both hands in the air. "Oh come on. You always tell me how much you want me to be independent. It's just a short trip to the mall, Daddy, Mommy." She looked at them. "Mr. Lee can vouch for my driving skills." She didn't mention that she had had more than her share of joyrides in her friends' luxurious sport cars. She could handle them better than her father, most likely. "Please?" She added the puppy eyes, just in case.

Her mother turned to look at her father and she knew she had done it.

She kept her half sulking half begging face on.

He finally sighed. "Fine. Just to the mall, right? You go home straight after. And before sunset. You hear me?"

"What is this, medieval vampire town? Home before sunset? There are lights, Daddy. Thomas Edison invented them for our convenience."

"Driving at night is different, Miyoung-ah. And it's weekend. It's bound to get crowded on the roads tonight."

There's her Korean name again. She would not press this matter and caused her father to change his mind. "Oh alright. I promise I'll be home by dinner. Okay?" She wiped her mouth and pushed her chair back. "Thanks, Daddy, Mommy." She gave them her best smile and quickly made her way out of the dining room.

The man sighed after the girl disappeared from his sight, "She's growing up too fast."

The woman chuckled lightly. "You can't bonsai them, you know. Kids grow up."

"I know," he smiled. "I can't help but think how crazy it would be when we have more. Constant endless puberty and adolescence." He sadly added.

She turned to him and squeezed his hand gently. "I'm sorry, dear."

"Don't be sorry. It's not your fault at all." He patted her hand – still smiling. "I guess it was just not meant to be."

They silently returned to their breakfast.

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She changed her clothes into something more casual, pocketed her phone, her driver's license, a credit card and some cash. She didn't want the hassle of carrying a bag. It was a casual short trip anyway.

She tied her pink sneakers and hopped out of her room. She walked to the large drawer in the living room and pulled it open. Creasing her brows, she tried to figure out which key would open her car door. Her eyes then fell on the small cute pink keychain on one of them and smiled. She was glad that Mr. Lee or the other drivers didn't take it off.

Making her way to the garage, she saw the man polishing the car he often used to drive her around. "Good morning, Samchon."

He turned and smiled, "Good morning, Miss Hwang. Your father told me that you'll be driving yourself today?"

She nodded. "You don't mind?"

He shrugged. "A girl needs her privacy, right? Besides, you're no longer a girl – as much as I hate to admit that." He shook his head and went back to his work gloomily.

She had to laugh. "Why is everyone in this house so opposed to me growing up? It can't be helped, you know. I might even move out one day."

He stopped his hand movements. "Please don't say that, Miss Hwang." His tone was fearful and hurt.

She laughed again, "You're worse than Daddy sometimes, Samchon."

He turned to her and grinned, "That's what I get for seeing you everyday for the past twenty one years, I guess." He gave the car one final rub with the cloth in his hand. "Well, at least I still have Taeyeon."

“Oh. Speaking of which...” She approached him. “Can you give me directions to her shop? I might stop by today. My car’s been rotting in the garage for a year. I’m pretty sure it needs at least an oil change or something?”

He tilted his head, “I’m pretty sure your car is fine, Miss Hwang.”

“Can’t hurt to make sure, right?” She shrugged. “Especially with all this talk about my safety and what not.”

He smiled a little. “You’re curious, aren’t you?”

“Huh? About what?”

“Taeyeon.”

She looked away, “Maybe.”

“She’s different, Miss Hwang. She’s not like you or your friends.” He explained carefully. “I care a lot about her. And I know you mean no bad things but...” He sighed, “Please be careful with her? She may look tough but she’s as fragile as a china doll inside. She gets hurt easily although she masks it expertly.”

“I’m not-... Come on, Samchon. You know me better than that.” She couldn’t help but resent the insinuation.

“I do and that’s why, with all due respect, I’m saying this, Miss Hwang.” He paused. “I’m not saying that you have bad intentions or anything but if you’re only curious about how the other half of the society lives, then please, don’t experiment on her. She’s been hurt enough.”

She sighed, “I don’t intend to experiment on her or do anything to her, Samchon. Can’t I just get my car checked? You did say that she’s good.”

He knew that he couldn’t say anything to change her mind. “Alright.” He took a deep breath. “Just please remember my words, Miss Hwang?”

She nodded. “I will. Don’t worry, Samchon. Okay?” She hopped away before stopping. “Oh and text me the directions, please?” She pouted, begging him like she begged her father.

He shook his head and smiled, “I will do that, Miss Hwang. Be careful? And send her my regards.”

“I will.” She waved at him and cheerfully made her way to the garage.

He took a deep breath and took out his phone to text the directions. “Let’s just hope that I’m just paranoid,” he muttered under his breath.

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“Excuse me?”

She heard the voice and turned to look from under the small hood. She saw who it was and raised her eyebrows. “What are you doing here?” She stood up from her squatting position and wiped her hands on the towel hanging from her pocket. She saw the car behind the girl. “Nice ride.”

“Thanks.” Tiffany approached her. “Can you check it for me?” She stopped a few steps away from Taeyeon.

“Is something wrong with it?” Taeyeon fixed her bangs, unknowingly smearing a little bit of oil from her fingers to her forehead.

Tiffany giggled.

“Anything funny?”

“You have something on your forehead.” She pointed at her own forehead.

“Oh?” Taeyeon tried to clean it up with the back of her hand and ended up just smearing up more oil.

Tiffany laughed, “No no.” She took the towel from Taeyeon’s overall pocket and searched for a clean spot before wiping Taeyeon’s forehead with it.

Taeyeon froze. *What is this girl doing?*

“There,” she returned the towel to her. “Maybe you should just pin your bangs.”

“Maybe.” Her tone was still cold although the gesture had pretty much quickened her heartbeat. “What’s wrong with your car?” She walked away from her, trying to distance herself as far as possible.

“Nothing but it hasn’t been out of the garage for months. I’ve had it for a year and it’s been used only seven, maybe eight, times since. And for short distances only.” She followed Taeyeon. “Doesn’t it need regular check ups or something? Oil change or whatever?”

“Well, since you don’t use it that much. It may not need anything.” She stopped by the open door at driver’s side and peeked in. She lifted her eyebrows. “You haven’t even reached 1000 kilometers yet.” She pointed at the odometer.

“I know. That’s why I’m worried. It’s been a year. Won’t the oil rot or something? Like milk?”

Taeyeon couldn’t help but laugh. “It’s not like milk, you know.”

“I know.” She stubbornly resented the laugh. “But still. A year is a long time to be sitting there doing nothing. Doesn’t it have an expiry date or something?”

“Engine oils can last up to ten years when sealed.”

“But this isn’t sealed! It’s been in there. For a year!” She repeated herself, getting tired by the second of the pointless argument. “Skip the checking. Can you just change it to be sure?”

She sighed, also getting tired of the talk. “Fine. We’ll change it.” Taeyeon then turned and shouted, “Jiseok-ah!”

“No.” Tiffany stopped her.

“Huh?” Taeyeon turned and looked at her with her eyebrows raised.

“I want you to do it. It’s a birthday present from my father. I really treasure this car and Samchon said I can trust you.” Her tone was final.

“You called, Noona?” The young man with the cap approached them.

“Oh never mind. I’m sorry, Seok-ah.”

“Okay. No problem.” He turned around and went back to whatever he was doing.

Taeyeon looked at her – puzzled. “Fine. I need to move it though.”

“Go ahead. The key is still in the ignition.” Tiffany walked towards the office.

Taeyeon took a deep breath and climbed in the pearly pink roadster. She gently ran her hands on the smooth surface of the steering wheel and smiled as she closed the door. She loved cars. Her father had transferred all his love for the machine to her. This one was very new indeed. Even the new car smell still hung thickly in the small space. She nodded to herself in satisfaction.

She turned the key and started the engine. It purred softly. She smiled again. It’s like going on a first date for her.

She gently and nervously drove it over the hydraulic car lift – taking good care to make sure it was perfectly in place before she operated the machine to lift the car off the ground just enough for her to squat under it. She had popped the hood open to speed up the draining.

Tiffany found a chair and pulled it up closer to where her car was. She was fascinated by what Taeyeon was doing – even though it was just a simple changing of car oil.

It wasn't long before Taeyeon got out from under the car, again wiping her hands. "Wait for a bit until it all drains." She walked passed her. "You don't happen to know what kind of oil is in there, do you?"

She turned around, "Nope. It's never been changed before so maybe the default factory oil?" She randomly guessed.

A small chuckle was heard from the girl who was now in another room at the back of the store. Taeyeon walked out with a silver plastic container in her hands. Tiffany thought it looked like the fabric softener bottle she saw in the laundry room once.

"Can you call whoever is usually in charge of this car? A driver? Samchon?"

Tiffany pouted a bit and took out her phone.

Taeyeon put the bottle down on the desk, crossed her arms and leaned on the edge of the desk, watching the girl sitting on the chair in front of her. It was another hot summer day and Tiffany was only wearing a loose top and very short denim shorts. Taeyeon unknowingly gulped. To say that this girl was beautiful was an understatement. And that gesture of wiping the oil on her forehead gnawed at her. She thought all rich girls were spoiled, stuck up and would never want anything to do with people like herself. Tiffany almost fit the bill perfectly – until she showed up and did that and ruined her mindset.

"Okay, thanks Samchon." Tiffany hung up and Taeyeon snapped out of her thoughts.

"And?"

"Samchon said it has never been changed and to use synthetic?" She hesitantly said that last word. "He said you know what's best."

Taeyeon smiled a little. "And he's usually right. Synthetic it is." She didn't move. The oil she had chosen was already the right one.

Tiffany wanted to ask what 'synthetic' actually meant but changed her mind when she realized that she didn't want to know anyway. Should things go wrong and the oil was not the proper one, she might have another excuse to go back there and she was more than happy with that possibility.

"Can I ask you something?"

Taeyeon lifted her eyebrow but said nothing.

Tiffany pressed on, "Where do you live?"

Taeyeon pointed to the ceiling.

"Oh. Upstairs?"

A nod.

"Alone?"

Another nod. "You don't have to make small talk with me. I'm fine with silence."

Tiffany furrowed her brows. "Why are you always so cold and rude?"

Taeyeon didn't answer and looked out the small lot.

Tiffany sighed and followed Taeyeon's gaze. She noticed the car Taeyeon was working on. "Are you fixing it up?" She gestured towards the car and turned to look at her again.

"Yes."

"You like that kind of car?"

"I like all kinds of cars."

She sighed again, "I mean, is Volkswagen your favorite? Everyone has a favorite brand."

A hesitant nod. "Something like that."

"I see." She looked at the car again, "How long have you been working at it?"

Taeyeon finally met her eyes. “Why are you so nosy?”

She turned at her again. “Seriously. Cold and rude.”

Taeyeon shrugged. “It’s the truth. Why do you keep asking me these questions?”

“Can’t I be friendly?”

“You’re nosy.”

“Sigh... you don’t have many friends, do you?”

“I have some.” Taeyeon paused. “And that’s enough.”

Tiffany understood the hint.

Taeyeon suddenly moved – taking the new oil with her and squatted to get under the car to check the draining process and continued with whatever she was doing.

As Tiffany watched the small girl work, she couldn’t help but feel a bit of anger rising inside her. Nobody ever talked to her like that. They would usually jump at the chance of making friends with her. She had seen desperate ones who would resort to many things to just have her talk to them. And here’s this girl, basically telling her to back off – coldly. Her pride couldn’t take it. But for the sake of her car’s well being, she decided to stop talking for now and let Taeyeon work peacefully. She would use the time to think of her next move. A short half an hour later and her car was up and running again.

Taeyeon got out of the driver’s seat. “There you go.” She had left the engine running for Tiffany.

“Thanks. How much?”

Taeyeon started to walk away. “Just pay for the oil. The service is on the house.”

“Huh?” Tiffany wanted to go after her but remembered to turn off the engine and lock the door before she did so. “Why?” She caught up with Taeyeon who had sat at her desk and was making out a receipt.

No answer came. Taeyeon ripped out the paper from the small book and gave it to Tiffany. The latter saw the numbers on it and furrowed her brows. “I refuse to pay only this much.” She took out the bills from her pocket and counted them before giving it to Taeyeon. “Either take this or I will make sure to never return here again.”

Taeyeon didn’t move. “Do you think I don’t have other customers?”

Tiffany didn’t back down. “I won’t leave until you take this. If you think I’m nosy then you have seen nothing yet. I still have a truckload of questions I can ask you. I can make your ears fall off.” She pouted.

Taeyeon suppressed a smile at the sentence and the fact that Tiffany was acting like a spoiled kid. The pout she had seen at least three times in the last hour was starting to grow on her. *Maybe if I keep annoying her, she’ll keep pouting?* “Fine. Stay. Be nosy all you want. I have work to do.” Taeyeon stood up and rounded the desk, walking away from a surprised Tiffany.

It took a few seconds for Tiffany to realize that her plan had backfired. She slammed the money on the desk and turned on her heels, stomping her way towards Taeyeon who was again busy with her small car.

“Why are you so rude to me?” A few heads turned at the volume of the voice.

“I’m letting you do what you want to do. How is that rude?” Taeyeon didn’t even lift her head.

“I’m being nice to you and all you’ve done is snub me.”

“I’m not snubbing you.”

“Yes, you are.”

Taeyeon sighed and turned to look at the angry girl who was – to her delight – still pouting. “Look. I told you how much you owe me and you refused to pay that. So I’m letting you do what you want. Isn’t that what you’re used to? Doing things your way?” She turned away again.

“Now you’re insulting me?”

Taeyeon shook her head quietly at the seemingly endless argument.

“Sigh,” Tiffany squatted down, facing her. “I don’t know what your problem is but I’m just trying to be nice here. You earn it so accept it.” She stood up. “Never knew that being nice could be this hard.” She huffed and turned on her heels.

The sports car drove harshly away soon after, engines roaring and tires screeching.

Taeyeon turned by reflex at the sound and saw Tiffany sped away. She chuckled. *To be able to drive like that... not such a good girl after all, huh?*

She stood up and went to the office. She saw the money and took a deep breath. It was a lot more than what she normally charged but since she couldn’t return it, “Hey guys! Lunch is on me! Who wants jajangmyun?”

Cheers were heard from the boys out front and she smiled. She picked up the phone and dialed the restaurant’s number. Her hands swiftly separated the bills. She took only what she normally charged and used the rest to buy lunch for her and her crew. Whatever’s left would go to the shop’s funds anyway.

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Tiffany went to the mall like she said she would but not to meet up with her friends. She was pissed and she released her stress the only way she knew how: shopping.

She couldn’t understand why Taeyeon was so rude to her. She was just trying to be nice. Her pride was hurt. Here she was, trying to sincerely make friends with that girl, and all she had gotten so far was short answers in a very cold tone. “Arrogant short... ugh...” she grumbled as she slammed the car door after putting in her bags in the back seat. Shopping didn’t help much this time. She couldn’t get over Taeyeon’s behavior.

She sat down and roughly grabbed the steering wheel. She exhaled loudly before her mind suddenly went back to the cute oil-smeared forehead and she felt her anger residing a bit. *Well, two can play at this game, Kim Taeyeon. You have seen nothing yet. I’ll make sure you feel guilty for turning down nice little old me.* She smirked at her own plan and quickly got out of the car again to put it into action.

----

“Hey Noona...” Jiseok came to stand next to her.

She didn’t lift her head. She was busy working on a customer’s car.

“What?”

“She’s back.”

“What? Who?” Taeyeon turned to look and caught sight of the pink sports car parking at the far end of the lot. She sighed and straightened up. “What does she want now...”

“She must like you or something.”

She glanced at him. “Stop hallucinating.”

He shrugged, “You’ll never know, Noona.” He winked. “A good catch, no?”

She hit his arm. “Go back to work.”

He laughed and left her.

Taeyeon took a deep breath as she saw Tiffany approaching her with a large paper bag in her hand. "What is it now?" She asked as soon as Tiffany was close enough to hear her.

Tiffany extended her arm. "It's a hot day. Here. Ice cream."

She lifted her eyebrows and didn't move.

Tiffany sighed, "It's gonna melt soon. Just take it and shove it into the freezer if you don't want it but at least don't let it go to waste." She nudged the bag forward. "I'm not taking it back with me."

Taeyeon scrutinized the seemingly innocent face – slightly pouting – in front of her. She exhaled loudly, making sure that her frustration was apparent for Tiffany to see. "Jiseok-ah!" She called the young man again.

"Yes, Ma'am!" He showed up almost instantly.

She knew he had been eavesdropping. She pulled down his cap, took the bag from Tiffany and gave it to him. "Tell the guys they can take a break and share this."

He grinned while fixing his cap and took a peek at the bag's content. "Whoo! Awesome! Will be sure to save you some, Noona." He then looked at Tiffany and smiled, "Thanks, Noona."

Tiffany returned the smile. "You're welcome. Enjoy."

"Guys! Ice creaaaamm!!" He ran back to the cheers of the other guys and Taeyeon couldn't help but smile as she saw how happy the guys were. She controlled her expression before she turned back to the still smiling Tiffany. "Thank you but don't ever do that again." She pointed with the wrench in her hand.

"Now you're threatening me with tools?" Tiffany's smile turned into a smirk. "You can't stop me from being nice to you, Taeyeon."

"What's it to you anyway? Why do you do this? Why are you even here?"

Tiffany shrugged, "Your karma for not accepting my sincere gratitude that night?" She waved and walked away. "Be seeing ya, Kim Taeyeon. Better get used to me."

Taeyeon scoffed and stared until the car drove away before letting a little smile graze her lips. "We'll see, Miss Hwang. We'll see..."

----

"Do you want ice cream, Samchon? There's still some left from yesterday." She stood up and opened the fridge. It was another relaxed Sunday afternoon spent over talks and chess games.

"Oh? Sure. What's the occasion? You don't usually buy ice cream unless you're celebrating something."

Taeyeon took out the half empty pint. "Miss Hwang bought them."

He put down the magazine in his hands. "Miss Hwang? Miss Tiffany Hwang?"

She nodded and gave him the small bowl. "Don't ask me why. I don't know either."

"She didn't leave after you took care of her car?"

"She did. In anger, as a matter of fact," she sat down to enjoy her own share of dessert. "But she came back later on. Again, don't ask me why. She seemed bent on proving her point that I'm cold and rude and she's all so friendly and nice." She mockingly said the last words.

"She *is* friendly and nice, Taeyeon-ah."

She shrugged. "Maybe for a stuck up arrogant rich kid..." She muttered under her breath.

"Hey." He warned her, "Don't talk about her like that. It's not her fault that her parents spoiled her. They just didn't want her to suffer like they did when they were young, okay. She's a good kid."

"Sorry..." She mumbled through the spoon in her mouth.

"And you *are* cold and rude to her. Though I'm not even sure why."



Taeyeon didn't reply.

"She's not stuck up or arrogant, Taeyeon. Well, not as much as the other rich kids anyway." He paused. "You should see some of her friends. Now *they* deserve your cold treatment. I don't even mind spilling oil on a few of them." He grinned. "But she's nice. She doesn't treat people less than her – in case you haven't noticed." He paused again, "I've told you about her a few times and how well she treats the employees and maids at home, right?"

She nodded a little.

"She's kind to us. Always is. She couldn't help it if those adoring people blow up her ego. She's very pretty, you know."

*I know*, Taeyeon agreed in silence.

He observed her but said nothing more. He finished his ice cream. "How's the car coming along? Did you call the number I gave you?"

"Yes."

"And?"

She stood up and took their empty bowls to the small kitchen behind her. "I'll just wait until next month."

He took a deep breath. "Why can't you just let me help out, Taeyeon-ah? Consider it a gift."

"It's not my birthday."

"But..."

"Nor is it Christmas. I don't need your help, Samchon." She looked at him. "You've done enough, okay?"

He sighed. "You can't do everything on your own, Taeyeon. You have to learn to let other people help you."

"I'm fine on my own, Samchon. Always been."

"I know..."

"Then please, can we talk about something else? Next month is only thirty days away. It's not that long." She finished washing the dishes and dried her hands.

"But you've been tinkering with it for more than a year..."

"So another month won't make that much of a difference, right?" She sat back down and reset the pieces on the board between them. "Besides, I'm not sure I'm ready to see it finished anyway." Her eyes glistened and she clenched her jaws.

He saw it and understood. He put the magazine down. "Can I at least be white this time?"

She chuckled and spun the board. "Go ahead and try, Samchon. You'll still lose."

He sighed.

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"Good morning!" The cheerful voice beat the noise of the busy garage. Some of the young men looked up at the familiar face and either smiled, waved or nodded their heads.

She approached the familiar pair of boots sticking from under a red car. "Good morning, Taeyeon-ah!"

With a sigh, the small girl pushed herself out – enough to see the smiling Tiffany. "What are you doing here?"

It was always the same greeting that met her every single visit for the past two weeks. Tiffany had gotten used to it by now. "Have you had breakfast?"

"Yes." She slid back under the car.

Tiffany squatted and peeked. "What did you have?"

"..."

"I asked the cook to make her super delicious sandwich." She shook the large plastic container in her hand. "Got enough for everybody."

"Then just offer it to everybody."

"You don't want any?" She knew Taeyeon would say no but she had planned to force her to eat it, just like she had done a few times before.

"No."

She grinned. "Okay. I'll leave you some." She stood up and turned around. "Hey guys. Who wants sandwich?"

Loud cheers were heard throughout the lot and Tiffany happily distributed the sandwich to the few who were clean enough to take it and told the rest that she would leave it in the fridge for them to eat later.

Taeyeon heard the commotion and sighed again. *Why does she keep doing this?*

Although she had been getting more used to these visits – which involved food, most of the time – she still wouldn't let her guard down. She wasn't sure what Tiffany's intention was no matter how nice that girl was according to the person she considered her own father.

She quickly finished what she was doing and slid out from under the car again. "Yoongmin!" She called out to one of her men who was happily chewing on his sandwich. "Clean this up for me please."

"On it, Noona." The grinning boy stuffed the last piece of the food into his mouth and ran towards her with a broom.

"Thanks." She patted his shoulder as he walked passed her. He was one of the youngest there. The sudden passing of his father forced him to stop school and to start working, helping his mother take care of his three younger siblings. He also worked as a delivery boy for a restaurant at night. Taeyeon thought he had potential since his love for cars reminded her of herself when she was his age. He practically begged for her to take him in and she couldn't refuse. He was hardworking and eager to learn. She appreciated those traits. "And don't choke on that sandwich."

He grinned again and went to work.

She walked to her office – wiping her hands on her towel. Being a mechanic who loved keeping things clean and neat made her develop that little habit. She saw a plate with a sandwich on it, waiting on her desk, as she reached for the phone and dialed a customer's number.

She glanced at Tiffany who was sitting on the small couch, eyes fixed on the screen of her iPad.

"Hello Mr. Park. This is Taeyeon. Your car is ready. I replaced the brake lines and checked everything else. The rest looks good." She paused to listen to the answer from the other end. "No problem, Sir. Ah of course. My pleasure, Sir." She smiled a little. "Yes, okay. See you later." She hung up.

Tiffany looked up, "Eat your sandwich."

"Why are you so bossy?"

"I'm not bossy. I asked Ahjumma to make it for you because it's so good. You have to appreciate her effort. She spent all morning on it." She had begun to know how to make Taeyeon do what she wanted. The key was to make her feel guilty about letting efforts of other kind people go to waste.

"Then you shouldn't have bothered her."

Tiffany shrugged, "She loves feeding people good food. She did it happily. I didn't force her. She was going to make some for my lunch anyway so she just added to that. The least you can do is appreciate her effort, you know."

Taeyeon sighed. She knew Tiffany had found one button to push and although she resented it at first, she found that she didn't mind that much actually. She washed her hands thoroughly before grabbing the sandwich and took a bite. It was indeed good. Easily the best she had ever had in her life. "Tell her thanks," she said.

Tiffany nodded absentmindedly. Her focus was back on the device in her hands.

"Why are you still here?" Taeyeon asked again.

Tiffany ignored the question. "Do you think this looks childish?" She showed Taeyeon her iPad.

Taeyeon lifted her eyebrows. "Why should I care?"

Tiffany sighed, "Just answer the question."

Taeyeon creased her brows, not understanding why she was suddenly asked for an opinion on something that – her eyes went to the screen – looked like a children's party invitation. "Your niece is having a birthday party?"

Another sigh. "Too childish it is." She frowned, "I told her so. She just wouldn't listen to me." She muttered under her breath as her fingers slid and clicked on the rectangular surface.

Taeyeon curbed her curiosity. She finished her sandwich and returned the plate to the small pantry before wiping her hands on her towel again and sat at her desk.

Tiffany's eyes caught the movement and suddenly remembered, "Oh right." She snapped her fingers and set her iPad aside. She grabbed a white paper bag at its strings and stood up, walking towards Taeyeon. "This is for you. Use them or else..." She dropped the bag on the desk and made a threatening face, almost making Taeyeon laugh at how far from scary it was.

Taeyeon furrowed her brows instead, "What now?"

Tiffany returned to her seat, unfazed by the harsh question. "Open it and see." She picked up her iPad again and continued typing.

Taeyeon heaved another deep sigh and opened the bag. She pulled out towels of various color, all similar to the ones she always hung out of her pocket. She lifted her eyebrows.

"I don't know what your favorite color is. But since I've seen the blue towel most, I got you more blue." She looked up and smiled. "I even threw in a few pink."

"Let me guess. Your favorite color?" Taeyeon coolly replied.

"Yes! How do you know?"

"Pink car, phone, iPad, shoes..."

"Oh right." She laughed. "Well, use them." She went back to her typing.

"What if I refuse?"

Tiffany ignored it. "You wouldn't, by any chance, want to come to my birthday party, do you? It's in two weeks." Her eyes were still glued to the iPad.

"W-what?" Taeyeon hadn't even gotten over the towels and now a birthday party invitation was sprung on her out of nowhere.

She turned to look at her. "My birthday party. Two weeks. My house. Wanna come?"

"You invite strangers to your house? That's bold." Taeyeon finished putting the last of the towels back into the bag. "And this is too much, by the way."

“They’re just towels. They’re not even made of silk or gold threads or something.” She dismissed that argument. “And you’re not a stranger. You rescued me, helped with two of my cars and Samchon thinks of you as his daughter. We’re practically related.”

Taeyeon didn’t react. The logic was too crazy even for her.

“So? You’ll come?”

“No.”

“Why not?” She knew Taeyeon would refuse but it didn’t lessen the disappointment. “I’m still not nice enough to you?”

“So all this is just to prove that you’re nice to me? I’m not a charity case.”

“Who says you’re a charity case?!” Her volume increased. “I’m just saying that I’m trying to be nice here. You should at least appreciate my effort.”

“Why should I when I don’t even know what your motive is?”

That startled Tiffany. She had begun to forget her original plan to get back at Taeyeon – secretly enjoying her time hanging out at the garage even though it was only to observe Taeyeon and the others at work. She had gotten to know some of the boys although Taeyeon stayed silent most of the time. She had to ask questions to get her to talk and even then she would always be met with cold answers. It was different than hanging around her usual crowd. Plus, most of them were out of the country since it was summer vacation after all. Her family had opted to stay home this year because her mother wasn’t feeling well again.

Taeyeon’s question reminded Tiffany why she was doing all this in the first place and for a second, she regretted her plan. But she was determined to make Taeyeon change her mind about her.

“I don’t have a motive!”

Taeyeon didn’t answer. She just sat there quietly – staring at Tiffany as if she was trying to read her mind.

She grew uncomfortable under the gaze. “Look. I’m just being nice here, trying to make friends with you. Samchon told me that you’re a good person but you keep making me think that he lied to me.”

That made Taeyeon lift her eyebrows.

Tiffany sighed, “I have to go now.” She stood up and Taeyeon didn’t move, of course. “I’ll see you.”

Tiffany walked out of the shop and Taeyeon saw her waving good bye to the boys and even exchanged short conversations with some of the older ones – laughing a little.

*They’re probably hitting on her although they know she’s way out of their league,* she scoffed.

She looked at the paper bag on her desk and took a deep breath. “What are you doing, Hwang Tiffany?”

### CHAPTER 3

Tiffany spent the next two weeks nagging Taeyeon to come to her birthday party. Taeyeon kept refusing, of course. Nothing on earth could make her come to that party.

After those two weeks, however, Tiffany was proud to acknowledge that her constant presence had somehow warmed Taeyeon up even though it was just for a tiny bit. Microscopic, even. But she knew there was a change. She was beginning to understand how Taeyeon worked: which question she would answer and which she would ignore. Although she hadn't let Taeyeon know that she practically already knew everything about her life story, she was pretty sure they had at least become a bit more comfortable around each other – somehow. The look in Taeyeon's eyes was no longer filled with as much dislike or resentment as before. Tiffany knew it. She had years of experience in recognizing people's reaction and predicting their actions.

Taeyeon spent that Sunday morning cleaning her small apartment and reorganizing it a bit. Mr. Lee said he wasn't feeling well so he didn't drop by. Her friends were either busy or had gone on vacation. Not that she minded. She was used to being alone.

She pushed the large cabinet to the wall and huffed. Taking a step back, she took a look around the room and was quite happy to see its new arrangement. She smiled to herself. *When the car's done, I will definitely get some new furniture.*

The thought of the car brought her eyes to the framed faded photograph on the cabinet. She reached out and took it, smiling sadly at the face looking back at her. *I'll make you proud, Appa. I'll make you proud somehow.*

She gulped and let her tears drop freely onto the glass surface before quickly wiping them away.

She would only let herself cry when she's alone. She had made that promise to herself – and to him, as they poured dirt over his coffin – five years ago.

She put the picture back and wiped her cheeks. She straightened up and dusted the small figurine next to it. The VW Beetle known to many as Herbie, a car with his own mind. She smiled. It was the first movie her father had shown her. Other girls grew up watching Disney Princess classics such as Cinderella, Snow White and Little Mermaid. Her father showed her the Herbie movies. It's a Disney classic too, he argued.

She chuckled at the memory of crying her eyes out when she saw a toy VW Beetle instead of a Barbie doll for her eighth birthday. As much as she loved him and cars, she really wanted to have the same toys her classmates had. Although she eventually accepted her love for cars and the color blue to be more dominant than the glittery accessories, Barbie dolls and the color pink, it took her quite a while to get there.

*I'll make sure we get our Herbie, Appa.* She smiled and wiped another escaping tear. *Just wait.*

The sound of the doorbell startled her. She hadn't expected company.

Another ring came and she fixed herself up a bit, making sure that whoever was at her door would not notice a single trace of her crying. She then made her way out the apartment door and down the stairs towards the front door.

She peeked through the peephole and her eyes widened with surprise. She twisted the lock and opened the door. "What are you doing here?"

A smiling Tiffany greeted her. "Happy birthday to me!"

"What?"

“Well, you didn’t come to my party last night so I’m bringing the party to you.” Her bright smile expertly masked the small disappointment of the other girl’s absence that tugged at her heart – although she had expected Taeyeon to not show up in the first place.

“What?!”

“Oh stop the ‘what’ please. You didn’t even wish me a happy birthday yesterday.” She showed her the box in her hand. “I have cake! And it’s not pink, I swear.”

Taeyeon couldn’t say a word. She stared at the box and at Tiffany and back at the box.

“Err... are we just going to stand here or are you going to let me in?”

Taeyeon sighed and stepped aside to let the other girl through.

Tiffany was surprised to find a narrow staircase as soon as she stepped through the door.

Taeyeon closed the door and took the box from Tiffany’s hands. “Be careful,” she said as she climbed the stairs.

Tiffany made her way up, unable to contain the surprised and fascinated look on her face as she entered the small apartment. *Neat and tidy as expected*, she nodded to herself. Although her room alone was at least twice as big as that whole apartment.

“Sorry. It’s not much, I know.”

She shrugged, “It’s fine.” She saw Taeyeon placing the cake box on the small table in the kitchen. “You might want to put that in the freezer. It’s an ice cream cake.”

“Oh.” Taeyeon then managed to squeeze the box into her freezer, silently grateful that there’s nothing in there but ice cubes. She then turned to see Tiffany admiring the framed pictures on the wall.

“Nice drawings. You made them?”

“No. My father did.”

“Oh.” Tiffany straightened up. “Sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about.”

Her eyes fell on the photograph. “Is this him?”

“Yes. You want something to drink?”

“Hmm? Oh, water would be fine.”

Taeyeon poured a glass of ice water and handed it to her.

“Thanks.” She took it and drank. She then saw the small Herbie miniature. “Herbie!” She picked it up and smiled.

“Eh?” Taeyeon was surprised. “You know Herbie?”

“Of course! I’m a huge Disney fan and The Love Bug is a classic! There was a new sequel a few years ago, you know, though I still prefer the old ones. He’s such a cute car.”

Taeyeon nodded. It was the last movie they saw together before he passed away the year after. “I have it on DVD.” She cried watching the DVD alone because of the memories of her father.

“Ah! So you’re a Herbie fan! No wonder you’re so obsessed with fixing that car.” Tiffany gently put down the mini car.

“I’m not obsessed.”

“You are.” She looked at her. “You’re always doing something with it. Almost every time I see you.”

Taeyeon didn’t reply. “Have you had breakfast?” She remembered her manners and tried to be a nice host.

Tiffany nodded. “Have you?”

“Yes.”

“You can cut the cake and eat it if you want. I’ve seen enough cakes to last me until Christmas.” She was back to admiring other things in the apartment, the books on the shelves, the tube TV she hadn’t seen in quite a long time, other framed pictures of Taeyeon in school uniforms with a few girls she assumed were her friends, the chess board on the coffee table and some magazines under it.

Tiffany sat down on the couch and placed her glass on the table. “You play chess?”

“Too surprising for a mere high school graduate?”

She looked at her and frowned, clearly unhappy with the reply. “I was just asking, you know. No need to go all defensive or touchy now.”

No reply.

“You’re too stubborn,” Tiffany sighed. She then had an idea. “How good are you?”

“Huh?”

“Chess.”

Taeyeon shrugged. “Not bad. Why?” She didn’t want to blow her own horn and told Tiffany that she was her school’s champion for two years in a row.

“I’ll make you a deal. If you can beat me then I promise to not annoy you for a whole week.”

Taeyeon lifted her eyebrows. “That’s interesting. Does that mean that you won’t come to the shop or here for a whole week? Seven days?”

“Try not to sound so excited to get rid of me, please.”

Taeyeon shrugged. “I’m just being honest.”

“Honestly rude, you mean.” Tiffany unconsciously pouted and Taeyeon started to doubt whether she really wanted to win this game.

“What if you beat me?”

A wide smile grazed Tiffany’s face. “Then you have to be extra nice to me for a whole week.”

“I am already nice to you as is.”

“No, you’re not. Far from it. Extra nice means treating me like a friend. Smile a bit when you see me, talk to me and reply nicely when I ask you something. You know, the normal friendly people stuff.”

Taeyeon considered the offer. *This is a dangerous stake*, she thought. *I can’t let my guard down against this... this... spoiled pink princess.*

“I’m not playing.” She crossed her arm.

“Aww... Tough Kim Taeyeon is afraid to be nice?”

“Stop that.”

“Just one game.”

Taeyeon was still unconvinced.

“What? There’s no way that I can beat you anyway, right? You think I’m just a spoiled rich airhead. Right?” She hoped she was wrong but when she saw the look in Taeyeon’s eyes, she knew she was right. She couldn’t deny that she was hurt.

“I never said that.”

“No, but your eyes and your behavior towards me have pretty much made that clear.” She sighed. “I don’t know why you hate me so much.” She muttered under her breath, knowing that Taeyeon would hear it nevertheless and feel guilty.

It was Taeyeon’s turn to sigh. “I don’t hate you...”

She suppressed her smug smile after getting the reaction she wanted. “Right.” She scoffed instead.

“I don’t.”

“Your actions say otherwise, Taeyeon.”

Taeyeon took a deep breath. “Fine. One game. Just don’t cry when you lose.” She approached the coffee table, dragging a chair behind her and sat on it. “You want to be white or black?”

Tiffany shrugged, “Doesn’t matter.”

“I’ll take black then.”

“Are you trying to be nice or just feeling bad for the airhead rich kid?”

She again ignored the remark. “Go.”

It didn’t take long before Taeyeon realized that she had extremely underestimated Tiffany. Her chess pieces were vanishing from the board. She started to take more time to think before each move.

Tiffany noticed Taeyeon’s increasing panic and couldn’t help but smile. Though not really fond of the game herself, her father had made her play with him for hours on end. Plus, she didn’t become her high school class valedictorian for nothing. She was always top of her class – although people would never expect that. She had learned to use that to her advantage many times. This was just one of those moments.

A few minutes passed. Tiffany smugly moved her piece. “Check mate.”

Taeyeon stared at the board with wide eyes. She had never been beaten in a chess game since her senior year in high school. Not even those old men at the park could beat her. She groaned and ran her fingers through her hair in frustration once she realized what this meant. A whole week of being nice and friendly to Tiffany.

“So...” Tiffany leaned back and took out her phone, checking her messages while waiting for Taeyeon to process her defeat. “Let’s start today, shall we?”

“Start what?”

“You treating me like a friend? We made a deal.”

Taeyeon groaned again and buried her face in her palms. “This can’t be happening.” She muttered to herself.

“Oh it’s happening alright.” Tiffany grinned. “Suck it up, Taeyeon.”

A sigh.

“Start with calling me by my first name, please.”

“What?” She looked up at the grinning Tiffany.

“You heard me. You haven’t called me by my first name since the first time we’ve met. I heard ‘Miss Hwang’ a few times and I don’t like it. My name is Ti-ffa-ny, okay?” She slowly pronounced her name in flawless English. “Not ‘Tippani’. Ti-FFa-ny.”

Taeyeon stared at the girl.

“Try it.”

“Not gonna happen.”

“What? You made a deal, Taeyeon-ah. Don’t tell me you break your promises? I thought you’re better than that.”

She sighed again, regretting her decision more and more as each second passed. “Being nice doesn’t require calling you by your first name.”

“The deal was about being *extra* nice, remember? Friends? Do you call any of your friends by their surname and using ‘Miss’ along with it?”

“No...”

“Then the same goes for me.” She saw Taeyeon hesitating. “Oh come on. Not that hard, really.”



Taeyeon still didn't want to give in. Tiffany stared at her – waiting.

She hoped Tiffany would just let it go but when a minute went by in silence, she knew she had no choice. “Fine, Fa-ny.” She put her best effort into it although still trying to rebel a bit by not using all three syllables. “There. Happy?”

“Hmm... you shortened it. But yes, happier than I was before for sure,” Tiffany smiled. She didn't want to complain now that she was making progress. She could live with ‘Fany’. “Now remember to use that instead of the ‘Miss Hwang’ thing, okay?”

Taeyeon sighed one more time.

“I take that as a yes. Good.” Tiffany was content.

Taeyeon rearranged the chess pieces back to their starting positions and placed the board neatly at the center of the table. “Sorry I didn't wish you a happy birthday.” It was a mumble.

Tiffany's eyes widened. She couldn't believe her ears. “Wh-what?”

“I'm sorry for not wishing you a happy birthday... yesterday.”

“You're apologizing to me? Wow!” She clapped her hands. “I totally love this deal! Ha!” She laughed.

“I apologize and you make fun of me. I talk normally and you say I'm rude. What the heck is this?” Taeyeon was not happy.

“Sorry. I'm just shocked, that's all. Admit it. You have been so cold towards me so it's natural for me to be surprised, right?”

Taeyeon shrugged but didn't answer. She stood up and went to what Tiffany assumed was her bedroom. She came out a few seconds later.

“Here,” she extended her hand to Tiffany and the latter saw a cute key chain in the shape of a mini pink sports car dangling from it. It looked almost identical to her car.

“What's this?” Tiffany took the object and examined it. “This looks like my car.”

“That's because it is your car. Well, a mini version of it anyway.” Taeyeon sat down. “It's your birthday present. I'm sorry I couldn't think of anything else to get you. I figured you have everything already anyway.”

Tiffany was still staring at the small object in awe. “You made this?”

Taeyeon shrugged, “Got some free time and plenty of scrap metal and paint lying around. Sorry for its low quality.”

Tiffany looked up, eyes still in awe. “Stop apologizing! This is so cute.” She smiled. “You're very detailed.” She looked at it again.

“My father taught me well,” Taeyeon smiled a little. “He made that little Herbie, you know.”

Tiffany met her eyes, “Really? That's one fine handy work.”

She nodded, “He was very good at art stuff.”

“Did he make other mini cars?”

“Yes, but he threw them all away, unfortunately. I managed to save the Herbie.”

“Why?”

Taeyeon shrugged, “They reminded him of better days when he was healthy enough to have made them, maybe? I'm not sure.” She was suddenly aware that she was telling Tiffany things she had never told anyone before. She stopped herself and cleared her throat. “Anyway, I'm glad you don't hate it.”

“Are you kidding me? I love it!” Tiffany smiled and Taeyeon felt uneasy. *First the recurring pout now the recurring smile*, she sighed inwardly. *Not good.*

“Good.” She tried to return the smile but it faltered. Her mind went to that day when Tiffany gently cleaned her face. She gulped. *Not good at all.*

Thankfully, Tiffany was already busy replacing her key chain with the one Taeyeon gave her. She showed it to Taeyeon once she was done, the huge smile still on her face. “Very cute, Taeyeon-ah!” It was a genuine smile. Both of them knew it.

Taeyeon nodded and observed Tiffany while the latter kept staring at her birthday present. It made Taeyeon feel appreciated – special. *Maybe this spoiled princess isn’t such a bad person after all*, she thought. *Maybe samchon was right.*

“Do you have plans today?” Tiffany asked her and she snapped out of her daze to find the girl staring back at her.

“N-no. Why?”

“Since you didn’t come to my party, I technically still owe you a meal.”

“You don’t owe me anything.”

“The next step in being nice to your friend, Kim Taeyeon, is doing whatever she wants on her birthday. Especially since you’re at fault for not attending her birthday party.”

Taeyeon sighed again.

“Stop sighing. You’ll age faster. Let’s go.” Tiffany stood up.

Taeyeon didn’t move.

Tiffany jingled her car keys and smiled. “I’ll let you drive.”

Taeyeon’s eyes betrayed her impassive face as they twinkled at the possibility of driving Tiffany’s roadster. The latter saw it, of course, and threw the keys at Taeyeon.

She caught it. “You’re serious?”

“Yep. Now come on. Let’s have lunch.” Tiffany moved towards the door.

“Wait. I need to change.” Taeyeon realized that she was still wearing shorts and an old t-shirt. “You’re not going to take me somewhere fancy, right?” Her tone practically begged Tiffany not to do so.

Tiffany laughed. “Don’t worry.” She pointed at her own outfit. “Do you think I’d wear this to go somewhere fancy?”

Taeyeon noticed the shorts and loose shirt and nodded. “Fine. Give me a minute.” She dashed to her bedroom and closed the door, unable to control her excitement. *I’m going to drive that gorgeous car!* She smiled as she hurriedly changed into her own pair of torn denim shorts and t-shirt. She tied her sneakers and rushed out of the room. “Let’s go then.”

Tiffany chuckled at the change of behavior. *So this is what it takes to make Kim Taeyeon excited. Cars. I should’ve known. What else is there?* She silently smiled.

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“How do you even know this place?” Taeyeon stopped the car and looked out in amazement.

“Let’s just say that some of my friends love cars too. Fast cars.” Tiffany was fixing her hair. The wind had messed it up quite a bit since she had decided to put the top down for Taeyeon.

Taeyeon stepped out of the car. “I never knew such places even exist in Seoul.”

“Well, we’re practically outside of Seoul right now, just a little bit though. This was abandoned a few years back. I think it was a small private airport at some point.” Tiffany pushed herself up and sat on her door, smiling a little as she stared at the fascinated Taeyeon who was walking around the wide stretch of concrete. “Heard someone bought it and it will soon be off limits.”

"I see." Taeyeon looked at the seemingly endless runway and couldn't help but wonder how it felt to race down that track, just to see where it ends.

Tiffany saw the expression. "Driving this car in the city kinda sucks, huh?"

"Huh?" She turned to the girl smiling at her from behind her Ray-Bans. "What are you talking about?"

"My car. Seoul is too crowded to really enjoy driving it."

"Oh. Well yeah, that's always the case when you own a sports car but live in the city."

"You wanna see how fast you can go? I think my friend said that this baby could do 0 to 100 km in 5.5 seconds. Can you beat that?" She raised an eyebrow – challenging Taeyeon.

Taeyeon looked at her in disbelief. "W-what?"

"You heard me." Tiffany turned her head as a gust of wind suddenly blew passed them and messed up her hair. The long strands were now flowing in the breeze and Taeyeon gulped at the sight before her. *She's truly way out of my league*, she realized with another gulp.

"Taeyeon."

She realized she must be spacing out and shook her head a bit, "Are you sure about this?"

Tiffany shrugged, "Why not? I told you, this car hasn't been out of the garage much for the past year. It needs to fulfill its destiny, don't you think?" She lowered her sunglasses to make sure that Taeyeon could see her eyes before she smiled. She thought she saw Taeyeon swallowed and mentally patted herself on the back. *That trick never grows old. Well done, Tiffany.*

She slid back down to her seat. "Let's go, Taeyeon-ah! You're wasting time."

Taeyeon took a deep breath and sat on the driver's seat. "You're sure about this?" She looked at Tiffany as she fastened her seatbelt.

"For the hundredth time, YES!" Tiffany sighed. "Why did you turn chicken all of a sudden?"

"I did not!"

"You did."

"I did not! I just want to make sure."

"I offered, didn't I?"

"Well, yeah-..."

"Then you should stop questioning me. I wouldn't have offered you if I don't trust you."

Taeyeon stopped at those words.

"Five point five seconds, Taeyeon." She took out her phone. "I'll time you."

*This girl isn't such a good innocent daddy's girl after all*, Taeyeon thought. "Fasten your seatbelt."

"What? You're such a grandma. Where's the fun in that?"

"Fasten your seatbelt, Fany. Or I will drive us straight home." A very cold and stern tone.

She was pleasantly surprised at the use of that name and relented. "Fine." She harshly did as she was told. "Now go already! Sheesh. You're so slow." She was pouting a bit again.

Taeyeon smirked. "Slow, huh?" She started the engine and shifted the gear. "We'll see about that." She pushed the accelerator, slightly stepping on the brake with her left foot.

The car made a subtle jump forward and Tiffany saw the glint in Taeyeon's eyes. Taeyeon revved the engine, pushing the accelerator and the brake, causing the tires to spin wildly in smoke.

She knew Taeyeon was teasing her but before she could say anything, Taeyeon let go of the brake and the car smoothly lurched forward for a split second before she felt it speeding increasingly down the abandoned runway. Taeyeon's hand shifted the gear quickly.

"Time!" Taeyeon shouted and Tiffany fumbled with her phone.

Taeyeon turned the steering wheel abruptly and shifted the gear again, making the car drift a bit before it stopped with Tiffany swaying to her side – almost dropping her phone.

Tiffany was speechless.

Taeyeon was grinning widely, half in pure happiness half in satisfaction after successfully silencing Tiffany. “How was that?”

Tiffany’s mouth was still slightly open when she glanced down the small screen in her hand. “Four point seven seconds.”

“Really? I thought I could do at least four.” Taeyeon said, “Oh well. Better than 5.5 for sure.” She smirked, “Tell your friend he needs to practice more.”

Tiffany was still quiet. She could feel the adrenaline rushing through her as she started to smile. She turned to the smirking girl beside her. “That was AWESOME, Taeyeon-ah!!” She pushed Taeyeon’s shoulder. “You have to teach me how to do that!”

“Never.” Taeyeon shifted the gear and drove – normally, this time.

“What?! Knowledge is supposed to be shared! Sharing is caring! Especially between friends, you know.”

Taeyeon didn’t take her eyes off the road but she raised her eyebrows a bit. *Are we really friends now?* She quietly asked herself.

“Come on...” Tiffany pleaded again, using her puppy eyes and pouting techniques. “Please?”

Taeyeon glanced at the cute begging stance and suppressed a smile. “No.”

“That’s selfish.” Tiffany crossed her arms and threw herself back against the seat’s backrest.

“It’s for your own safety. I don’t want you joyriding or racing your friends. It’s dangerous.”

“But you-...”

“Not gonna happen, Fany.” The cold and stern voice returned.

Tiffany sighed. “Fine.” She turned away and the wind caught her hair again. She put one hand on her head to keep the strands off her face. Taeyeon glanced again and wished she could kick herself as she felt her throat drying up and her heart racing. She knew it wasn’t the adrenaline. This was what she was afraid of, why she didn’t want to let Tiffany come anywhere near her. She didn’t want to fall for someone whom she knew was a galaxy out of her league. She silently took a deep breath and pushed the accelerator again, shifting the gears to make the car speed up.

Tiffany noticed the increase in speed and smiled. She unbuckled her seatbelt and lifted both hands in the air. “Whoohooo!!!”

Taeyeon laughed at the behavior. She knew this might be the last time she could fully enjoy their time together. She was determined to stop herself from suffering one heck of a heartbreak and a world of hurt.

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“Where have you been?” The question came as soon as she set foot on the lowest step of the staircase.

“Out with a friend,” she said dismissively and walked on.

“What friend? The Jungs are abroad and so are the Lees and Chois.”

She stopped again and turned, “I do have other friends besides Jessi, Sunny and Sooyoung, Daddy.”

“You were not out with a boy, were you?”

“I’m now officially 22 years old, Daddy. Seriously?”

He didn’t reply.

She sighed, “It’s not even dark out and you’re interrogating me as if I haven’t come home for days. Give me a break. I’m not a little girl anymore. I can take care of myself.” She turned and continued up the stairs.

“You’ll always be my little girl for as long as you live under my roof.”

“I’ll make sure I move out soon then.” She shouted out before closing her bedroom door. “Noisy, overprotective, bossy parent.” She muttered under her breath as she took off her shoes and threw her phone and keys onto the table.

The sight of the small pink car made her smile. She had fun with Taeyeon that day, even though it was just lunch and that short visit to that abandoned strip. The joy on Taeyeon’s face was inexplicable. Tiffany knew how much Taeyeon loved cars just by the gleam in her eyes when she – almost lovingly – ran her hands over the steering wheel the moment she first sat down. She chuckled at the memory.

She enjoyed her time with her, even more than she had expected. She was now determined to keep Taeyeon’s company for at least another month, until the end of her summer holiday. *And she now has no choice but to be nice to me for a week.* She smiled as she grabbed a towel and went to the bathroom to take a shower.

## CHAPTER 4

Taeyeon got quite an earful when Tiffany scolded her the following Monday afternoon. According to the loud girl, Taeyeon was not being a good sport. Her tone and behavior towards Tiffany had turned cold and rude again.

She didn't want the guys to hear them arguing so she appeased the angry Tiffany with an apology and a promise to keep her part of the deal. She feared that it would lead to nothing but trouble on her side but she was unable to do anything else to calm Tiffany down.

And so Taeyeon had to treat Tiffany nicely all through the week, just like she treated her friends. It was difficult at first but she found it increasingly easier to do after a few days. She would berate herself every night though – alone in her apartment – for being so weak. She could not be this nice or grow this close to that girl. She knew she would fall for her and that was the last thing she wanted to happen. *Why is my life such an endless drama?* She sighed as she closed her eyes that Saturday night and tried to sleep.

Her phone suddenly beeped.

She opened her eyes again and reached for the device on the small bedside table.

"I can't sleep." She read the message and sighed. *Why are you doing this to me, Fany? I bet you have plenty of friends and admirers. Why me?*

Another beep and in came another message. "Are you still up?"

She replied, "Yes."

"That's it? Whatever happened to being nice?"

Taeyeon let out another sigh as she adjusted her pillow's position. "I *am* being nice. I replied, didn't I?"

"If I were just one of your school friends, what would you have replied?"

"The same thing."

"You're lying. There's still one day left, Taeyeon-ah. Be nice."

Taeyeon took another deep breath. Too bad she didn't know that Tiffany was feeling a little hurt by her short replies. Tiffany thought they were making progress and that Taeyeon was being sincerely nice to her. That they might have become friends by now. The short answers Taeyeon sent her made her believe that it was all indeed just because of the deal. After tomorrow, Taeyeon would revert back to being cold. Tiffany sighed. *More than a month's worth of effort and still this.* Taeyeon was officially the toughest nut to crack in all her 22 years.

Another reply came from Taeyeon. "Fine. Why can't you sleep?"

Tiffany smiled a little and shifted in her bed, "That's better. I don't really know why. Why are you still up?"

"I asked and all you can say is 'I don't really know why'?"

Tiffany chuckled, already seeing Taeyeon's annoyed face in her mind. "It's not the answer that matters, Taeyeon-ah. It's the nice gesture of asking. It shows you care."

Taeyeon read the last reply and sighed. *Why should I care? It's just going to hurt me in the end. You might see this as just another game, something to pass your time. But I happen to like you.*

She held her breath at that thought. *Right. Nice going there, Kim Taeyeon. You can't like someone like her, okay? No matter how nice she turns out to be. Not gonna happen. No! Snap out of it!*

"Well, I did ask, didn't I? It's late, you should sleep. Good night." Taeyeon ended the conversation and turned off her phone.

“You didn’t answer my question though.” Tiffany replied but no answer came. She typed again, “Taeyeon? Why are you still up?”

No reply.

She sent another one. “Don’t tell me you’ve fallen asleep?”

Still no reply.

She sighed. *I guess you have.* She put her phone down and stared at her ceiling, dotted with glow-in-the-dark stars. *Why do I even bother to try so hard to make you like me, Kim Taeyeon? Why are you so different? So... interesting?* Her mind went to some of the moments she personally favored. *She could be cute when she wasn’t acting all tough and cold,* she thought – unconsciously smiling to herself. *The shocked innocent face that day more than a month ago when I cleaned your face,* she giggled. *That was definitely the cutest. Well, that and the slight pout you showed samchon. Or when you shockingly realized that I beat you at chess, or when you saw how much I like your birthday present for me, or when you drove my car, or when I caught you staring at me, or when you grinned at Yoongmin like a proud noona, or joked around with Jiseok and the guys, or when...*

She fell asleep with the small smile still on her face.

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The ringing doorbell surprised her and she almost dropped the hot pot in her hands. “Sh-...” She suppressed a curse as she placed it back on the stove and let go of the handle. She quickly grabbed the kitchen towel to clean up the liquid that had spilled on the table.

Another ring came and she threw the towel down next to the thermos and half ran downstairs. *Who the-...* She peeked through the peephole and heaved a sigh.

“What are you doing here?” She pulled open the door.

“Why didn’t you reply my messages?” Tiffany was sulking.

“I did.”

“You stopped halfway.”

“I said good night.”

“But I didn’t! That means the conversation was not over yet. And what about my messages this morning?”

Taeyeon stepped aside. “Can we argue inside? You interrupted me in the middle of something.” Her thought went to the open thermos in the kitchen.

“Humph.” Tiffany stepped inside and climbed the stairs to Taeyeon’s apartment. “Ugh... what’s that smell?” She scrunched her nose the moment she walked through the door.

Taeyeon rushed passed her and went to the kitchen, finishing what she was doing.

“What is that?” Tiffany approached her.

“Herbal drink.”

“Ew...”

“It’s good for your health, you know.”

“It stinks.” She paused as she watched Taeyeon carefully twisting the top of the thermos firmly in place and put the lid back on the pot on the stove. “You’re going to drink all that?”

“It’s not for me.”

“Oh? Who’s it for?”

“Samchon.” Taeyeon disappeared behind the walls of her bedroom and came out a few seconds later wearing a different t-shirt although still black.

“I thought you like blue?”

“Huh? What kind of random question is that?”

Tiffany raised her eyebrow.

“Sigh... yes I do. Why did you ask?” Taeyeon was typing something in her phone.

“Then why are you always wearing black? Does that help with the whole tough aura you’re trying to convince people with?”

Taeyeon stopped typing and looked up at Tiffany – an annoyed glare in her eyes. “What are you implying?”

Tiffany was not deterred. She was still angry that Taeyeon hadn’t replied to her messages.

“What do you think?” She asked and kept her chin high.

Taeyeon held her anger in. “I don’t have time for this,” she said as she pocketed her phone and took the thermos.

“Where are you going?”

Taeyeon didn’t answer as she walked over to the coffee table and grabbed what looked like a new unopened magazine still wrapped in plastic.

“Where are you going?” Tiffany moved to stand between Taeyeon and the door.

Taeyeon sighed again. “Why do you always want to know?”

“Why do you keep doing this? Why do you hate me so much?”

Taeyeon blinked. “I don’t hate you.”

“Right. Then why didn’t you reply to my messages?”

“I did!”

“At the beginning. Then you stopped. Why?”

Taeyeon ran her fingers through her hair in frustration. *How in the world am I supposed to get out of this?* She chose the easiest way out. “Fine. I’m sorry. I fell asleep last night and I was busy making this drink for samchon all morning.” She lied.

The look on Tiffany’s face softened. “Do you make that for him all the time?”

“No. But since he’s sick again...”

“He’s sick?!” Tiffany was genuinely surprised.

“You didn’t know?”

“I d-didn’t...” She immediately regretted her ignorance about that kind old man. She had been too busy with Taeyeon that she had completely forgotten about anything else for the past couple of weeks. Especially since she had been driving herself ever since – much to her parents’ dismay. Now that she thought of it, she hadn’t seen him around the house that much indeed. She shook her head. “So ungrateful of me,” she muttered under her breath, feeling very guilty. All her anger towards Taeyeon had disappeared.

Tiffany then looked up. “What’s wrong with him?”

Taeyeon shrugged, “Not sure. He only said that he’s not feeling well. He’s not one to complain so I don’t know what he’s really feeling.”

“Yeah, he never complains.” Tiffany fondly thought of the man and felt even guiltier. “Well, let’s go then.”

“Go where?”

“Visit samchon, of course. Where else?” Tiffany rolled her eyes and grabbed the thermos from Taeyeon’s hand and replaced it with her car keys. “You drive.” She turned away and walked out of the apartment.

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Tiffany was surprised to know that Taeyeon knew the way to her house. She even knew where Mr. Lee's small living space was. "You've been here before?"

"Once."

"Oh? When? How come I didn't know?"

"Why would you know? I was just here to visit him because he was also sick that day." Taeyeon slowly made a turn. "Can I just park here?" She stepped on the brake.

"You can park anywhere."

Taeyeon nodded and pulled the handbrake. "I hope you don't think that he lets unknown visitors in behind your family's back or anything. I had to scold him that day because he wouldn't let me visit him."

"Oh n-no. Of course not."

"Good. I don't want to get him into trouble or anything..."

"Oh come on. He's part of the family. He's been working with my father even since before I was born."

Taeyeon noticed the 'working with' term instead of 'working for'. She silently sighed and wished that Tiffany were indeed a spoiled arrogant rich kid who cared about nobody but herself. *It would've been much easier*, she thought.

She unbuckled her seatbelt and opened the door. "Let's go. He's waiting for me."

"Oh. Right." Tiffany also unbuckled her seatbelt, one hand still holding the warm thermos and magazine for Taeyeon.

"Thanks for holding on to that." Taeyeon reached to take the objects away.

"I don't mind." Tiffany didn't hand them over as she stepped out of the car.

Taeyeon raised her eyebrows but said nothing.

They made their way up the small metal staircase at the side of the huge garage.

Taeyeon knocked on the door. "Samchon? It's Taeyeon."

They heard the sound of a lock turning a few seconds later and the door opened to reveal a pale looking man.

"That was fa-... Oh, Miss Hwang?" He was surprised to see Tiffany there.

"Hi, Samchon. Are you okay? I'm sorry I didn't know you're sick." Tiffany looked at him with concerned eyes and he smiled.

"I'm okay, Miss Hwang. Probably just a cold. How did you know?" He then looked at Taeyeon. "You told her?"

Taeyeon shrugged. "She barged into my house while I was making you that." She pointed to the thermos in Tiffany's hands and the latter handed it to the smiling man – along with the magazine.

"Thanks. You shouldn't have." He then looked at Tiffany, "You went to Taeyeon's house?"

"Y-yeah." She avoided his eyes. "She wasn't replying my messages so I thought..." She couldn't finish her sentence.

His smile faded a little. "I see." He then straightened up. "Well, come in then."

----

The visit wasn't a long one. Both girls decided that it was better to let the man rest. So after a final long lecture from Taeyeon about taking care of his health better and to call her whenever he's not feeling well, they made their way down the staircase.

"Do you know what samchon's favorite dish is?" Tiffany suddenly asked Taeyeon.

"Uh yes. Why?"

She grabbed Taeyeon's hand and pulled. "Come with me."

"Ya-... Hey! What are you doing?!"

Tiffany ignored the question and Taeyeon quieted down once she remembered where she was.

They walked towards a large mansion and Taeyeon couldn't stop herself from gawking at it as Tiffany pulled her across a vast lawn and into what she guessed was a back or side entrance to the house.

"Ahjumma!"

Taeyeon found herself in a large kitchen.

A middle-aged and kind looking woman turned from the oven. "Oh hi, Miss Hwang. I'm trying out a new cake recipe. Will be ready in an hour or so."

For a moment, Tiffany seemed to forget her initial intentions as she let go of Taeyeon's hand and approached the glowing oven – nose sniffing in the air. "Smells so good, Ahjumma! What is it?"

She smiled. "You'll just have to wait and taste it for yourself later, Miss Hwang."

"Aw... That's not fair." Tiffany pouted as she walked towards a huge fridge. Taeyeon was still frozen in place.

"Who's this?" The woman turned to look at Taeyeon.

"Oh. I almost forgot." Tiffany pulled her head out of the open fridge. "This is my friend, Taeyeon."

She bowed politely to the older woman, "Good afternoon, Ahjumma. I'm Kim Taeyeon, Lee Samchon's niece, actually..."

Tiffany tensed. *Why won't you allow me to introduce you just as my friend, Taeyeon? Why did you have to clarify like that?* She lost interest in the fridge raid and closed the door after pulling out two bottles of water for Taeyeon and herself.

"Ah... you're that girl he's been telling me about. The one who runs the small garage? His best friend's daughter?"

"Yes, Ahjumma."

"You know her, Ahjumma?" Tiffany handed a bottle to Taeyeon.

"Not personally but oppa talks about her a lot." She smiled kindly. "He said she's like his own daughter. I think he even showed me a picture of you once. But your hair was different."

Taeyeon smiled. "I changed the color just recently. Thank you for the delicious sandwich you made me last month, Ahjumma." She bowed again.

"Oh that was for you? I should've made more. You're too skinny."

Taeyeon laughed a little. "You made enough. Everyone was full."

"Good to know. Have you had lunch?"

Tiffany snapped her fingers. "Lunch! Right. Ahjumma, Lee Samchon is sick."

"Again?" The woman sighed. "I told that man to get a check up but he's just too stubborn to listen to me."

"Has he been sick often, Ahjumma?" Taeyeon worriedly asked. "He won't tell me when he's sick. I can only find out after he was better or when it happens to be a Sunday... like today."

"Why Sunday?" Tiffany couldn't curb her curiosity.

"That's when oppa usually goes to visit Taeyeon," the woman smiled.

Taeyeon smiled again, warming up to the kind lady.

"Oh. That means, last week..." Tiffany remembered that day.

"Yeah, he was sick too back then." Taeyeon said. Her face clearly showed worry. "Is it possible for you to let me know whenever he's sick, Ahjumma? I know it's too much to ask but he's the

only..." She clenched her jaws and stopped herself. "Let's just say I get worried about him." She forced a smile.

The woman approached Taeyeon and patted her back gently. "I understand, Taeyeon-ah." She smiled and lowered her voice, "You don't have to worry. Everyone here loves him. He's like an older brother, a father and an uncle to us. Even to Miss Hwang there." She gestured towards the quiet Tiffany. "I'll make sure that he's well taken care of. If you want me to call you then I don't mind but I won't do it behind his back. I know he doesn't want to worry you, Taeyeon."

Taeyeon sighed. "I know, Ahjumma. But still, can I just give you my number? Just in case?"

She chuckled, "Of course." She took out a device from her apron pocket. "Just put your name and number here. I don't know how to do it. My son usually does it for me. All I know is how to find a name and call it."

Taeyeon grinned and inserted her name and number in the device before returning it to the woman. "I saved it under 'Taeyeon', Ahjumma. Thank you very much." She bowed ninety degrees and the old woman hugged her.

"Aigoo, it's nothing, Taeyeon-ah. Don't worry, okay? Oppa is fine."

"Speaking of samchon..." Tiffany cleared her throat. She had been observing everything and felt sad and worried for Taeyeon, realizing that Mr. Lee might be the only person she had left in the world. "He's actually the reason why I came to see you, Ahjumma."

The woman let go of Taeyeon and turned to Tiffany. "Oh?"

"Isn't there like... healthy food that you can cook him? Something that's good for him? And also make his favorite dish or something? Taeyeon said she knows what he likes."

Taeyeon understood now why she was dragged into this kitchen and was touched at Tiffany's kind intention. She nodded, "If you can, Ahjumma, I would truly appreciate it. I'd gladly do it myself but I can't cook that well, unfortunately." She blushed a little and Tiffany captured that moment to add to her list of favorite Taeyeon expression.

"Of course! Just tell me what it is and I'll try to make him some." She then turned to Taeyeon, "You can even come to my house and I'll teach you if you want, Taeyeon."

Tiffany interrupted Taeyeon before she could say anything. "Why at your house, Ahjumma? We have everything we need right here right?"

Both Taeyeon and the woman stared at Tiffany in surprise. "I don't think that's a good idea, Miss Hwang. You need to ask your parents first."

Tiffany shrugged, "I'm sure they won't mind. As long as it doesn't interfere with their meal times, of course. Between lunch and dinner maybe?"

The woman was still unconvinced. She didn't want to get in trouble with her employers.

"Don't worry, Ahjumma. I take full responsibility. I'll talk to them. They won't mind, I'm very sure. I want to learn too so make it a cooking lesson for me and Taeyeon." She smiled. "How's that?"

She realized how badly Tiffany wanted to do this for her friend because she knew how much Tiffany dislike cooking. She nodded happily. "That would be fine." She then turned to Taeyeon. "Just let me know a few days before you plan to come so I can make sure I have the ingredients, okay?"

Taeyeon nodded. "Thank you, Ahjumma." She smiled widely.

"Aigoo, don't mention it." She gave her another motherly hug and Taeyeon caught Tiffany's eyes. She mouthed a thank you and Tiffany nodded, smiling brightly.

They spent a few more minutes discussing Mr. Lee's favorite dishes and what to feed him before the girls took their leave.

"Thanks for all that." Taeyeon said as they made their way back out, across the lawn.

"Don't mention it. I told you, he's like family. I want what's best for him too."

Taeyeon nodded quietly.

They came near the garage and Taeyeon bid her goodbye. "Well, I'll be going now. Thanks again for everything. I owe you one." She waved. "And I'll show myself out, don't worry."

"Where are you going?"

"Err... home?" Taeyeon pointed to the end of the driveway, towards the direction of the large gates.

"And how do you think you're going to get there?"

"Subway? I know my way around town."

Tiffany sighed and shook her head. She threw her car keys to Taeyeon. "You drive." And turned around to walk towards where they had left the car.

Taeyeon lifted her eyebrows as she stared at the small pink car hanging from the round metal circle. "Why are you doing this to me?" She muttered under her breath before dragging her feet to follow the other girl.

----

Tiffany stepped out of the car and took off her sunglasses. She tossed it onto the passenger's seat before closing the door and locking it.

Since they had been spending more time with one cooking lesson under their belt – where she was just sampling everything and played games on her iPad while waiting for Taeyeon – she was glad to know that Taeyeon had truly warmed up to her.

Apparently that day they visited Mr. Lee more than two weeks ago had served as a big breakthrough for Taeyeon's change of behavior towards her. And she wasn't even trying to show her kindness. She was genuinely concerned about the man and sincerely sad to see Taeyeon so worried and sad about that same man.

His health had been improving and both her and Taeyeon were delighted to see that. Her parents gave him the rest of the summer vacation off when she told them about his health, especially since she seemed to be having no problem driving herself around for the past two months.

Her happy steps came to a halt as she noticed how the usually loud and cheerful boys were quiet and somewhat down. She faintly heard voices from inside the office. *Is that... Taeyeon?* She looked at the beetle – neatly tucked under the silver cover. *Taeyeon's not working on it so that must be her. But... she's yelling?*

She searched for the oldest among the guys and walked up to him. "Jiseok-ah..."

"Oh hi, Noona." The capped head looked up from under the hood of the car he was working on and gave her a sad smile.

"What's going on? Why is everyone so... gloomy?"

Before the young man could answer she heard another loud noise and turned to the closed office door. *That's strange. Taeyeon doesn't usually close the door,* she silently thought.

"Yoongmin's in trouble." He said.

"What? How?"

He sighed and adjusted his cap. "He's been stealing money from the shop's fund. Taeyeon noona caught him this morning when he thought she wasn't looking." He paused. "She had told me that she

has been missing some money lately but she thought that it's probably her own carelessness. She didn't want to suspect anyone." He took another deep breath. "Taeyeon noona would never miscalculate or misplace a cent..." He quietly said the last sentence and shook his head again before going back to his work.

Tiffany couldn't believe her ears. Taeyeon must be furious. The person she cared for a lot and trusted did this to her. For someone who spent so much time keeping her guard up like that, Tiffany knew that it was gonna affect Taeyeon in a big way. She hurriedly walked towards the office and saw the door open and out ran an upset looking Yoongmin. The boy continued to run all the way out of the lot and disappeared into the bustling street.

She turned and made her way carefully into the office to see Taeyeon sitting at her desk with her face buried in her hands – elbows on the desk.

"Taeyeon?"

She saw Taeyeon inhaled, "Not now, Fany-ah..." Came the muffled voice from behind the palms.

She kept approaching anyway, standing next to the other girl and gently stroked her back.

Taeyeon flinched a little but she was too spent to move away. She was drained, disappointed, hurt, angry and sad. She didn't expect that Yoongmin would do this, just when she was about to let him learn and do more car repairs instead of just cleaning tasks. She didn't know how much longer she could keep this up. Out of all the boys she had taken in, most ended up somehow worse than before they started working for her. *Maybe people don't deserve second chances after all...*

"Don't, Fany-ah." She finally said once she realized that Tiffany's hand was still on her back. She moved an arm to swat Tiffany's hand off her.

Tiffany knew that Taeyeon wasn't exactly thinking of her actions clearly but she was hurt nonetheless. "And I thought we're friends." She couldn't help it.

Taeyeon groaned. "Not you too, please. Not today. Okay?" She finally lifted her face from her hand and Tiffany saw tired and sad eyes before Taeyeon quickly turned away and stood up. She closed the drawers and locked them. She then grabbed another set of keys off the desk.

"I'm just trying to help here."

"Then leave me alone." She glared at the well-meaning girl as she squeezed between Tiffany and the desk and walked out of the office.

Tiffany's sympathy turned to anger at the rejection. She followed Taeyeon.

"Jiseok!" Taeyeon called out to the distracted young man and threw the heavy set of keys to him. "I leave the shop to you. Lock up when you're done. The rest of you can go home when you're done. It's been a slow day anyway." She walked towards the door leading to her apartment and opened it.

Tiffany quickly put her hand against it before Taeyeon had a chance to slam it shut. "I'm not going anywhere."

Taeyeon didn't want to argue so she just turned and climbed the stairs to her apartment.

"You have to stop doing this!" Tiffany closed the door behind her roughly. Her anger was rising too. She didn't like how Taeyeon pushed her away like that.

Taeyeon ignored her, opened the apartment door and stepped inside. Tiffany was still following Taeyeon. "Taeyeon-ah!"

Taeyeon threw her keys on the table and opened the fridge to get a cold bottle of water. She placed it on her forehead and closed her eyes, letting the wet coldness soothe her aching head.

"Taeyeon-ah..." Tiffany was standing next to her now.

Taeyeon opened the bottle, took a sip and closed the lid again, returning it to her forehead. She liked how it's numbing her throbbing head. Maybe it could numb her heart too.

"Taeyeon-ah..."

She heard the voice again and finally snapped. "What do you want, Fany?!" She was irritated.

"Why are you taking this out on me? I'm just trying to help."

"Then leave me alone!"

"Why is it so hard for you to accept me? What have I done wrong?"

Taeyeon sighed. "Nothing," she mumbled. She pressed the bottle harder against her forehead – hoping that the cold would increase the numbness.

"Then what the heck are you doing? Why do you keep pushing me away?"

Taeyeon didn't answer. *Now is not the time to be dealing with this*, she thought. One drama a day is more than enough. "Not now, please?"

Tiffany huffed. She knew it had been a tough day for Taeyeon and felt a bit guilty for pushing. She reached out for Taeyeon's back again, by reflex. "Sorry..."

Taeyeon flinched again at the touch and moved away from Tiffany. That set the girl off. "See?! I can't even be nice to you. I can't even comfort you or anything."

"Nobody asked you to!" Taeyeon slammed the bottle down on the table and Tiffany jumped. "Nobody asked you to be nice to me. Nobody asked you to take pity on me, okay?"

"Who says I pity you?"

"Oh come on. What else is there?"

"Watch it, Kim Taeyeon." A stern warning and a frown.

Taeyeon sighed. "Why else would someone like you hang around someone like me?" She finally asked the question she had been struggling with for the past two months. "I can't think of anything but pity so yeah, I don't need your pity, thank you very much." She wiped her wet forehead.

"Really? After all the time we've spent together and you still think of me as shallow and arrogant? It's not my fault that my parents are rich." She saw Taeyeon's surprised face, "Yeah, there. I said it. You think I have it easy? Well on some level, yes, I guess I do. But being constantly judged as arrogant, stuck up, mean and stupid just because your parents happen to be successful sucks too, you know. I don't need to pity you. I can pity myself if I want to. You know nothing about me."

Taeyeon felt a little guilty although she refused to show it. "Then why are you here? Why do you keep coming back?"

Tiffany shrugged and looked away. She wasn't sure she knew the answer to that. It had started as curiosity, then amusement at her ability to annoy Taeyeon and – after the damage to her pride – it was the pleasure of getting back at Taeyeon for being so cold and judgmental. But she had forgotten all that and was genuinely enjoying the past few weeks she had spent with her.

"Fany-ah..."

She looked at the deflated Taeyeon.

"Please don't do this to me?"

She was taken aback by that plea. "W-wha-... do what?"

"If you think I'm just another interesting topic for your social studies class then please... just... go?" Taeyeon was tired of the constant mind games, even those she had been playing with herself. "I can't see why you even bother to be nice to me. Maybe I'm just a summer vacation activity before you go back to school? Either way..." She sighed, "Just don't, okay?"

"I don't think of you that way!" *Not anymore, at least.*

“Sigh, then for the millionth time, why are you doing this?”

“I-...” Tiffany still couldn’t answer so she decided on another approach. “Why are you so eager to get rid of me?”

“I asked you a question. Don’t turn this on me.”

“Answer me and I’ll answer you.”

Taeyeon scoffed, “Right. Just another game, huh?”

“What game? I’m not playing any game right now. Tell me why you wish to get rid of me so fervently ever since the first time we met. You tell me that and I’ll tell you why I’m still here.”

Taeyeon was drained. She hated being in this position. If only Tiffany would leave her, life would become simple again. “You really wanna know?”

Tiffany nodded although inside, she somehow feared the answer. “And don’t give me that rich arrogant crap of a reason again. I know you know that I’m not like that. I want the real reason.” She braced herself for any kind of hurtful words that might come out of Taeyeon’s mouth.

Taeyeon took a deep breath. *So it has come to this, huh? Fine. Then let’s just get this over with shall we? Good bye, Tiffany.*

She grabbed Tiffany by the waist and closed the gap between them – pressing her lips on Tiffany’s, letting her eyes close for a second before she pulled away and let go.

Tiffany was staring at her with wide eyes filled with shock.

She counted down in her head, waiting for an outburst – maybe even a slap – and a raging Tiffany stomping out of her apartment. She braced herself.

What happened next totally caught her off guard as she felt a hand grabbing the back of her neck, pulling her head forward by force. A soft pair of lips met hers and she froze. *What the...!?* But her mind stopped working as she felt Tiffany’s other hand holding hers, lacing their fingers together. She let instinct took over and closed her eyes before using her free hand to pull Tiffany closer by the waist.

## CHAPTER 5

Taeyeon's brain finally regained its function after a while and she let go of Tiffany. She pulled her face away and opened her eyes. Tiffany's hand slowly fell from her cheek and she took a small step back.

Taeyeon gulped as she tried to catch her breath. "W-why..."

Tiffany was just as breathless. She looked down. Her cheeks were pink.

"Why did you kiss me?"

Tiffany fiddled with the hem of her t-shirt. "You kissed me first." She was still looking down at her fingers.

"I had expected a slap or yelling or... something..."

Tiffany didn't reply.

"Is this another game you're playing with me?"

She looked up, "N-no!"

"Then why did you do it?"

Tiffany looked away. "You gave me your answer so I gave you mine."

Taeyeon lifted an eyebrow. "Excuse me? This is why you keep coming back here? You expect me to believe that?"

"Well not at first, of course..." Tiffany trailed off. She then took a deep breath. "Why do you always question everything I do?" She looked at Taeyeon and the latter saw hurt in the usually bright eyes.

"Why is it that it's okay for you to kiss me but not for me to do the same?" Tiffany shook her head. "What have I done to make you hate me this much?"

"I don't hate you." Taeyeon stopped herself from reaching out and hugging the other girl. Her feelings had been let loose thanks to that kiss and were now wrecking havoc in her heart. It took everything in her to keep her thoughts coherent and her actions in check.

"Then why do you keep doing this?"

Taeyeon sighed, "Put yourself in my shoes. How am I supposed to believe that this gorgeous rich high-class girl likes me? Me. A struggling orphan. A mere high school graduate who slaves over cars for a living."

"You should really stop thinking of yourself that way. You're not some pitiful orphan, Taeyeon. Well yeah, life's tough for you but come on, you know you're better than that. Even I can see that." The last words were barely audible as Tiffany turned her head away again – not willing to meet Taeyeon's eyes. That kiss had unleashed her feelings too. Feelings she didn't even know she had.

Taeyeon took a deep breath. "Still, we're too different. I'm bad news, Fany-ah. What if your parents find out?"

"They're not that kind of people! They'll like you. You're not a bad person!"

Taeyeon shook her head. "You're too stubborn. I'm doing this for your own good, Fany-ah. Just don't, okay?"

"Why not?" The eyes looking at Taeyeon were glistening and defiant at the same time.

Taeyeon sighed again. "Look, it's complicated enough to be friends. This-..." She gulped. "In case you haven't noticed, I like girls."

"So?"

Taeyeon raised her eyebrows, "You don't have a problem with that?"



“It’s a bit too late for that, don’t you think? Didn’t I just kiss you?”

Taeyeon was now sure that Tiffany was definitely not just an innocent spoiled daddy’s girl.

Tiffany suddenly understood, “You thought that kissing me would scare me off?”

“Kinda…”

“So you didn’t mean it?”

“Would I have returned your kiss if I didn’t mean it?” Taeyeon then sighed. “This is tiring. Let me just get to the point and be really really honest with you, okay?”

Tiffany straightened up, bracing herself for whatever’s coming.

“I like you, in *that* way. And yes, at first I thought you’re just some rich spoiled kid who took pity on me – even though samchon had told me otherwise many times.” She paused. “I guess you kinda grow on me,” she smiled a little. “But I can’t. We can’t.” She turned serious again. “I don’t like flings. It will just hurt me and I’ve had enough of that, thank you. So please. I’m laying down my pride here and sincerely beg you. Don’t play with my feelings, please. Don’t do something you know you’ll regret later on. Don’t start something you know you can’t finish. Please.” She ran her fingers through her hair and bit her lower lip. It wasn’t easy to let go what she desired especially when it looked like the other girl was willing too. She could easily throw herself into this but, like she told Tiffany, she didn’t want more heartache.

Tiffany folded her arms. “Is that why you keep pushing me away? Because you like me? In *that* way?”

Taeyeon nodded.

“And why do you think I’ll regret it?”

Taeyeon sighed, “You want me to repeat everything I’ve said? I’m tired, Fany-ah. In case you’ve forgotten, it has not been a good day for me today. So please, just leave. And if you don’t mind, please don’t come back. I mean that in the nicest possible way for both your and my sake. Please.”

Tiffany didn’t answer nor did she move from her spot. She kept looking at Taeyeon, head slightly tilted. It was like she was weighing her options.

When she didn’t seem to be able to make up her mind, Taeyeon decided to be the first to walk away. “I’m going to take a shower. Please make sure the front door’s closed properly when you leave, okay?” She straightened up and walked passed Tiffany.

She was about to enter her bedroom when a pair of hands suddenly grabbed her shoulders and pulled her back. “Hey!” She felt herself being spun around before a hand tilted her chin and Tiffany’s lips met hers once again.

Her eyes widened and she pushed Tiffany away. “No! Fany, don’t!”

Tiffany didn’t say anything nor did she stop what she was doing.

“Tiffany!” She pushed one final time, using more strength this time to put some distance between them – her hands firmly grabbing Tiffany’s shoulders. “What’s wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong with *you*?!” Tiffany roughly pushed both of Taeyeon’s hands off her shoulders. She was not happy. “Why do you keep talking as if you’re the only one involved? Why don’t you ever consider my feelings?”

Taeyeon gulped.

Tiffany backed away. “I’m not a kid, Taeyeon. I know what I’m doing. Stop sounding like my parents, okay? I don’t appreciate it no matter how you think it’s for my sake, my own good or whatever.”

She sighed. “Fine. What do you want then?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

She shook her head. “You’re just confused, rebellious. It will go away.”

“See? There you go again.” Tiffany sighed. “I’m so sick and tired of everyone trying to run my life and tell me what to do or what I feel.”

Taeyeon started to understand the surprising sides of Tiffany. Her ability to drive and maybe even race a car, her indifference about Taeyeon’s sexual preference, and her other rebellious tendencies. And yet her mind suddenly returned to the flute lessons and she couldn’t help but grin.

“Why are you grinning?”

“Nothing. How can someone trying to be this rebellious take flute lessons?”

Tiffany shrugged. “I like playing the flute. The teacher’s nice and kind and it helps keep up the appearance people expect of me.” She gulped.

Taeyeon realized that she wasn’t the only one struggling. Her life might look worse and sadder but Tiffany had her own share of problems. In a way, Tiffany’s life might be a lot more complicated than hers. At least she had the freedom to live it the way she wanted. She realized that with a bit of guilt. She took a deep breath. “So what now?”

Tiffany shook her head. “Not sure.” She looked at Taeyeon, “But I don’t want you pushing me away...”

As if by reflex, Taeyeon took a step forward and put her arms around Tiffany’s waist, pulling her into a hug. “I’m sorry about that.”

Tiffany tightly hung onto Taeyeon. “I’m sorry I can’t promise you anything,” she said – almost whispering.

“I know.” Taeyeon made up her mind right then and there. She knew it would hurt like crazy once it all ended. And it was a question of when, not if, it all ended. She gulped. “I know.” She broke the hug and kissed Tiffany again. *Let’s hope this is worth it.*

----

They spent the last week of Tiffany’s summer vacation together and were practically inseparable. Tiffany was always at the shop, bringing Taeyeon lunch or waiting until Taeyeon was done with the day’s work. The boys around the shop had noticed the change and some started to tease Taeyeon when Tiffany dropped by or when they went home before Tiffany did.

“Taeyeon-ah...” Tiffany hugged Taeyeon from the back and placed her chin on her shoulder.

“Hmm?” Taeyeon was locking up the shop. She chuckled as she felt the restrain caused by Tiffany on her back. “You know, this will go a lot faster if you would kindly let go of me. Plus, you’ll get your arms and clothes dirty, and I kinda stink.” She had worked on quite a few cars that day.

“I don’t care.” Tiffany was now leaning her head sideways on Taeyeon’s back.

Taeyeon chuckled and went about what she was doing.

“There.” She said once she had finished locking the last bolt. She pocketed the heavy set of keys and pried Tiffany’s hands off her abdomen. She took one hand in hers and walked towards the apartment, pulling the quiet girl along. “Sleepy?”

“Yeah.” Tiffany’s eyes were half closed.

“Sorry it got very busy today.” She closed the door behind Tiffany and slowly climbed the stairs, still towing the girl in hand. “Please open your eyes so you don’t trip and fall?”

Tiffany grinned and walked a bit faster to keep up with Taeyeon.

“I’m going to take a shower, okay?” Taeyeon let go of the hand and walked into the bedroom – throwing the keys on the table.

“Sure.” Tiffany threw herself down on the couch and stretched. She fell asleep a few seconds later.

“Fany-ah.” Light kisses trailed her cheek and down to her neck. She smelled shampoo and soap. She shifted a little but didn’t want to open her eyes. She liked what Taeyeon was doing and intended to let her keep doing it.

“Fany-ah, wake up. It’s late.” Taeyeon stood up and tugged at her arm.

“Why did you stop?”

Taeyeon chuckled. “Get up, Fany-ah. It’s late. I don’t want you driving alone at night.”

“Daddy?”

“Ew...”

Tiffany giggled and opened her eyes, “Sorry. You sound just like him.” She stretched a little. “What time is it?”

“Eight.”

“What?” She sat up. “You let me sleep for more than an hour?”

“You looked so peaceful.” Taeyeon smiled and sat down next to her, fixing her messy hair. “I couldn’t bring myself to wake you up.”

Tiffany smiled and pecked Taeyeon’s lips. “Have you had dinner?”

Taeyeon shook her head. “I’ll go make ramyun or something later.”

Tiffany frowned, “That’s not healthy.”

“I’m not in the mood to cook.”

“Then let’s eat out or order take out or something. My treat.”

It was Taeyeon’s turn to frown, “No.” She firmly declined.

“Aw come on. Enough with the pride thing. You’ve cooked for me many times. At least let me pay for food this time. Please?” She put on her puppy eyes and pouting act.

Taeyeon grinned, “Now how can I refuse that look?” She kissed the pouting lips. She was about to pull away when she felt Tiffany’s hands around her neck as they prevented her from moving any further. She gladly obliged and snaked her arms around the other girl’s waist. She felt Tiffany shifted and tried to push her back and that’s when she knew they had to stop. “F-fany-ah...”

“Less talking, more kissing, Taeyeon-ah.” Tiffany mumbled against her lips.

“No.” She forcefully pulled away.

Tiffany sighed and sat down – arms still draped loosely around Taeyeon’s neck. “I’m beginning to hate your ‘no’.”

Taeyeon smiled, “It’s late. I’ll drive you home and grab some dinner on the way back.” She pulled the arms off her neck. “Your parents will be worried.” She stood up.

“Can we just order take out instead of going out?” Tiffany looked up at her.

“Huh? Didn’t you hear what I just said?”

“Daddy’s out of town and I told Mommy I’m staying at Jessica’s tonight.” Tiffany grinned.

Taeyeon gulped. “W-what?”

Tiffany stood up and pulled Taeyeon’s face towards her again, “So either decide what to do for dinner now or I’ll start kissing you again and I won’t let anything stop me this time.”

Taeyeon was still staring at Tiffany in disbelief. “You lied to your parents?!”

Tiffany shrugged, “Jessi knows. She’ll cover for me. She always does. Her parents aren’t home either so my parents can’t even check up on me.” She smirked. “So what will it be, Kim Taeyeon? You have three seconds to decide. One...” She tilted her head, “Two...” She leaned closer. “Th-...”

“T-take out!” Taeyeon blurted out and quickly got away from Tiffany’s hold as the latter laughed out loud.

“What do you want?” Taeyeon was standing near the phone, going through the restaurant menus and leaflets. “Chinese? Chicken? Pizza? Korean?”

“Doesn’t matter. Whatever you feel like eating.”

“Chinese it is.” Taeyeon dialed the number and Tiffany grinned. “Figures...” She had gotten to know Taeyeon’s taste better and it would always either be Korean or Chinese food.

Taeyeon ordered the food and they waited while watching some random variety show on TV, Taeyeon’s arm around Tiffany as the latter snuggled to her.

The delivery soon came and they quickly finished their dinner.

Taeyeon threw away the empty containers and placed the dishes in the sink. “Leave it,” Tiffany pulled her hand away. “I’ll help you with them tomorrow.”

Taeyeon chuckled, “You don’t even know how to wash dishes.”

“Then I’ll dry. I know how to do that,” she argued. “Come on. I’m here and you’re wasting time by doing the dishes?”

“What am I supposed to be doing then?”

“Something to keep me entertained.” Tiffany pulled Taeyeon by the waist and leaned down to kiss her neck.

“I-I thought I’m the one who should be keeping you entertained.” She stuttered.

“Hmm? Oh. Don’t worry, this is also entertaining.” Tiffany lifted her head and grinned at her before going back to what she was doing.

“F-fany-ah...” Taeyeon was somehow uncomfortable with what was going on. She didn’t know where this would lead and since Tiffany was planning on spending the night there... She gulped and tried to push Tiffany away again. “Fany...”

Tiffany sighed and let go of Taeyeon – clearly irritated with the constant interruptions. “Why are you playing so hard to get tonight?”

“I’m not doing that. It’s just...” She could feel her cheeks turning red. She looked away.

Tiffany laughed and clapped her hands. “And here I thought that you’re such a bad girl. You’re just a shy little puppy, aren’t you?”

“Yah!”

Tiffany was still laughing, “Don’t worry. I won’t do anything that discomforts you, okay?” She kissed Taeyeon’s cheek and went to sit on the couch, grabbing the remote to change the channel.

Taeyeon sighed and decided to quickly do the dishes to calm herself down. When she had finished she again found Tiffany asleep on the couch. She chuckled. *This girl has been sleeping too much*, she smiled to herself.

She took the remote from Tiffany’s hand and turned the TV off. For a while, she just sat there and stared. She gently brushed the bangs aside and sighed quietly. *Too bad you’ll never really be mine*, she thought. There’d be no happy ending to this story and she knew it. “Why did you have to come into my life?” She whispered and saw Tiffany creased her brows. The sleeping girl slowly blinked and opened her eyes. She saw Taeyeon’s smiling face and playfully swatted it away with her hand. “Creep...”

“What? What did I do?”

“You were watching me sleep.”

“And? Is that illegal?”

“No. Just creepy.”

“Not my fault you keep falling asleep.”

“Not my fault your place is so comfy.” Tiffany yawned and stretched.

Taeyeon chuckled, “Tell me why you look more tired than me who actually did a lot of work today.”

“Waiting for you took a lot of energy.”

“Right. Energy to bash zombies on your iPad and munch on snacks?”

“Something like that,” Tiffany grinned. “Do you have an extra toothbrush? I didn’t bring mine.”

“Yep.” Taeyeon stood up and went to the bathroom. She returned a few seconds later. “It’s above the sink. The purple one.”

“No pink?”

Taeyeon laughed, “No. All blue and purple.”

“Fine.” Tiffany stood up and went to the bathroom. “Remind me to get you some pink ones.”

“You want to take a shower?”

Tiffany stopped in her tracks and turned around slowly. She smirked and lifted her eyebrows.

Taeyeon realized her mistake. “I m-mean, do you want to t-take a shower before bed?” She gulped. “Not insinuating anything here.”

Tiffany laughed again. “Seriously. A cute shy puppy, Kim Taeyeon. Not badass in any way.”

Taeyeon pouted a little and Tiffany couldn’t resist. She walked back and gave the girl a quick peck. “Too cute.” She smiled. “Yes to the shower. Can I borrow a towel?”

“Did you even bring anything?”

“Nope.” She grinned. “Not even my pajamas. I didn’t think I would need them.” She teased and watched in amusement how Taeyeon’s eyes grew wide and how her cheeks turned redder by the second. She laughed out loud. “Relax, Taeyeon. I’m just kidding. But no, I didn’t bring anything. So if you can spare me any old shorts and t-shirt to sleep in, I would really appreciate it.” She walked away, still giggling.

Taeyeon cursed under her breath for the fast crumble of her strong image in front of Tiffany. That girl was the only person who was able to elicit such reactions from her so far. With a sigh, she left the couch and rummaged in her closet to find some comfortable clothes and to get a towel for Tiffany. She heard the water running and waited until it stopped to knock on the door.

The door opened a bit and a hand slipped out. She handed Tiffany the towel before deciding to get her revenge. She didn’t give her the clothes.

The door closed again. She stepped back and waited with a smirk on her face and the clothes draped over one arm.

As expected, the door opened again soon and the hand reappeared – searching and grasping air.

Taeyeon stifled a laugh.

“Kim Taeyeon! I can hear you snickering. Don’t mess with me.”

Taeyeon let out her laugh. “Payback for calling me a cute and shy puppy.”

“But you are a cute and shy puppy!” The hand hit the door impatiently. “Come on, Taeyeon-ah! It’s cold.”

Taeyeon didn’t move – still feeling proud of her successful revenge.

“Fine. Remember, you asked for it.” The hand was withdrawn and the door closed with a bang.

Taeyeon’s smile disappeared, replaced by a confused look. *What is she going to-...*

Before Taeyeon could finish her thought, the door opened and out stepped Tiffany – wrapped only in the towel Taeyeon had given her. It wasn’t a very big towel so it came down to around the upper part of Tiffany’s thighs.

Taeyeon’s eyes went wide with shock as they involuntarily traveled up and down the length of Tiffany’s towel-clad body. Her jaw dropped and she almost drooled but managed to regain consciousness at the last minute and closed her mouth before anything more embarrassing happened.

“Wow. You’re red.” Tiffany’s voice and laughter brought her out of her daze and she almost threw the clothes at Tiffany as she ran to the bedroom and threw herself facedown on the bed.

She heard the sound of Tiffany’s laugh approaching and felt the mattress dip. “Taeyeon-ah...”

She didn’t move. She knew her face was still burning because she was still trying to get the image out of her head – and failing miserably, of course.

“Taeyeon-ah...”

She felt a hand on her back and scooted away, all the way to the edge of the bed. She tensed.

Tiffany laughed again. “Sorry about that. I’m fully clothed now.”

She groaned.

“I’m serious. It’s safe to look, Taeyeon-ah.”

She still didn’t move.

Tiffany sighed, “Fine. I’m getting sleepy again. Wake me up if I’ve fallen asleep after you finally manage to recover, okay?”

She felt Tiffany shifted on the bed and waited until her heartbeat had returned to its normal pace and the heat in her face had receded before she dared to take a peek at the girl lying at the other side of the bed. She saw Tiffany silently sleeping and exhaled quietly before turning on her side, watching the sleeping girl.

She then glanced at the clock and saw that it was almost 12 AM. She was feeling tired so she got off the bed, switched off the lights and went to the bathroom to brush her teeth. She turned off the lights in the living room and returned to the bedroom, finding Tiffany still in the same position.

She smiled as she gently climbed onto the bed to lie next to the sleeping girl. She then pulled the blanket over them.

Tiffany scooted a bit closer and her hand reached for Taeyeon as it found her waist and tugged.

Taeyeon moved closer and kissed her forehead, “Good night, Fany-ah.”

“Good night, shy puppy.”

“W-wha...?!”

Tiffany opened her eyes, “Gotcha.” She grinned and held Taeyeon firmly when Taeyeon was about to move away. “Aw come on. Don’t be so shy, please. I promise I won’t pull anything like that again if you promise to not play jokes on me again.”

Taeyeon sighed. She was glad that the darkness hid her burning cheeks. “Fine. I will never pull something like that again.”

“Well, never is such a strong word. ‘For the time being’ is more fitting.”

Taeyeon gulped. *Don’t tease me, Fany.*

Tiffany giggled, “Relax, Taeyeon. I know you’re tired. Go to sleep.” She scooted again and fitted her head right under Taeyeon’s chin. “Good night.”

Taeyeon finally relaxed and pulled Tiffany closer as she adjusted her position to get comfortable. "Good night."

----

Tiffany lay in the silence of the room and stared at the sleeping face in front of her.

She never could understand how Taeyeon's skin can be so milky white and smooth. She couldn't resist trailing a finger along the soft cheek, down to the chin and along the jawline. *You're totally not a badass punk, Kim Taeyeon.* She grinned silently. *You're just a gentle and shy girl who tried so hard to look tough.*

Her smile faded as she remembered why Taeyeon was doing that and her heart ached. *I will not hurt you. I'll try to make this last for as long as I can, okay? I like you too, you know. Maybe even more than you like me.* She gulped and let her finger brushed Taeyeon's lips lightly. *You're gorgeous, inside and out.* She smiled again. *Whoever tells you otherwise is the blindest and stupidest person in the whole universe.* She almost let out a giggle at her own childish thought.

Taeyeon stirred and she lifted her finger – afraid to wake her.

The sun had risen and the room was dimly lit by its rays, shining brightly behind the curtains. Taeyeon's blond hair looks silky smooth and she couldn't resist touching it, moving the strands away from the face she was observing.

Tiffany's fingers accidentally brushed Taeyeon's nose and Taeyeon flinched. She blinked and huffed. It took a few more seconds before she could fully open her eyes and recognize the face smiling at her.

"Good morning." Tiffany kissed her.

"Hmph..." Was the only reply she could manage.

Tiffany smiled at the cute reply. She waited until Taeyeon was fully awake.

"Why are you up so early?" Taeyeon turned away and stretched long and hard before turning back to face Tiffany.

"I'm not up early. You just wake up late."

Taeyeon furrowed her brows. "What time is it?"

"Around 9... last time I checked."

"Oh? I must be more tired than I thought."

"Well, you did work very hard yesterday." She gave Taeyeon a small peck.

"I did, didn't I?"

"Mmhmm..."

"So do I get a reward for it?"

Tiffany laughed, "You were so shy last night and now you're suddenly frisky? Are you a morning person?"

Taeyeon smiled. "I was just asking. You're the one who interprets it wrongly."

"Oh. I'm wrong?"

"Yep."

"So this is not the reward you're referring to?" She kissed her again, making sure to let it linger this time.

"Well," Taeyeon's arms went around Tiffany's waist and pulled. "It might be." She gave Tiffany a long and deep kiss.

"You're really not sheepish about morning breath, are you?"

“Could be worse.” Taeyeon moved her lips down to Tiffany’s jawline and chin. “At least we brushed our teeth last night.”

Tiffany chuckled. She felt Taeyeon’s lips on her neck and caught her breath. Her fingers were tangled in Taeyeon’s short golden locks. “Taeyeon-ah...”

“Hmm?”

She forgot what she was about to say. Something told her that they had to get up quickly and that she should leave but Taeyeon’s lips were expertly erasing everything her brain was trying to make her remember.

She had somehow managed to pin Taeyeon under her and slip her hand under Taeyeon’s t-shirt when the doorbell rang.

It triggered her brain back to full working order and she gasped as she lifted her face off Taeyeon’s. “Samchon!”

“Wha-... Oh sh-...” Taeyeon had totally forgotten that it was Sunday.

Tiffany groaned as she quickly got off Taeyeon. “This is what I wanted to tell you! I should’ve left early. Dammit!” She quickly changed out of Taeyeon’s clothes and into her own, not even caring that Taeyeon was there.

Taeyeon got off the bed and ran her fingers through her hair in stress. She didn’t even notice Tiffany changing until the girl frantically ran out of the bedroom and grabbed her phone and keys from the coffee table.

The doorbell rang again. Twice.

They both knew that the man was growing impatient.

“You don’t happen to have a back door or a fire escape do you?” Tiffany asked as she stood in the bedroom doorway.

Taeyeon shook her head. “I think he would’ve seen your car by now. Don’t you?”

Tiffany cursed. “What do we do then?”

Taeyeon quickly changed her clothes as well, not even caring that Tiffany was standing at the doorway. Her brain was busy trying to find a way to hide Tiffany and explain the presence of her car. She could say that Tiffany had left it there for her to check again. But she couldn’t fool Mr. Lee when it comes to cars. He knew a lot. Too much, even.

She mentally kicked herself for forgetting what day it was. Tiffany’s presence had totally distracted her.

The doorbell rang again. It was a long ring followed by a shorter ring then another long one.

Both girls gulped.

Taeyeon sighed. “Face the music?”

Tiffany sat down on the couch. “I’m so dead if my parents find out.” She buried her face in her palms.

Taeyeon walked up to her. She kissed the top of her head and smoothed her hair. “I’ll take full responsibility. I’ll think of something. Tell him that you’ve just arrived this morning.”

Before Tiffany could answer, Taeyeon was already out the door and down the stairs.

She heard the twisting of the lock and the door being opened.

“Hi, Samchon.” She heard Taeyeon’s voice and heard rushed footsteps instead of the man’s reply. She braced herself and stood up from the couch.



She saw him walking through the door and noticed the obvious displeasure on his face. “Good morning, Samchon.” She put her best game face on. She had to somehow get Taeyeon out of this mess.

## CHAPTER 6

Tiffany saw Taeyeon walking up the stairs behind the man. She signaled for Tiffany to just play it cool and the girl understood.

“Why are you here, Miss Hwang?” His tone was flat and cold. It was the coldest tone she had ever heard him speak in during all the years she’d known him.

“I just came by to see Taeyeon.”

“I’ll make you some coffee, Samchon.” Taeyeon was in the kitchen, boiling water.

“When did you arrive?” The man was still standing near the door, facing Tiffany.

“This morning.” Tiffany said. She kept her face straight and her eyes looked straight into his – not wavering. Lying was not something new to her.

He shook his head and sighed, “You kids think I don’t know...”

He then moved to pull the chair from the kitchen and placed it next to the coffee table. “Please sit down, Miss Hwang.” He gestured to the couch and Tiffany sat down.

“Taeyeon.” He called for the other girl as he sat down on the chair.

“Yes, Samchon?”

“Turn off the stove and come here.”

Taeyeon gulped and did as she was told.

He looked up at her, “Sit.” He pointed to the empty space next to Tiffany.

Taeyeon sat down at a safe distance away from Tiffany. She didn’t look at her and kept her expression under control.

He looked from one girl to the other. He took a deep breath after a few seconds of silence. “What are you two doing?”

“We’re not doing anythin-...” Taeyeon said.

“Don’t lie to me, Taeyeon. I know you.”

Taeyeon shut her mouth.

“How are you going to explain this to your parents, Miss Hwang?” He turned to the Tiffany.

“Explain what, Samchon?” Tiffany put on her best innocent look.

“I live above the garage, Miss Hwang. I can hear every car that comes and goes when I’m there. And I didn’t go anywhere yesterday or this morning.”

Tiffany and Taeyeon kept their faces straight although their heartbeats had considerably increased and Taeyeon’s palms were sweating. She hated lying to the man but she had to. She could not let Tiffany get in trouble and be taken away from her. Not yet.

He sighed again. “I thought you understood what I told you, Miss Hwang.”

“I still don’t know what you’re talking about, Samchon.” She desperately needed for this to blow over. It had just been a week. She had only had Taeyeon for a week. It was too short even for a fling.

He ignored her act and turned to Taeyeon, “And when I told you to be nice and befriend Miss Hwang, I didn’t mean in this way, Taeyeon. You should know better. I’m trying to protect you here.”

“What way is that, Samchon? We’re just friends. There’s nothing to protect me from.”

He leaned back in his chair and sighed again, massaging his temple with one hand. “Please don’t make me the enemy and stop lying to me, both of you. I know you and care about you like you’re my own daughters. I really don’t like being lied to. Especially by you two.”

Taeyeon glanced at Tiffany and the latter shook her head a little. She wasn’t going to give up her act just yet.

“Miss Hwang, how many times did I help cover for you? When you wanted to stay longer at Miss Jung’s or Miss Choi’s house to play? Or when you skipped your flute or English lesson to go hang out at the mall or go out on a date?” He paused and looked at her. “I can go on you know. The list is quite long after more than ten years.”

Tiffany tried not to flinch.

“And you...” He turned to Taeyeon, “Before you even told me about your girlfriend back then. All those times I saw you with her and never told your father, even when I caught you two kissing. You think I don’t know?” Taeyeon slightly looked away.

“I would let this slip if you were both still teenagers, 17-year-olds maybe. But you’re 22.” He took a deep breath, “You’re graduating next semester, Miss Hwang. That’s in six months. You know what your father’s plans are. How do you expect to keep this up then?”

Taeyeon curbed her curiosity. *What are Tiffany’s father’s plans?*

“And if you’re just playing with Taeyeon here...” He trailed off.

“I am not!” Tiffany then groaned as she realized her mistake. *So much for being an expert in lying then*, she cursed herself. She just couldn’t bear to let anyone think that she was playing with Taeyeon’s feelings.

His expression didn’t change. He already knew so Tiffany’s outburst was unnecessary in that respect but it did surprise him that Tiffany had reacted that way. “Then what are you doing, Miss Hwang? With all due respect, and I don’t mean to insult you in any way, Taeyeon.” he nodded towards her before turning back to face Tiffany, “You must be crazy if you think your parents are just going to let this slide.”

“Then let’s just make sure that they don’t find out.”

He raised his eyebrows, “You expect me to lie to your father? You know I can’t do that. Covering for your little playtime escapades when you’re a kid is one thing. This? This, I can’t.”

“You don’t have to lie if he doesn’t ask you anything, right?”

“Miss Hwang, you know he frequently checks up on you. Who do you think he usually asks first?”

Tiffany suppressed a curse. “Then just tell him that I’m doing fine. I’ll be going back to campus tomorrow as usual, Samchon. Nothing’s gonna change. Even if he sees Taeyeon, well, just tell him she’s my friend. That’s not a lie. You don’t have to cover for me this time.”

He shook his head again, “You know this can only last for a few months. You’re a smart girl, Miss Hwang. Why are you doing this?” He repeated his question.

“You too,” he then turned to Taeyeon. “You’re just as smart. I don’t get why you can’t be the more tactful one.”

Taeyeon sighed, “I’m sorry, Samchon. I tried.” She gulped, “I know what I’m doing and what’s gonna happen to me afterward.” She smiled weakly, “Can’t you just let this slide? Turn a blind eye? At least for the few months you mentioned?”

Tiffany turned at the words and saw Taeyeon’s sad smile. She could feel her heart break. *Samchon’s right. I’m just going to hurt Taeyeon*, she realized. “Taeyeon...”

Taeyeon ignored her, “Please, Samchon? I’m a big girl. I can handle this. I know, okay. I know.”

He heard the plea and took another deep breath. “You’re just going to get hurt again, Taeyeon. Why put yourself through that?”

Taeyeon shrugged and smiled again, “If there’s a chance to not be alone and feel lonely, even for just a few months...” She trailed off.

Tiffany couldn't take it anymore. She reached for Taeyeon's hand and held it. "Taeyeon-ah, don't say that."

Taeyeon blinked the tears back, "It's fine, Fany. We knew what we're getting into, remember?" She looked at Tiffany. "Plus, it's the truth. I figured that a few months of happiness would be better than a long period of loneliness – no matter how much it will hurt in the end. I'll recover. I always do." She grinned in an attempt to reassure her.

Tiffany squeezed the hand in hers, holding her own tears back. She remembered the promise she had made herself that morning while watching Taeyeon sleep. *I'll try my best, Taeyeon-ah. For as long as I can.*

He silently observed the two and knew that he couldn't say or do anything to make them change their minds.

He took another deep breath. "I'm staying out of this, okay? You're old enough to know what you're doing. Just don't say I didn't warn you." He leaned back in his chair. "And please be careful? If anyone knows about this..." He didn't finish his sentence.

The two girls nodded – still not letting go of each other.

"I think I need some air," he stood up. "I'll come and visit you some other time, Taeyeon."

Taeyeon stood up and followed him out. "I'm sorry, Samchon."

He patted her head. "Your life, your decision, Taeyeon. I just don't want to see you get hurt again."

"I know, Samchon, thank you." She smiled. "I'll be fine. Like I said, I'll recover. I always do."

He shook his head, "Stubborn as always." He waved goodbye, "I'll see you later."

"Bye, Samchon." She watched as he closed the door behind him before she turned around to go back up to her apartment. She found Tiffany still sitting on the couch, staring blankly at the chessboard on the coffee table. She took a deep breath and sat down next to her, encircling her arms around Tiffany.

Tiffany rested her head under Taeyeon's chin and held her arm. Taeyeon leaned back and pulled Tiffany with her – holding her firmly in her arms.

They sat in silence for a few moments.

"Are we crazy?" Tiffany finally asked.

Taeyeon chuckled. "I think so. At least I am."

Tiffany sat up and looked at her. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Taeyeon shrugged, "Too late to back out anyway."

"It's not too late..."

"You want to back out?"

Tiffany shook her head slowly.

"Then neither do I."

"But..."

"It's too late for my heart, Fany-ah."

Tiffany chuckled, "Cheesy."

Taeyeon grinned and kissed her forehead. "I'll be fine." She knew she would not be fine at all but she'd say and do anything to have her few months with Tiffany.

----

Tiffany left after they spent a few more hours together that Sunday afternoon. They did nothing besides having a quiet brunch and watching TV together. The unexpected encounter with Mr. Lee

had left them somewhat rattled. They silently decided to just spend as much time as they could together before reality forced its way in and they had to go their separate ways.

The week after was the first week of Tiffany's new and final semester as a university student. It got a bit hectic because she had to meet with her professors to get her final year project started – resulting in no meeting between the two at all. They resorted to text and long calls all through the week.

Although they didn't realize it, the long talks had resulted in an even deeper connection between the two as they shared stories – old and new – and got to know more about each other.

By Friday, Tiffany was already making up another story to her mother about meeting her friends for dinner when – in reality – she was going to go to Taeyeon's place as soon as she was done with her stuff at the campus. Since she was going to come home a bit later than usual, she had also managed to convince her mother that it would be more practical for her to drive and let Mr. Lee rest.

She couldn't wait to see Taeyeon again and was practically running across the campus car park and rushed all the way to the small garage. After spending more than two whole months together, five days without seeing each other felt like years to them.

"Jiseok-ah," Taeyeon straightened up as soon as she saw the pink roadster making its way into the lot – wiping her hands on her towel.

"I got it, Noona." The young man smiled understandingly.

"Lock up properly, okay? And just put the keys through the mail slot, as usual."

"You know you can count on me," he winked.

"And can you please ask one of the boys to cover up the beetle?"

He nodded. "Of course, of course. Don't worry, Noona. I'll take care of everything." He saw Tiffany getting out of the car. "Just go."

Taeyeon nodded, "Thanks." She turned to greet Tiffany. The scene would make unknowing bystanders think that the two hadn't seen each other in years judging by how they ran towards each other with wide smiles on their faces and held each other's hand – just like in those old corny romantic movies. Taeyeon pulled Tiffany into the apartment as soon as her hand grabbed hers.

"I missed you." Tiffany's mouth was already covering Taeyeon's before Taeyeon was able to shut the door behind her properly.

Taeyeon pushed the door until it clicked close. "I missed you too." She mumbled. "Let's go upstairs." She unwillingly broke the kiss and pulled Tiffany's hand.

She hadn't even put the keys on the table when Tiffany started kissing her again. She had to chuckle. "Fany-ah, slow down."

Tiffany ignored her and led her towards the couch – grabbing her by the collars of her overall. "Five days, Taeyeon-ah." She sat down and lay back, pulling Taeyeon down with her.

"I know." Taeyeon returned the kiss. "I missed you too."

It took about half an hour before they decided that they had had enough catching up. Taeyeon sat up and pulled Tiffany up with her. "You bit me." She put a finger to her lip and saw blood.

Tiffany grinned. "Sorry." She stood up to get a tissue for Taeyeon. "Got a bit carried away there..." She dabbed the small wound with the tissue and grinned sheepishly.

"What happens if we don't see each other for a month? I might need stitches." Taeyeon laughed.

Tiffany pouted. "I'm not a freak sadist."

"And yet I'm bleeding..."

Tiffany grinned again. "Sorry about that."

“You wanna put ice on that?” Taeyeon asked.

“On what?”

“Your lips.” She laughed. “Your mother would think that you got into a fight and someone punched your mouth.”

“Ha ha. Very funny.” Tiffany handed her the tissue and grabbed the TV remote. “Just wait an hour or so, the swelling will go down.”

“Such an expert.”

Tiffany shrugged. Her eyes were glued to the TV. She comfortably leaned back.

“I’m curious.” Taeyeon said.

“About what?”

“How come you’re okay with all this? With me?”

“What do you mean?” Tiffany changed the channel again.

“I would’ve never expected that you like girls.”

Tiffany took a second to reply. “Girls, boys, does it matter?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

Tiffany sighed and finally looked at Taeyeon. “I never really cared about the gender, I guess. Just as long as the feeling and the attraction’s there.” She turned towards the TV again and pressed another button on the remote.

“So you’ve dated girls before?”

“Nope. You’re the first.”

That made Taeyeon smile.

“But I did kiss a girl once.”

The smile disappeared.

“Who?”

Tiffany shrugged, “Some random senior, I think. It was at a party and I was drunk so I don’t really remember much. No big deal.”

“Excuse me.” Taeyeon grabbed the remote and turned the TV off. “You went to parties, got drunk and kissed strangers, older girls, then forgot about it. That’s not a big deal?!”

Tiffany laughed. “You’re an older girl and I kissed you, didn’t I?”

Taeyeon was not finding it amusing.

“It was just that one time and that was a very long time ago. High school?”

“High school?! What happened to your overprotective parents?”

“Out of the country.”

“Samchon?”

“Was on vacation, I think. I told my parents that I was having a sleep over at Sooyoung’s. It was her sister’s party. Her parents were out of town as well.” She grinned, “It was fun.”

“Kissing unknown older girls is fun? What do you rich kids get high on?” She shook her head.

“Hey! Money has nothing to do with fun. Although it does mean a lot more variety in party drinks.” She laughed again. “It was just another reckless teenage act, Taeyeon-ah. No big deal.”

“And here I thought that you’re such a prim angel...”

“Ooh! I’m an angel?” She turned her body towards Taeyeon and smiled.

“You only look like one. Totally evil inside. I am a saint compared to you,” Taeyeon smirked.

“Well, never judge a book by its cover, or so they say. I’ve never expected you to be such a puppy either, you know.”

“Hey! Stop with the puppy thing.”

“Why? It’s cute and it’s the truth.”

Taeyeon sighed. “What other crazy things have you done, Hwang Miyoung?”

“Yah! I told you to not use my Korean name. It reminds me of my parents when they reprimand me or try to make me do things I don’t want to.” She pouted a little.

Taeyeon grinned, “Sorry.” She kissed the pouting lips and started to play with Tiffany’s fingers.

They let the comfortable silence pass for a few more seconds.

“What time did you promise to be home?”

Tiffany shrugged, “Ten? Eleven? Daddy’s still away. I can stay longer.”

“Good.” Taeyeon hated the fact that they couldn’t even thoroughly enjoy their time together but knew that she was powerless against it. “We have plenty of time then.”

“Yes we do.” Tiffany kissed Taeyeon’s cheek. “Don’t frown, please. Just enjoy the moment.”

She smiled a little. “I will. Sorry.”

“No need to apologize.”

“I’m going to take a quick shower, okay?” She handed Tiffany the TV remote back.

“Sure. I’m not going anywhere.” She smiled and let Taeyeon kiss her forehead before she stood up and went into the bathroom.

Her smile disappeared as soon as she heard the bathroom door close. *Just enjoy the moment, Taeyeon-ah. It’s the only thing we can do right now.* She gulped as she remembered her father’s plan as soon as she graduated by the end of the semester. She shook her head to get rid of the thoughts. *Let’s forget about that for now. Yeah, I’m going to do just that.* She nodded and turned the TV back on.

----

“You’re still seeing each other?” He put down his coffee cup.

Taeyeon nodded and moved a chess piece.

He didn’t know whether he should be happy or upset at that fact. Under different circumstances, he would totally be elated to know that it had been a bit more than two months and Taeyeon and Tiffany were still going strong. Yet considering the current situation, he knew that it would only hurt Taeyeon more as their bond grew deeper.

“Did she tell you about her father’s plans after her graduation?” He finished moving his piece.

“No. And I don’t want to know.” She paused to think before making her move. “I don’t need to know. Everything will be over by then.” She clenched her jaws.

He took a deep breath and made his move. “Her father’s back in town, you know.”

Taeyeon nodded. “And we’ve been extra careful. Please don’t worry.” She finished her turn and he could see that she was distracted. The move she made was predictable and easy to stop. He took her chess piece off the board and she groaned.

“I thought you wouldn’t notice my mistake.”

He chuckled. “That would be foolish of me.” He observed as she took her time to contemplate her next move. He knew that he should change the subject to make Taeyeon feel a bit more relaxed and comfortable.

“How’s the car coming along?” He asked as soon as she completed her turn.

“Pretty good. I got the pistons and the cylinder kit.”

“I heard.” He paused. “What’s next?”

“Well, the engine’s pretty much done.”

“Oh? She’s purring?”

Taeyeon chuckled. “Not yet. I’m replacing the brake lines next. We’ll see if she’ll purr after all that.” She paused to think before moving another piece. “Then it’s off to the paint shop.” She grinned. “Whew. Check mate, Samchon. Almost got me there.”

He laughed. “I shouldn’t have changed the subject and I might have booked my historical first win.”

“Wouldn’t have made any difference, Samchon.” She smiled.

He sat back. “Oh well. My time will come someday.”

“How have you been feeling lately, by the way?” Taeyeon stood up to refill their glasses.

“Pretty good actually. The long rest did me well. If only I don’t have to worry so much these days...”

“Sorry...” Taeyeon mumbled.

“Just kidding, Taeyeon-ah. Like I said, your life your decision. I’m always worried about you one way or another anyway.”

“Why?” Taeyeon put the glasses back on the table.

“Well, I’m old,” he smiled. “There’s an expiry date for each one of us and I’m afraid mine might not be as long-...”

“Stop it.” Taeyeon cut him off harshly.

He held his tongue.

“I’m sorry for being impolite but please, don’t ever talk like that to me. I refuse to hear anything of that sort.”

“Taeyeon-ah...”

“End of discussion, Samchon.” She stood up again and walked to the kitchen, expertly hiding her tears at the thought of him leaving her. “You want something to eat? I cooked Samgyetang. It’s good for you and I think it’s edible,” she forced a laugh. “Don’t tell Ahjumma if it tastes bad, okay? She might be discouraged that her student fails her one and only lesson.”

“Taeyeon-ah...”

She heated the food and busied herself with preparing their lunch while wiping her tears every once in a while.

*Everyone’s going to leave me sooner or later. Guess I’m destined to be forever alone.* She clenched her jaws and silently scooped the rice into the bowl.

----

Another month flew by and before they both knew it, Tiffany was halfway through her project. The stress was getting to her and she began to spend more time at the library or at home, working on her computer. The times she spent with Taeyeon were reduced even more – to Taeyeon’s dismay. Yet she knew how important it was for Tiffany so she kept her silence, supporting and comforting Tiffany each time she called her to let out her stress and frustration. She knew Tiffany just wanted someone to talk to during those moments so she patiently listened to every rant about the project, the professors or anything else Tiffany let out.

It was another Saturday night and Mr. Lee said he would be going back to his hometown to meet some of his old friends that weekend so Tiffany decided to stay over all through Sunday. She said she would just think of another lie to tell her mother. It was good timing considering that her father was out of the country again.



Taeyeon couldn't wait until closing time – the time Tiffany had said she would come. She kept looking at her watch. She was working on her beetle but kept getting distracted as her thoughts traveled to the girl who was about to come in a few hours.

“Noona...”

The voice startled her and she slid out from under the vehicle. “What is it?” She sat up and wiped her hands.

The young man squatted down and adjusted his cap. “You okay?” He looked at her with a worried expression.

“Err... yes? Why?”

“Uhm... you've been under there for the past hour but you were not moving. We thought you either had fallen asleep or had frozen.” He chuckled.

Taeyeon blushed a bit. “I'm fine. Just distracted, I guess.”

He smiled, “Tiffany noona is coming tonight?”

“Yeah...”

“Ah... no wonder.”

They sat in silence.

“Something on your mind, Seok-ah?”

“It's not my place to say it, Noona.”

“But?”

He hesitated. “Promise me you won't get mad at me?”

“Nah. I'll just smack your head a bit and I'll be fine.” Taeyeon grinned.

“You're worse than my mother, Noona.” Jiseok grimaced.

“I promise I won't get mad at you.” Taeyeon reassured the young man, “What is it?”

“Uhm...” He took off his cap and put it back on. “Don't you think that Tiffany noona is way out of our league, Noona? I know I used to tease you about her but I never thought that she really likes you, like for real.”

Taeyeon laughed.

“I'm serious, Noona. I know she's nice and everything but I can't help but worry about you. Does she have a hidden agenda?”

“I don't know about that, Seok-ah, but I personally don't think so.” Taeyeon smiled. “I appreciate your concern. I really do. But it's all gonna be fine. She's not gonna be around much longer.” She smiled although her heart broke after hearing her own words.

“Eh? What do you mean, Noona?”

“Just wait a few more months and you'll see for yourself.” Taeyeon pulled his cap. “Now stop worrying about me and start worrying about your girlfriend instead. Get her something nice for Christmas this year, okay? Don't spend all your money on those silly toys.”

“Gasp! They are rare collectibles, Noona! You know it!”

Taeyeon laughed, “I know but still, save some money and get her something nice for once, okay? I think she's a keeper.”

“How do you know?”

“She's been stuck with you for two years! That takes superhuman mental power that I can't even begin to understand.” She laughed again.

He sighed, “If teasing me makes you feel better...”

“Oh stop playing martyr.” She pulled his cap again and he laughed.

“Well, if all is well and you won’t get crushed by a heap of junk while daydreaming about your girlfriend...” He stood up and dusted his hands. “I’ll just be on my way.”

Taeyeon grinned. “Hey, Seok-ah...”

He stopped and turned, “Yes, Noona?”

“Don’t ever leave me, okay?”

He grinned. “I have no intention to do so, Noona. Unless you call my rare collectibles toys again.”

She laughed. “Fine. Rare collectibles they are.” She smiled, “Thanks, Jiseok-ah. Can’t do this without you.”

“Oof! That’s too mushy for me, Noona. I’m outta here.” He took off his cap and bowed jokingly before making his exit.

Taeyeon shook her head and chuckled. *Well, at least Jiseok and the boys are here. Not much of a comfort but at least my days won’t be as quiet and lonely as my nights.* She sighed and lay back down to slide under the car.

----

It was an hour before closing time and she had just finished working on a customer’s car. Her phone suddenly rang and she took it out of her pocket – smiling widely as she saw the name on the screen.

“Hi!”

“Hi! Busy?”

“Nope. What’s up?”

“Uhm... promise you won’t be angry with me?”

Her face fell. “S-sure.” She steadied her voice. “What is it?”

“I might have to cancel tonight.”

“Oh?” She couldn’t hide her disappointment. “Why?”

“My professor just returned my report and there’s a mountain of revisions that I have to do. So it looks like I’ll be spending the rest of the day at the library, glued in front of the computer and buried under the books.”

“Ah I see...”

“I’m sorry, Taeyeon-ah. I really am. I promise I’ll come by first thing tomorrow morning, okay?”

“Don’t worry. First things first, Fany-ah.” She swallowed her disappointment and tried to sound cheerful. “I have a lot of stuff to do here anyway.”

Tiffany knew that Taeyeon was disappointed. She felt really bad and had spent the last half an hour trying to figure out how to best break the news to her. She might sound okay but she was just as disappointed and sad as Taeyeon was. They hadn’t spent time together for quite a long time so every hour was precious. “Taeyeon-ah...”

“Hmm?”

“I’m just as disappointed and sad as you are, you know. I miss you.”

Taeyeon sighed, “I miss you too but seriously, first things first. I’m fine. You do what you have to do. There’s plenty of time to catch up later.” She was determined to be strong for the both of them. “Don’t worry and just focus on what you have to do.”

“I-...” Tiffany really wanted to say those three words but she knew she couldn’t. They couldn’t. That would just hurt them more. They must never go there. “I will try to get things done as quick as possible, okay? I’ll be there tomorrow and I’ll stay over until Sunday.”

“Don’t push yourself too hard. I don’t want you to get sick. Just take it easy. We’ll catch up later. You can always call me if you need to talk.” She gritted her teeth.

“Sigh... Sorry, Taeyeon-ah...”

“For the millionth time, it’s fine. Now go work on that paper. The sooner you’re done with it the more rest you can get. Okay? I’m about to close up anyway.”

Tiffany hesitated a bit before answering. “Okay then. Text me when you want to talk? Anytime is fine, you know. Or call me...”

Taeyeon smiled, “Don’t worry about me. Now, this is going to waste your precious time. Go work on that paper.”

“You sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine. Go go.”

“Okay then. I’m sorry again.”

“Enough of that. Good night, Fany. Don’t tire yourself out.”

“Bye Taeyeon-ah. I miss you.” It’s the only thing she could say for now.

“I miss you too. Take care, okay?”

“I will. You too. Bye...”

“Bye...” She didn’t want to hang up but she knew she had to. She sighed and pocketed her phone. All the excitement and happiness had evaporated and she didn’t know what to do for the rest of the night.

She decided to just work on her books or maybe try to reorganize the office. Anything is better than spending the night alone in her quiet apartment.

By the time she had done all that she had intended to do, it was nearly 10 PM. She was quite surprised when she looked at the large clock on the wall and quickly closed up.

She had just finished securing the last bolt and was going to walk towards her apartment when she saw two young men walking across the lot, approaching her. She recognized them.

“Yoongmin! Honsoo! What are you guys doing here?” She was surprised to see them especially since her last encounters with them weren’t exactly happy ones. Yoongmin ran out of her office in anger and she had literally kicked Honsoo’s butt when he tried to snatch Tiffany’s purse.

The two didn’t say anything as they stop to stand in front of her.

She lifted her eyebrows. “What’s up guys?”

“Do you know what the word ‘humiliated’ means, Noona?” One of them asked.

“Huh? What are you talking about, Honsoo?”

“Because that’s how you made us feel. Humiliated.”

“What? I don’t-... I never intended to humiliate anyone let alone you two.”

“But you did, Noona. Badly.”

She saw something silver and long behind Yoongmin’s back. She felt fear. “I did? I’m sorry if I did. I never intended to-...”

“It hurt, you know.” Honsoo spoke again.

“I’m sorry. I-...”

“We only did what we must do to survive, you know.”

“I know but there are certain boundaries that you shouldn’t cross, Honsoo.”

“You always say that you care about us but that’s all bull, Noona. Crap!”

“Now now, I do care about you guys...”

“Really? More than you care about this junk?” Yoongmin took out the object he was hiding and Taeyeon saw it. A baseball bat. He took a swing at the beetle and Taeyeon screamed as she heard the sound of glass breaking.

“YAH! WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU’RE DOING!?”

“Hurts, doesn’t it, Noona? Kinda like our pride when you humiliated us in front of so many people.” Honsoo sneered and Yoongmin took another swing. Something cracked and fell to the ground with a loud clang.

“STOP THAT!” Taeyeon grabbed Yoongmin’s arm and pulled. He shook her off easily and took another swing and another.

“STOP IT!” Taeyeon lunged forward and stood between the boy and the car right when he was taking another strike.

She was able to duck a bit and lifted her arm by reflex to defensively protect her head. The bat missed her hand by a millimeter and struck the side of her head. She thought she saw a lightning flash before everything blurred and turned black.

She faintly heard a loud honk, screeching tires and a loud voice although she couldn’t make out the words.

She felt warmth on her face and tried to open her eyes. It hurt. Her head hurt. Everything hurt.

“Taeyeon-ah!”

*Fany?*

“TAEYEON-AH!”

Darkness.

## CHAPTER 7

“It’s just a concussion, Miss Hwang. She’s very very lucky.”

She heard a low voice. A man.

“Thank goodness. I was so worried.” A sob.

*Fany?*

“She’ll be fine. The tests look good so far and we’ve stitched the wound up. We’ll keep her under observation for the next 24 to 48 hours but that’s pretty much it. You have nothing to worry about. She’ll be out of here in no time.”

She tried to open her eyes but the blinding light hurt her head. She suddenly felt the need to vomit. She tried to move but her head hurt too much.

“Taeyeon? Taeyeon-ah!” She felt a hand on her arm.

“I think she might be nauseated. Nurse...”

The hand was replaced by someone else’s who was gently but firmly guiding her to sit up. She felt something cold being placed on her lap and tried to open her eyes to see what it was – only to feel pain in her head again and the return of the nausea.

She vomited and felt someone wiping her mouth clean before placing what felt like a glass on her lips and tilted her head a bit. She let the cool fluid flow down her throat and let it reduce the bitter and sour aftertaste. She rested her painful head on the pillow again.

“F-fa-a...” She tried to speak but found it difficult to properly say the words she wanted to say.

“I’m here, Taeyeon-ah.” She heard the familiar voice and it soothed her. She felt a kiss on her forehead and immediately relaxed. She fell asleep soon after.

“I’ll be going now. Just press the button or call for me or Nurse Min if you need anything, Miss Hwang.”

“Will do, Doctor. Thank you.”

“No problem. Please don’t worry, it’s normal for her be sensitive of bright lights and to feel nauseated for the time being. She’ll get over it soon.”

“Yes, Doctor. Thanks again.”

“No problem. Good night, Miss Hwang.”

“Good night, Doctor.”

----

She blinked and grunted. She waited a few seconds before she slowly tried to open her eyes again, waiting for them to adjust to the light. It took a while before she finally realized that it wasn’t that bright after all. The room was dimly lit. She squinted her eyes.

Everything was blurry but she could make out the layout of the room and the objects in it. She tried to move her head but it hurt too much. She grunted again.

“T-taeyeon?”

She heard the hoarse voice and tried to search for the source, lifting her right hand by reflex.

She felt a warm pair of hands grabbing hers and a kiss on her forehead, “Thank goodness you’re okay.”

“F-fany?” Her voice cracked and she sounded like an old man with a bad cough. She tried to clear her throat. “Fany?” She tried again.

“I’m here, Taeyeon-ah, I’m here.” She felt another kiss – on her cheek this time. “I’m sorry. If I hadn’t canceled then this wouldn’t have happened.” She then heard a sob.

“W-what?”

“I’m sorry. I’m really really sorry...”

She then slowly started to remember what happened. *Honsoo and Yoongmin. Baseball bat. The beetle!* She jerked and tried to sit up before the pain in her head forced her to lie back down. “Ow...”

“What are you doing, Taeyeon-ah? Don’t move like that. Rest, okay?”

“Beetle...”

“We’ll take a look at it when you’re better, okay? I’m sure Jiseok will take care of it for now.”

“No...”

“It will be taken care of, Taeyeon-ah. Think of your health first, okay? Get better and you can fix it all up again.”

She turned her head to get a better look at the other girl and could only see her blurry face.

“Fany...”

“Yes?”

“Not your fault.”

She heard a sigh. “If I hadn’t canceled then you wouldn’t have been there when they came.”

“No. Worse. You’d be there.” She blinked and hoped the blur will disappear soon. She wanted to see the face she was missing so much.

“I’m sorry, Taeyeon-ah.”

“Not your fault. Okay?” She tried to swallow. Her throat felt dry.

She felt Tiffany letting go of her hand and felt the cold surface of a glass pressed against her lips moments later.

Tiffany wiped the water that had trickled down from Taeyeon’s mouth. She felt very guilty for what had happened.

“Time?”

Tiffany looked at her watch, “4.20 AM.”

“You sleep.”

“I’ve been sleeping. I’m fine.”

“Paper.”

“I’ve finished it. That’s why I was able to come after all.”

“Good.” She tried to smile but she didn’t know how it looked like.

“I’m sorry, Taeyeon.” She heard another whisper and felt a kiss on her lips this time.

“Don’t. Please.”

Silence.

“Fany?”

“Yes?”

She braced the pain in her head as she tried to move aside.

“Don’t move, Taeyeon-ah. The doctor said you should not move your head around too much. Just sleep. Get plenty of rest.”

She ignored the girl and kept moving slowly aside.

“Taeyeon-ah. Stop moving, please.”

She patted the space next to her and heard Tiffany sigh before the hard mattress shifted a bit and she felt the warmth of the other girl’s body at her side.

“Seriously, you’re just too stubborn.” She felt another kiss on her cheek.

She felt a bit of pain in the back of her left hand so she didn't move that one. She searched for Tiffany's hand with her right hand and held on tight as soon as she felt Tiffany grabbing it.

"Don't leave."

"Of course I won't. Sleep, Taeyeon. Please?"

"You too."

"Yes, me too." She felt another kiss on her cheek and Tiffany's head slightly resting on her shoulder. She exhaled in relief and surrendered to sleep once again.

----

"She'll be fine, Mr. Lee. She's recovering just fine. Miss Hwang's been taking good care of her. All she needs is plenty of rest for the next few days or weeks. I've prescribed some paracetamol for her headache but she won't need to take them after the headaches are gone."

"Thank you very much, Doctor."

"My pleasure. She'll be fine, Mr. Lee."

The door closed.

"I'm sorry, Samchon. It's my fault. If I hadn't canceled on her she wouldn't be down at the shop."

"It's not your fault, Miss Hwang. She would've still come down and meet the boys." He sighed. "You said it was Yoongmin and one other boy?"

"Yes, the one who tried to snatch my purse."

He took a deep breath. "Honsoo. Bad news from the start. I bet he influenced Yoongmin into doing this. From what I've heard, that boy wasn't that bad."

"He wasn't. He was a good kid. Taeyeon cared for him a lot."

"Yeah, she told me about him a few times. She was sure that he could be even better than Jiseok."

Silence.

"Samchon?"

"Hmm?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"What is it, Miss Hwang?"

"Why is Taeyeon so obsessed with that beetle?"

He chuckled. "Have you seen the Herbie miniature she kept on the cabinet?"

"Yes?"

"She's obsessed with Herbie."

"Why?"

"She grew up with it. Her father made her watch all the movies and even the TV series, I think." He paused, "Other girls grew up watching Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty or other fairy tales, she grew up watching Herbie." He sighed, "Her father's dream was to one day own a Herbie – a beetle painted to look exactly like that car. I guess she tried to make that dream a reality." He smiled sadly. "I know that it sounds childish but, in her own words, it's the childish dreams that keep her going. I think it gave her a sense of purpose while cherishing the memories of her father at the same time."

"Oh..." Tiffany was quiet. "Did her father give her that beetle?"

The man chuckled, "No. He couldn't afford it. Those things are considered classics and are always in demand. Besides, he's very strict when it comes to Herbie. The car used in the original movie was made in 1963. He said that should he ever own one, it must be the exact same make and model. He wouldn't settle for less."

"That car Taeyeon's working on, is that...?"

He nodded. "The 1963 make." He smiled, "One of the boys who used to work for her now runs his own refurbishing business downtown. His clients are A-listers and celebrities. He found this car one day, rotting away in the corner of some abandoned garage of an old movie star or something. He gave it to her on her birthday." He laughed. "He said that even if Taeyeon can't make it work again, he still won't mind painting it to look exactly like Herbie. But it would just be a silly model, not a real car. Taeyeon was determined to restore it to its original glory."

His smile disappeared, "Last I heard, it was almost done. All she needs now is just the exterior and interior parts. Tires, seats... those things. And to get it painted. She had been constantly tinkering with it for almost two years now. I don't know how much damage those boys have inflicted on that car. I just hope that Jiseok can fix them before Taeyeon saw it... if it's indeed as bad as I fear it would be."

He took a deep breath and stared quietly at the sleeping girl. "You can never seem to catch a lucky break, do you, Taeyeon?"

"Don't say that, Samchon. She's lucky it's just a concussion. The doctor said so."

He smiled. "Sorry. I guess you're right. But what's the use of health when..." He stopped himself and laughed it off, "Pardon me. I'm just being silly. I guess the trip had tired me out more than I realize." He took a deep breath. "Health is the most important. Health gives you a chance to hope for better things and another day to move closer towards your dream." He smiled again. "Health gives you the opportunity to wait, to love..."

"Samchon..."

He chuckled, "Pardon the musings of this old man, Miss Hwang."

She sensed the sadness in his words and tone. "It's fine, Samchon. Are you sure you're okay though?"

"I'm fine, Miss Hwang." He smiled a little. "I'm fine."

They grew quiet.

"Can I ask you something this time, Miss Hwang?"

"Of course, Samchon. What is it?"

"Are you sure you're not just playing with her heart?"

"Samchon!" Luckily, she remembered to keep her voice down.

"I'm just trying to make sure, Miss Hwang."

"I thought you would've known by now..."

"I'm sorry but when it comes to Taeyeon, I have to be extra protective and careful."

"Why?"

"She's fragile, Miss Hwang. I've already told you that. Behind that cold and tough exterior is a fragile girl who wants nothing but simple happiness after a lifetime of one hardship after another." He sighed, "She's all alone in this world..."

"She has you."

"Yes, but for how much longer, Miss Hwang?"

"What are you talking about? You're healthy. You'll be here for her for a long long time, Samchon."

He smiled but didn't answer nor confirm her words. "My point is, I'm honestly afraid that she's getting too attached to you. Just as you are to her."

Tiffany didn't answer.

"Do your parents even know you're here?"



"I told them I was spending the weekend at Sooyoung's since we need to catch up on our papers and it was only half a lie." She quickly added the last part. "I did need to catch up on the paper. I just finished it early so I could spend time with Taeyeon." Her tone grew quieter. She then took a deep breath. "Three months, Samchon. That's all I have left with her." She smiled sadly. "A total of six months, give or take a few weeks. Not bad, right?" She turned to him, "It's more than what a lot of people get, you know. And then you can go back to live your life in peace – without the fear of Daddy's sudden interrogation." She laughed a hollow and painful laugh.

He heard it and sighed. "It's not that I don't want you two to be happy, you know. My fear is that you two would be *too* happy."

She was confused. "What do you mean, Samchon?"

"The length does not matter, Miss Hwang. Six months, six days, six weeks... a year, five years..." He took a deep breath and whispered, "... eleven years..." He gulped as the memories of the loved ones he had lost resurfaced.

"Samchon..." She reached out and held his arm.

"I'm alright, Miss Hwang." He smiled and cleared his throat. "My point is..." He repeated. "Once you're bound to that one person you know you don't want to ever be without, you will never be able to forget them no matter what. You can move on, try to forget and try to find love and happiness again. Some succeeded, others don't. But even those who succeeded will tell you that what they have now is different and it will never be the same. All they could do is make the best of the hand they were dealt and try to forget what's in the past." He paused. "I was trying to spare you two from that pain simply because we both know that it's just not meant to be, Miss Hwang." He sighed. "You know you can't. Not with her, not with Taeyeon."

She wiped the tears that had silently trickled down her cheeks. "I know, Samchon. I know I can't, we can't. But I won't trade these six months for anything in the world." She smiled. "And I still have hope. Maybe one day, by some lucky twist of fate, we... can?"

"And how long would that take? How long would you leave her hanging? Alone in uncertainty?" He sighed again and turned to look at the sleeping figure, "She's been alone for a large part of her life, Miss Hwang – if not most. What you're doing, what you've done, is condemning her to also live the rest of her life alone."

She caught her breath at his last words and gulped. *Have I done that?*

"B-but you said so yourself. People can move on, find new happiness." She couldn't use the word 'love'. "I'm sure Taeyeon will find someone. She's a wonderful person."

"Oh that she is. She has had a lot of boys and girls after her, you know." He chuckled. "I think every boy she has ever taken in once had a crush on her before they found out about her... preference." He smiled. "But you will always be her first love."

"Huh? You said she had a girlfriend."

"She did. Once. But it was such a silly crush. I think it only lasted a few weeks." He grinned at the memory. "I think it was her second kiss."

"Second? Who was her first?"

"Some fanboy in grade school." He laughed. "Her father told me the story. It was so funny, he was laughing until he cried. Apparently, Taeyeon came home from school crying one day because a boy 'squashed her mouth with his' and she cried 'yuck' and 'ew' for the whole day."

Tiffany laughed, imagining a cute little Taeyeon crying. *But she's a good kisser*, she thought with a smile. *Where did she learn how to do that?* She chuckled at that thought.

“She grew up too quickly, that kid.” He spoke again.

“I never have any intention to hurt her, Samchon.” She told him after another brief pause between them. “I swear.”

“I know, Miss Hwang.” He smiled. “I blame both of you equally,” he shook his head. “I’ve never seen her fall for anyone this fast and this hard.” He sighed, “You two are just too stubborn. And it has happened so there’s no use discussing it any further.” He took a deep breath, “Let’s just hope what you said come true. That by some lucky twist of fate...” He trailed off.

“Y-yeah... let’s....”

They stared silently at the still figure they both loved so much.

It’s a good thing that neither of them noticed the small streaks of tears flowing from the edges of the closed eyelids down the sides of her face.

----

Taeyeon was released just two days after she was admitted under strict orders to get plenty of rest, drink plenty of water and to make sure that she didn’t make any sudden or large movements with her head.

The doctor told her that she was allowed to do light work as soon as the headaches had disappeared. However, he told Taeyeon to not go under hoods, cars or anywhere that required her head to be tilted or bent down for a longer period of time. A month maybe, just to make sure.

She had gone back to work two days after her release. A decision that was heavily objected by Tiffany and Mr. Lee. She promised them to sit quietly at her desk and do only paperwork for the next month.

The damage to the beetle was not major, fortunately. Mr. Lee and Jiseok called in a few favors and the broken window was replaced, the bumper was fixed and reinstalled and the dents in the body repaired. The engine was not damaged in any way so everyone was relieved – especially Taeyeon.

Tiffany had been spending every spare moment she had at the shop with Taeyeon. She would bring her laptop, books and papers and work until she had to go home or go see her professors at the university or get extra references from the library. She had put other activities on hold until she could finish her paper.

Her presence at the shop also served as a way to keep an eye on Taeyeon since Taeyeon was itchy to get her hands dirty again and had started to secretly do the work she was not allowed to.

Mr. Lee also visited more often, sometimes taking turns with Tiffany to accompany Taeyeon. She enjoyed the constant company but as the weeks went by, she could no longer keep the conversation she had overheard that day at the hospital at the back of her mind.

She had thought that six months were enough. But as they entered the fourth month, she found the curiosity inside her growing – gnawing at her. She wanted a glimpse of what would happen to them after all this was over.

“Taeyeon-ah!!”

She heard the door shut, followed by the sound of footsteps climbing up the stairs. Mr. Lee and Tiffany had forced her to make duplicates of her house keys and to give a set to each of them as precaution. They didn’t want to risk stubborn Taeyeon pulling some stunt to prove her health while she was alone in the apartment – hurting herself in the process.

Tiffany burst through the door with a huge smile on her face.

Taeyeon looked up from the chessboard and lifted her eyebrows. “Looks like someone’s happy.”

“You bet!” Tiffany dropped her bag on the floor and literally pounced Taeyeon on the couch, making Taeyeon fall backward on it. “Yah! Watch the head!”

“Oops! Sorry.” Tiffany reached for a cushion and gently placed it under Taeyeon’s head. “Comfy?”

“Yes but why are you so ha-... mmmphphy?”

Tiffany’s lips silenced Taeyeon and Taeyeon relaxed into the kiss. Tiffany took care to not be too rough on Taeyeon. So she kept her distance – supporting herself on all her arms and knees – and limited her movements, much to the frustration of the blond girl.

“Fany-ah!” She pushed Tiffany away.

“What?”

“It’s been almost a month and there’s a cushion under my head. You can do better than that.”

Tiffany laughed, “Byuntae.” She gave Taeyeon one quick peck and got off of her.

“Now why did you stop? That’s the most action I’ve gotten in a month! I need the exercise!” She pouted and refused to sit up.

Tiffany laughed again. “But we have plenty of time. Today’s Friday, remember?”

“And?”

“My professor finally approved my project. Now all I have to do is finish the rest of the paper.”

“That’s good.” Taeyeon was still not moving.

“Yep. It means I’ll have plenty of time to babysit you until you recover fully.” Tiffany hovered over Taeyeon and showed her a bunch of pink toothbrushes.

“Are those disposable?”

“Of course not!”

“Then why are there so many? Are you using one brush for every tooth?”

Tiffany laughed, “You’re cute when trying to be annoying like this.” She gave her a quick peck on the lips. “I told you I’d add some pink to your colorless life.”

Taeyeon sighed, “Blue and purple are colors too, you know. But go ahead. Pinkify me.”

“Is that even a word?”

Taeyeon shrugged, “I don’t know and I don’t care. I also don’t know why you’re hovering over me, holding a bunch of toothbrushes in your hand instead of doing something more worthwhile and rewarding with it. I don’t think my position could be more compromising, do you?”

“Why are you suddenly so eager and cranky?”

“I’m bored. My brain has been idle for weeks. The most I’ve done is keeping the book balanced and playing chess with myself. Humor me.”

Tiffany laughed again and put the toothbrushes down on the table. “You’re more fun this way. Your brain should be idle more often.”

Taeyeon didn’t respond.

“Oh fine...” She bent down and kissed the girl. “There, happy?”

“THAT’S IT?!”

Tiffany laughed again. “Not on the couch, Taeyeon-ah. You need better support for your head.”

“Fine.” Taeyeon pushed Tiffany off her and sat up. “You better keep your word or I swear I’ll lock you out of the bedroom for the entire weekend,” she sternly warned Tiffany.

“Ma’am, Yes Ma’am!” Tiffany grinned.

Taeyeon stood up and pulled Tiffany with her to the bedroom.

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“F-fany...” She stuttered.

“Hmm?” A lazy reply came from the girl trailing kisses on her jawline down to her neck. She felt Tiffany’s hand grazing her abdomen again and she tensed.

“What happened to you?” Tiffany pulled away – straddling her waist and staring at her. “You’re not becoming bipolar, are you?”

“I-I...” She gulped, “I don’t think so.”

“Then why were you so eager one moment then so tense and quiet the next?”

“I-...” She swallowed. “I-I’ve n-never...” She couldn’t finish her sentence.

“Oh.” Tiffany understood. “We don’t have to, you know.” She smiled. “Doesn’t matter to me.”

“If we... I mean would we... I mean... Dammit...”

Tiffany laughed and rolled off, lying on her side facing the now blushing Taeyeon. “Doesn’t matter, Taeyeon-ah.” She kissed the red cheek and held Taeyeon’s hand, weaving their fingers together. She leaned her head on Taeyeon’s shoulder. “I’m happy to just have you with me like this.”

Taeyeon was restless. If she were to allow anything more to happen between them, would that make her even more attached to Tiffany? Would it be more painful when they had to say goodbye? Her mind replayed the conversation between Tiffany and Mr. Lee. *Samchon said it’s too late anyway, she argued. So it’s not like I’m opening a whole new can of worms, is it? And there’s always a small chance – a small hope – that we could end up together, right? Fany said so... although samchon wasn’t convinced. Why wasn’t samchon convinced? What is going to happen to Fany? What’s her father’s plan?* The curious questions returned.

“Taeyeon-ah...”

She didn’t hear her name.

“Taeyeon-ah.” Tiffany pushed herself up and leaned on her elbow. She searched Taeyeon’s eyes.

“Hmm?”

“What are you thinking about?”

“Oh nothing.”

“Liar. You’re clearly contemplating something. What is it?”

No answer.

“Are you still thinking about that? It’s okay. Really! Nobody says we have to do anything.” She lay back down on her side, resting her head on the pillow.

“Can I ask you something?” Taeyeon looked at Tiffany.

“Sure. What?”

She summoned all her courage and prepared herself. “What’s gonna happen after you graduate?”

Tiffany looked down.

“Fany-ah...” Taeyeon tugged at the hand in hers.

She looked up at the pleading eyes.

“Please? Can I know what your father’s plans are?”

“Why do you need to know? I thought you don’t want to know.”

“Well, I didn’t want to know...”

“So what changed? It might be better for you to not know.”

“But if there’s even the slightest hope, by some lucky twist of fate, don’t you think I deserve to know so I can hope with you?”

Tiffany’s eyes widened. “Who-... Did samchon tell you?”

“No.”

“Then how-...” She gulped. “You heard?”

Taeyeon nodded.

“How much did you hear?”

“A lot.” Taeyeon turned to lie on her side, fully facing Tiffany. “Fany-ah, what’s gonna happen next?” She squeezed the hand in hers.

Tiffany sighed, “He plans to send me to the States to continue my studies. Get a Master’s degree.”

“Oh.” She paused for a second. “That’s not bad. A Master’s degree will take, what now, one and a half, two years? I can wait that long.”

“I won’t be back, Taeyeon-ah.” Tiffany gulped – her eyes had started to water.

“Huh? Why not?”

“He plans to move the entire family to the States, where there’s better treatment for Mommy.”

“Better treatment? Your mother’s sick?”

“Yeah...”

“What?! How come you’ve never told me this?” Taeyeon sat up.

“Hey, no sudden movements.” Tiffany followed suit.

“I’m fine. It’s been a month.” Taeyeon dismissed the concern. “What’s wrong with your mother?”

Tiffany shrugged, “Not sure. She had a tumor, I think. It’s why I don’t have siblings and also why they tend to be overprotective of me. They won’t tell me the whole truth or the complete story though – not even when I’m already this old.” She smiled. “But it was completely gone and Mommy has been healthy for years. It’s just, these past few years, the doctors aren’t sure...” She sighed and Taeyeon comforted her, pulling her close and letting her rest her head on her chest.

“These past few years...” Tiffany continued, “She had been growing weak. She started to feel unwell more often. I tried to be there for her but she always said that she was okay, no matter how pale she looked.” She wiped a tear off the corner of her eye. “So I finally decided to just treat her normally, like nothing’s wrong with her. And she seemed to prefer it that way.”

Taeyeon suddenly felt guilty for keeping Tiffany with her all this time. “You shouldn’t spend too much time here then. Go accompany her. She must be lonely at home.”

“She’s fine. Besides, she would sulk, get cranky and wouldn’t even talk to me when I’m around. I think that – on some level – she hates being treated like an invalid. When she sees me happy and active, she’s happy.” She smiled. “That’s why Daddy keeps going on his business trips too. We just carry on like normal.”

She sighed. “Daddy thinks that the doctors in the States can provide better care for her, that they may know what’s wrong with her. And we can’t let her go alone now, can we?” She looked up and smiled sadly. “Too bad you and I couldn’t have met earlier.” She chuckled and reached out to tuck Taeyeon’s hair behind her ears. “We could’ve had so much more fun times together...”

Taeyeon leaned down and kissed the teary girl gently. “Remember what samchon said?” She smiled.

“What?”

“Six months, six weeks, six years, six days... it doesn’t matter.” Taeyeon smiled. “The length doesn’t matter, Fany-ah.” She held back her own tears, feeling a slight regret now that she knew what the future would look like. “It doesn’t matter.” She kissed her again. *I think I love you, Fany. I wish I could tell you that out loud.*

Tiffany finally let her tears spill out as she felt Taeyeon's gentle lips on hers. *I wish you had really hated me. It would be much easier for me to let you go, Taeyeon. I love you but please don't love me back. Please don't...*

## CHAPTER 8

After their talk that day, Taeyeon was more determined than ever to make the remaining months they had together as memorable as possible.

Four months on and Christmas was finally coming. Yet while other people could use the special day to gather with their loved ones, Taeyeon could not spend it with Tiffany as the latter had parties to attend plus her annual family dinner.

Tiffany promised to come and celebrate it with Taeyeon a bit later – on the 27<sup>th</sup> – instead. So Taeyeon spent the 25<sup>th</sup> with Mr. Lee, as usual, while Tiffany was with her family.

She wanted to take Taeyeon to the parties her friends were throwing but due to Taeyeon's ongoing recovery, Tiffany didn't want to risk it. She wanted to keep Taeyeon in perfect health so they could enjoy their remaining time to the fullest.

The 27<sup>th</sup> finally came and Taeyeon was half nervous half excited. She didn't decorate the apartment much since she never really celebrated Christmas anyway. There was only the small table-top Christmas tree that Mr. Lee had given her a few years ago, some lights along the window frame and a mistletoe on every doorway. She found that last idea to be brilliant and couldn't wait to see Tiffany's reaction.

"Taeyeon-ah!!"

She heard the familiar shout and walked to greet the cheerful girl at the apartment door.

"Merry Christmas!" Tiffany hugged her and she almost lost her balance.

"Y-yah! Fany-ah! Calm down!"

"I don't care! I missed you." She tightened her hug and Taeyeon had to laugh. "I missed you too. Merry Christmas, Fany-ah. How was your Christmas?"

Tiffany let go of Taeyeon. She then placed the large bag she was shouldering on the floor and took off her jacket and boots, "Meh... the usual. Nothing new." She was about to step into the apartment when Taeyeon stopped her.

"Not so fast."

"What?"

Taeyeon pointed upward and Tiffany's eyes followed the finger. She grinned. "Let me guess, you've placed this on every doorway in this house?"

"How do you know?!"

She laughed, "You're so predictable, Byuntae." She kissed her. "There you go."

"Thanks. Great idea huh?"

"Mine's better." She walked passed Taeyeon and sat down on the couch.

"Oh?" Taeyeon sat down next to Tiffany. "And what idea is that?"

Tiffany pulled something out of the bag she was carrying. "Ta-da!"

"Eh? What is that thing?"

"This..." Tiffany put on the red reindeer headband that had a thin steel wire curving in the middle of it with mistletoe dangling on its end. "...is portable mistletoe!"

Taeyeon laughed. "You're right. This is so much better!"

"I snatched it from Sooyoung's party."

"Nice move." She kissed Tiffany. "And there's your kiss."

"That'll do for now." Tiffany took the headband off.

"For now? So if you keep wearing it then I have to keep kissing you?"

“Yep.”

“Assa!”

Tiffany laughed, “Let’s save that for later.” She put the headband in the bag. “Have you had dinner?”

Taeyeon nodded. “Have you?”

“Yup. Wanna open your present now?”

“Ooo! Can I?”

“Of course!” Tiffany took a big box from the bag and gave it to Taeyeon. “Merry Christmas, Taeyeon-ah. I hope you like it.”

Taeyeon grinned widely and carefully opened the neatly wrapped package. Her eyes went wide when she finally saw the content. “Thi-this...” She gulped and stared at the box in her hand. “H-how... that’s impossible!” She looked at Tiffany, “Where did you get this? I thought they stopped making this more than ten years ago?”

“The power of the internet, Taeyeon-ah.” Tiffany grinned.

Taeyeon was still staring at the box. “Must have cost you a fortune!”

Tiffany laughed, “Not really. Besides, the look on your face right now is priceless – more valuable than money, for sure.”

Taeyeon laughed, “Cheesy, Fany.”

“It’s true!” *I’m happy to see you this happy, Taeyeon-ah.* She added the happy face to her list of favorite Taeyeon expression.

“Can I open it?”

“It’s yours, you know. You can do whatever you want with it.”

Taeyeon carefully opened the semi transparent box and pulled out the plastic Herbie. It’s a trinket box in the shape of the famous car. She pulled the top and the hood off to reveal the space under them and grinned happily like a kid on Christmas morning. “Thanks, Fany-ah!” She kissed her. “I love it!”

“I’m glad you do.”

“Appa would’ve loved it too.” She chuckled. “He might even hug it to sleep, I think.” Her eyes glistened at the thought of the man as she ran her fingers along the smooth plastic surface.

Tiffany gently stroked Taeyeon’s back. The latter turned to her and smiled. “He would have loved you. He considered anyone who can name all Herbie movies as family, you know.” She laughed.

Tiffany could hear the sadness in the laugh. “I’m sure I would have loved him too.” She kissed Taeyeon’s cheek. “He raised a wonderful daughter.”

“Thanks.” Taeyeon returned the kiss.

“My pleasure.”

Taeyeon took her time to put the plastic car back into the box and neatly set it aside. She gulped. “I... I don’t know if you’d like my gift. You might think it’s childish and cheesy.”

“I’d love anything you get me. Even real cheese.” Tiffany laughed.

Taeyeon grinned nervously and took out the gift from the pocket of her hoodie. “Merry Christmas, Fany. Please don’t hate it.”

“I won’t, Taeyeon-ah. Don’t worry.” She smiled and took the small package. She unwrapped it and opened the box. Her smile grew wider. “Ohmygod! They’re so cute!!” It was almost a shriek.

Taeyeon didn’t know whether to be happy or not at Tiffany’s reaction.

Tiffany pulled out the pink stringed object. “You made this?”



Taeyeon nodded.

“It’s for my phone?”

“For anything you want. Phone, keys, I don’t know whether you can hang it on your iPad though.”

Taeyeon grinned.

“This is supposed to be you?” She pointed at the cute large-headed metal character that hung from the pink string. It had blond hair and a small body that was wearing a blue overall complete with a pink towel hanging out of one pocket and a wrench in hand.

“Yeah...” Taeyeon blushed. “This one has a pretty eye-smile and long dark hair.” She took out the other one, hanging from the blue string. “It’s even holding a flute.” She showed it to Tiffany.

The smiling Tiffany squealed again. “They’re so cute, Taeyeon-ah!!”

“Not too childish?”

“Of course not! Now I have a mini you to carry around.” She laughed.

“I can blush too.”

“What?”

“Take out your phone.”

Tiffany did as she was told.

Taeyeon dialed Tiffany’s number and as soon as the phone rang, the cute round face started to glow a reddish hue. Tiffany laughed and clapped her hands in delight. “TOO CUTE!”

Taeyeon grinned. “Glad you like it. There’s small catch at the back of the head. You can replace the battery if it runs out. If you think the glow is annoying, you can just take the battery out.”

“I love it! Thank you, Taeyeon-ah!” She gave her a deep, long kiss.

“Wow...” Taeyeon was in a daze after Tiffany had pulled away. “You really love it, huh?”

“You bet! And the fact that you made it yourself makes it extra special.” She smiled and spent the next minute trying to hook it to her phone. “Yay. I’ll call her Taetae – the mini Taeyeon.” She laughed again as she stared at it one more time.

“I’m very relieved you like it,” Taeyeon smiled. “I was afraid it’s too childish.”

“It’s perfect, Taeyeon-ah.” She smiled at Taeyeon. *Now I feel like I have you with me wherever I go.* She gulped a little and shook the thought off. “The mini Tiffany is yours, I assume?”

“Yep,” Taeyeon had already hung it on her phone. “My little Yeppeunie.” She grinned.

“Cheesy, Taeyeon... very cheesy.”

“Not my fault you’re so pretty.”

Tiffany blushed.

“Oh and don’t forget the card.” Taeyeon handed Tiffany a beige envelope. “I’m not much of a writer so do you mind reading it when you’re home? Not here? It’s embarrassing.” She looked away – cheeks turning a light shade of pink.

Tiffany grinned, “Okay. My card is attached to the back of the Herbie box.”

Taeyeon nodded. “Yep, I saw that. Can I read it now?”

“Hmm... to make it fair, you can only read it after I’ve left.”

“Okay then.” She stood up and took her Christmas present and put it in the bedroom, putting the card on the bedside table while she neatly stored the box in the closet. She would think of a place for the Herbie trinket box later on. She walked out of the bedroom to find Tiffany still staring at her ‘Taetae’ – although she was smiling, Taeyeon noticed the sadness in the eyes. She sighed and approached the other girl. “Please don’t be sad on our Christmas day?” She put her chin on Tiffany’s

shoulder and her arms around Tiffany's waist. "We still have New Year and Valentine's day to celebrate." She paused, "And with a bit of luck... my birthday?"

Tiffany swallowed. "I'm pretty sure I'd still be here for your birthday." She turned her head and kissed Taeyeon's forehead. "I'll make sure I'm still here."

"Thanks." Taeyeon quietly replied.

Tiffany turned in Taeyeon's hold, making Taeyeon lift her chin off her shoulder. "I'm sorry." She looked into her eyes.

"What for?"

"Everything." The tears she was holding back finally spilled out of her eyes. "I'm sorry for all this. I shouldn't have been selfish. If I hadn't been so selfish, you would've been spared. If I hadn't pushed..." She gulped.

"No regrets, Fany-ah." Taeyeon kissed the tear-streaked cheek. "Like samchon said, we're both to blame." She grinned through her own glistening eyes. "It's Christmas! Happy times! Don't be sorry, okay? I'm glad I met you." She kissed her. "More than glad."

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She turned the volume of the TV down to hear the sound of weird jingling of keys and what sounded like muffled swearing and knocks against the door. Confused, she put the TV remote down on the table and walked out the door, down the stairs.

She peeked through the peephole and quickly opened the door. "Whoa..." She immediately caught a stumbling Tiffany in her arms.

"TAEYEON!"

"Sssh... lower your voice." She sniffed. "Are you drunk?"

"HAPPY NEW YEAR!"

She laughed, "You're drunk."

She pulled Tiffany in and closed the door. "Can you even stand?"

A sloppy kiss landed on her mouth. She pulled back. "Fany-ah, you're drunk. Do your parents know that you're here? Wait. How did you even get here? Did you drive in this state?!"

"What state? I'm fine. I'm not drunk. I'm just a bit tipsy, I guess." She drowsily grinned. "My parents are home. The party was at Sunny's this year." She grinned. "You should've come..."

Taeyeon chuckled. "I can't drink yet, remember?"

"Cold..." Tiffany leaned on Taeyeon, arms around her waist.

"Let's go upstairs then. Can you climb stairs?"

"Psh... what kind of question is that? OF COURSE I CAN!"

Taeyeon grimaced at the sudden increase in volume and the alcohol breath on her face. "Right. Let's try then."

A tiring few minutes later and Taeyeon had finally managed to drag Tiffany up the stairs and onto the bed. The girl fell asleep almost as soon as her head hit the pillow. Taeyeon took off her shoes and covered her with the blanket. She was grateful that nothing happened to Tiffany while she was driving in that state. *What kind of friends let their friend drive in this state?!*

She took a deep breath and kissed Tiffany's cheek before turning off the lights and went back to the TV in the living room. She wasn't sleepy.

She sighed and hoped that this end of year music show could distract her at least until sleep could find her.

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The month that followed the little drunk incident was filled with a very busy Taeyeon and an even busier Tiffany.

Business suddenly increased and the shop was bustling. The cold winter and sudden snowstorm seemed to be causing problems for a lot of cars.

Tiffany was busy finishing her paper and taking care of her graduation administration. To top it off, her father had been on her case too, making sure that her graduate application was in order so she could start on time. She was too distracted to even find time to sneak off to see Taeyeon.

There were days when they could only text each other good morning and good night. And as much as they hated those days, both realized that they had to get used to the distance and so they took it in stride - considering it practice for later.

January came and went and Taeyeon was looking forward to her first ever Valentine's day. She had used her beetle fund to get something nice for Tiffany. She knew that what Tiffany had probably cost a thousand times more but she convinced herself that it's the thought that counts.

She was about to start working on the beetle when she saw the familiar pink roadster entering the lot.

She raised her eyebrow and looked at the clock. *Someone's early*, she thought, as she tapped one of the boys' shoulders, "Can you cover the beetle up again for me?"

"Sure thing, Noona."

"Thanks." She wiped her hands and approached the pink vehicle. "You're early." She said once she saw Tiffany stepping out of the driver's seat.

"Hi." Tiffany gave her a quick peck and smiled. "Finished quicker than expected." She took something out of the passenger's seat and locked the car. She then took Taeyeon's hand and pulled. "Can you just get off work now?"

Taeyeon smiled. "Hang on." She let go of the hand and went into the office. "Jiseok-ah..."

"I know, Noona." He caught the keys being thrown at him. "Have fun!" He winked.

They went up to the apartment and Tiffany was already kissing Taeyeon before they even reached the top of the stairs.

"I missed you. Sorry for being so busy this month."

"I missed you too and I'm also sorry for being so busy."

"I have something for you." Tiffany let go of Taeyeon and showed her the paper bag in her hand. "Happy Valentine's day!" She handed it over to Taeyeon.

"Oh? And I didn't even have the time to get you flowers..."

Tiffany shrugged, "Don't really care for them much. They'll just wilt and die anyway." She took off her jacket. "Sorry I didn't have time to wrap them." She sat down on the couch.

Taeyeon saw the two different sized white boxes inside the bag and her eyes widened. She didn't even take any of them out. "Fany-ah, what is this?"

"For busy days, Taeyeon-ah." Tiffany smiled. "Texting alone is not enough. With those we can video call and video chat. Might need to set up the laptop though..."

Taeyeon took a deep breath, "I can't accept this."

"What? Why not?"

"Too much, Fany-ah."

"It's not too much! What are you talking about?"

"I'm sorry. I can't." Taeyeon walked over and handed the bag back to Tiffany.

Tiffany didn't take it. "Why are you acting this way?"

“What way?”

“Why won’t you just accept my gift?”

“Because it’s too much.”

“It’s not too much! They don’t even cost that much.” Tiffany sighed, “You accepted the Herbie, didn’t you? That cost a lot too so this shouldn’t bother you.” She regretted her words the moment they left her. She saw Taeyeon’s face fell and her eyes looking away. “I didn’t mean it that way...” She stood up. “Just take them? Please?”

Taeyeon placed the bag on the couch. “I’m going to take a shower.” She walked away, into the bedroom.

“Taeyeon-ah.” Tiffany went after her and saw Taeyeon taking some clothes out of the closet. She took a deep breath and hugged the small girl from behind. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to offend you.” She placed her head on Taeyeon’s back. “I honestly just wanted to be able to see your face even when we’re too busy to meet.”

Taeyeon took a deep breath, “I know. It’s just.” *What I got you can’t even compare to that, Fany-ah. I will never be good enough.* “Sorry...” That was all she could say.

At that moment, reality hit them harder than it had ever done in the past few months.

“Look, can we just forget it?” Taeyeon let go of the clothes in her hand and turned around, putting her arms around the sad looking Tiffany. “I’m sorry for the way I acted. Thank you for being so thoughtful.” She smiled.

“But you still won’t accept my gift? At least just the phone?” Tiffany was disappointed more than she was guilty.

Taeyeon sighed. She didn’t want to accept it. It would be a constant reminder of the unbridgeable gap between them. The Herbie Christmas gift was different because it was Christmas and it’s a rare collectible and... well, she couldn’t explain it. It just felt different.

“But I-... why?” Tiffany still didn’t understand.

Taeyeon shrugged. “Reminds me too much of how different we are, I guess.” She looked away, not exactly liking herself at the moment. She felt a kiss on her cheek.

“You know I don’t mean it that way...”

She still couldn’t look at Tiffany.

“Taeyeon-ah.”

“What are we doing, Fany-ah?” She let go of Tiffany and the latter started to feel panic rising inside her. *Don’t back out on me, Taeyeon.*

“What do you mean?”

“Aren’t we just fooling ourselves here?” She finally turned to look at Tiffany and saw the panic in her eyes. She smiled sadly. “Don’t worry. I’m still looking forward to spend my birthday with you.” She gently touched Tiffany’s cheek with the back of her fingers. *Too bad you’ll never be truly mine.* “Was just thinking out loud, that’s all.”

Tiffany knew that it was more than that but she couldn’t do anything about it. They were her exact same thoughts, after all. “Sorry.” It was all that she could say.

“Me too.”

Tiffany pulled her and hugged her tight.

She returned the embrace. “I have something for you. It’s really nothing but-...”

“Don’t say that it’s nothing, please.” Tiffany was still not letting go. “I told you, I’d love anything you get me even it’s just a paper with your name on it.”

Taeyeon laughed, "I should just get that for you next time then. Easy."

Tiffany was not laughing. "I mean it, Taeyeon-ah."

"I know, I know..." She gently stroked the long dark hair. "Don't you wanna see what it is?"

Tiffany finally let go of the other girl. "What is it then?"

Taeyeon walked over to the small bedside table and pulled open the drawer. She returned with her hands behind her back. "Close your eyes."

Tiffany grinned, "What are you hiding?"

"Close your eyes, stubborn girl."

Tiffany sighed and closed her eyes. She held out her hands. "Gimme!"

Taeyeon laughed and walked around Tiffany. She put the small necklace around Tiffany's neck and fastened the small clasp.

"Huh?" Tiffany looked down and saw something silver. Her finger traced the pendant. "T?" She looked into the mirror inside the closet door and smiled. "Pretty."

"T for Tiffany and T for Taeyeon." Taeyeon smiled.

"Cheesy as always but I love it." She kissed her. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. It's not much but..."

"I told you not to say that!"

Taeyeon smiled and continued her sentence. "But I figured that it would be less noticeable. I mean, when you wear it."

Tiffany knew what Taeyeon meant. "I'm sorry we can't do any couple things."

Taeyeon shrugged. "Are we even a couple?"

"Don't say that..."

"Just keeping it real, Fany-ah."

"What is wrong with you today? It's Valentine's day, Taeyeon-ah." Tiffany was getting annoyed with Taeyeon's behavior and words although she knew she couldn't blame her. She just didn't need the constant reminder.

Taeyeon sighed, "You're right. Sorry." She tried to smile. "I'm going to take that shower now, okay?"

"No." Tiffany grabbed the collars of the overall and pulled. She kissed Taeyeon hard.

"F-fany..." Taeyeon tried to talk. "I just... got off... work..."

"Shut up." She pushed Taeyeon onto the bed and straddled her.

Taeyeon was surprised at Tiffany's aggressive behavior. "Fany..."

"I said, shut up." She kissed her again as her hands searched, fumbling with the buttons of the overall.

She had just succeeded in opening one button when Taeyeon pushed her away and broke the kiss. "What are you doing?" She saw Tiffany quickly wiping her eyes. "Are you crying? Why are you crying?"

She quickly sat up and held the other girl in her arms. "Don't cry. Why are you crying?"

"Nothing..." Tiffany didn't want Taeyeon to see her eyes.

She sighed and kissed the girl again. She knew, she understood. "I hope you know how much you mean to me. You make me happy, Fany." *I love you.*

"I know, Taeyeon. I feel the same way." *I love you.*

Tiffany gently held Taeyeon's face and pushed her back onto the bed. And this time Taeyeon let her do everything that she wanted to do – everything they desired from each other.

----

The sound of a door being closed woke her up. She turned and saw the empty bed and a small box on the mattress with a note on it. "Please accept at least this one? At least read the card?"

She sighed and opened the pink envelope lying under the box.

*"Happy Valentine's day, Taeyeon-ah! I hope you like the gifts. We can 'see' each other now even if we can't see each other. Haha. Get it? Anyway, I hope you know how much I treasure you. I can't say those words because it will just make this harder for us. But you know how I feel, right?"*

*'I don't hate you', Taeyeon.*

*P.S: Check the video folder."*

She sighed again. "I don't hate you too, Fany."

She reached for the box and stared at it. She gulped and decided to just ignore the painful stabs to her pride and open the box.

She turned the device on and waited for it to boot.

She searched for the video folder and opened it. She lifted her eyebrows to see several videos, each titled 'A day with ME' and a part number on it. She clicked part 1 and the familiar face filled the screen.

"Whoa my face is big..."

She laughed as the Tiffany in the video adjusted the camera.

"There you go. Much better." A smile and a wave. "Hi, Taeyeon-ah. To make up for this crazy month, I've decided to take you on a day with me, to see how much I suffer from that annoying old man called Professor Choi." A laugh. "Just kidding, he's nice but you should see his hair. The new wig I told you about? You'll see how ugly it is and you can't call me mean again because I know you will be laughing your butt off."

She smiled.

"First up... MY ROOM!" The camera shook and rustled and Tiffany's image was replaced by a pink door. "Yes, even my door is pink. I was twelve, okay? I didn't know what I was thinking and I'm too lazy to get it repainted." The camera shifted to a mirror on a large makeup table. "Hi again." A laugh and a wave from the girl in the mirror. "My makeup table!" The camera shot the messy surface. "Sorry for the mess. I'm not neat like you." It then panned to a wide and tall bookshelf filled with books and some framed photographs. "My books... and..." A hand picked up one frame and the camera blurred a bit as it tried to zoom in properly on the faces. "Don't laugh! I had braces in middle school."

Taeyeon laughed at the dorky yet cute picture of a younger Tiffany in braces. From how much Tiffany was moving around, she could sense how large the room was. *Probably bigger than my apartment*, she realized with a gulp.

The frame was returned to the shelf and the hand grabbed another one. "This is my scary Daddy and my Mommy." An old family picture. "I think I was ten back then? Daddy's a lot fatter now." A laugh as the frame was placed back on the shelf. The camera panned again, to a large bed this time. "Totoro! This is my best friend." The hand gently patted the large plush. "And this is my bed." The camera filmed the bed long enough for Taeyeon to see how many stuffed animals were on it before it moved to a large desk with a big computer screen on top. There were books stacked and papers strewn all over the surface of the desk. "My desk. It's usually not as messy as this but these few months have been kinda crazy, so yeah." It moved again. "The TV. Nothing interesting there..."

Taeyeon saw the huge plasma TV and the camera quickly moved to a dark room. A click and lights came on.

“The bathroom...”

Taeyeon’s eyes widened at the size of the room she was seeing. It was bigger than her living room, maybe as big as her whole apartment.

“And the closet...” Another room came into view. It was filled with clothes, bags and shoes. Taeyeon’s mouth dropped. “And that’s pretty much it.” The camera shook and rustled again and Tiffany’s face reappeared. “Nothing much to see, huh?” A smile. “Well, that’s all for part one. I need to get back to this darn paper.” A sigh and a wave. “See you later.” Tiffany blew a kiss to the camera and laughed at her own dorkiness.

The video ended.

Taeyeon took a deep breath. She now understood why Tiffany wanted her to accept this gift so badly. Could this little device help them prolong their story? She didn’t know. But at least it could help them preserve it.

She smiled a little at that last thought and reached for the small manual booklet and started reading.

-----

Her phone vibrated. She looked at the screen and smiled as she read the message. “Part 1 was awesome. Thank you.”

She replied, “Glad you like it and glad you decided to accept it.”

“Sorry for making such a big fuss about it.”

“It’s okay. I understand. Sorry for making you feel uncomfortable.”

“It’s fine. What are you doing?”

A voice suddenly interrupted her typing fingers. “Miyoung-ah...”

She looked up and realized she was smiling. She cleared her throat and pocketed her phone. “Oh yeah, sorry about that.”

Her mother noticed her change of behavior. “Who was that?”

“Hmm?”

“Phone.”

“Oh, just a classmate.” She remembered her smile. “Apparently Professor Choi’s ugly wig got an upgrade to an even uglier one.” She laughed expertly.

Her mother smiled. “Now now, don’t make fun of your professor.”

“Can’t help it, Mommy. It’s so ugly. You can go see it for yourself during graduation later.”

“So?” Her father asked. “The application?”

“It’s well taken care of, Daddy. I’ve asked Lee Samchon to mail them for me yesterday.”

“Good.”

She stretched. “I think I’ll go to bed now. Good night, Mommy.” She gave the woman a kiss on the cheek then she walked over to the man on the large chair to kiss his cheek, “Night, Daddy.”

“Good night.”

She made her way up to her room and locked the door before throwing herself on the bed. She took out her phone and dialed.

The familiar childlike face appeared on the screen. “Whoa my face is big!”

She laughed, “Takes some getting used to, huh?”

“Yeah. This is cool though.” Taeyeon was still adjusting the distance between the camera and her face.

“Sorry I couldn’t reply your message earlier. Daddy was nagging, as usual.”

Taeyeon smiled, “No worries. What are you doing?”

“Nothing.” She yawned, “Will be sleeping soon.”

Taeyeon chuckled. “Tired?”

“Kinda. Someone was too feisty.”

Taeyeon laughed and blushed.

“What are you doing?”

“I was watching part 2.”

Tiffany laughed. “Samchon was awkward.”

Taeyeon grinned. “Yeah, he was so tense.”

“Have you finished it?”

“Not yet, but your friends are interesting.”

“I’ve known them since grade school. They’re my best friends.”

“Best friends don’t let their friend drive alone in the middle of the night when she’s drunk.”

Taeyeon couldn’t help it.

“Hey, I didn’t tell them. They didn’t even realize I was gone until much later, okay? Don’t blame them. They’re nice kids.”

“Sorry...”

“Nah. It’s okay. That was dangerous, I admit that.”

“Why did you do it then?”

“I was drunk! I was not in my right mind. Guess I just missed you too much.”

Taeyeon smiled. “Don’t ever do that again, okay? I can’t imagine what will happen if you miss me later. Hijack a plane?”

Tiffany laughed, “That would be totally hilarious. Imagine a plane landing in front of your door.”

“And you stumbling out of the cockpit?” Taeyeon grinned. “That would be hilarious indeed.”

The laugh receded. “Anyway...” Tiffany tried to stop the mood from turning somber at the reminder of what would be. “I need to take a quick shower then sleep. Wouldn’t wanna be late to laugh at Professor Choi’s morning wig tomorrow. Watch part 3, Taeyeon. You’ll love it.”

Taeyeon grinned, “I’m looking forward to it. Okay then. Sleep tight.”

“I will. I’ll drop by tomorrow. Around lunch maybe. You get some sleep too, okay?”

Taeyeon nodded. “Yup. Good night.” She waved.

“Night.” Tiffany kissed the camera and Taeyeon laughed. “Don’t expect me to ever do that.”

“I won’t. I prefer you kiss me for real anyway.”

Another laugh. “Good night, Fany-ah.” She hesitated. “I don’t hate you.” Taeyeon grinned.

She laughed, “I don’t hate you too. Night.” She waved and hung up.

Tiffany sighed. At least now they could see each other even when they’re not together. Her thoughts replayed Mr. Lee’s words. *The length does matter, Samchon.* She sighed as she walked towards the bathroom. *What I would do for forever...*



## CHAPTER 9

The phone signaled an incoming message and she wiped her hands before fishing it out of her pocket. She smiled at the picture of Tiffany in her graduation robe and cap.

“Looking smart there, Miss Hwang.” She typed and sent the message.

“Thank you, Miss Kim. Can’t believe I’m graduating.”

Taeyeon sighed. *Yeah... graduating and leaving.*

Although both never really talked about the exact date of Tiffany’s departure to the States, Taeyeon knew that the graduation would basically mean that the end was near. She had been trying to prepare herself for that day. She promised herself she wouldn’t cry in front of Tiffany or anyone else.

Their days together were now literally numbered. And to make things worse, her birthday was in less than a week. She was totally not in the mood to celebrate.

The new message alert startled her.

“Taeyeon-ah...”

“?”

“I don’t hate you.”

Taeyeon smiled. “I don’t hate you too. Gotta get back to work now. See you tomorrow?”

“Yep. See you tomorrow.”

“Fany-ah...”

“Yes?”

“Congratulations.” She gulped.

“Thank you.”

She put the phone back in her pocket and went back work.

-----

Tiffany’s family was busy preparing for their move and her father had been spending more time at home so Tiffany couldn’t stay at Taeyeon’s for too long. And so, their last few days together were mostly spent with Tiffany coming over for lunch or dinner with a few hours of just cuddling in front of the TV or on the bed. They didn’t talk much. Both just wanted to try to spend as much time enjoying each other’s presence as possible.

“Taeyeon-ah.” Tiffany sat up. Taeyeon’s arm fell off her shoulders and onto the mattress.

“Hmm?”

“Can you promise me something?” She played with Taeyeon’s fingers.

“What?”

“Accept my birthday gift to you? No matter what it may be?”

Taeyeon lifted her eyebrows and put her other arm under her head to support it. “Sounds suspicious...”

Tiffany smiled. “Please?” She then changed her expression to the begging puppy eyes and pouty lips again. “Pretty please?”

She laughed, “You know I can’t resist that look.” She kissed the pouting lips and lay back down, “But that sounds even more suspicious now.”

“Just this once? Please?”

She sighed. “What if I say no?”

“Then you do hate me.” She let go of the hand.

“I don’t hate you.”

“So promise me you’ll accept it and just say ‘thank you’ nicely? Maybe add a thank you kiss or two...”

Taeyeon smiled, “I can promise to give you plenty of thank you kisses.”

“I’ll take that too.” She grinned. “Please? Promise me?”

She sighed again and didn’t answer.

“Please, Taeyeon-ah?” Tiffany lay down on her stomach and inched closer. “Just this once? One final time? It’s also my farewell present...” She grew quiet.

Taeyeon gulped. How could she resist that plea? She took a final deep breath after a few more seconds of consideration. “Fine. Just promise me that it’s not crazy.”

Tiffany grinned and kissed her, “Thank you. It’s not crazy. Don’t worry.”

She pulled Tiffany and kissed her, turning to pin her under her weight.

“Taeyeon-ah.”

“Hmm?” She pulled away from Tiffany’s neck and found Tiffany looking at her with sad eyes. “I really don’t hate you.”

“I know” She kissed her and smiled. “I really don’t hate you too.”

----

“Happy birthday, Noona!”

Jiseok creamed her face and she went after him with a large chunk of cake in her hand. “Come back here you stupid little brat!!”

“Now now, Noona... My mother always tells me not to waste food.”

“It’s not wasted if it’s in your... MOUTH!” She jumped him from behind and shoved the cake into his face.

“ARGH!” He squirmed to get Taeyeon off his back, his cap falling off his head. “NOONA! Pffttt...” He tried to blow cake out of his nose. “I won’t be able to un-smell cake now!”

“HAHA! Serves you right!” She then turned around to see the other boys hiding in weird places. “What are you? Girls? Hiding? Really?” She still had enough cream on her hand. “Psh... Come out and fight like real men, will ya!”

They were running all over the shop, screaming and creaming each other with cake when a dark blue roadster – exactly like Tiffany’s – drove into the lot.

They stopped and turned. Some – including Taeyeon – quickly cleaned up their faces and hands. The others just gawked and stared at the shining sports car.

The door opened and out stepped a smiling Tiffany. “Wow.” She closed the door. “You guys are messy. Guess I’m too late to join the fun, huh?”

“Consider yourself lucky, Noona. I will be smelling cake for a week now.” Jiseok was still blowing his nose.

Tiffany laughed.

Taeyeon approached her, “You repainted your car?”

“Are you crazy? Pink is the most perfect color in the world, Taeyeon.”

“Oh.” Taeyeon assumed that it was just another car that Tiffany or her father owned. “You want cake? Or at least what was supposed to be cake...” She laughed.

“You missed a spot.” She took Taeyeon’s towel and cleaned her hair with it.

Taeyeon grinned. “Kinda reminded me of that day when you cleaned my face.”

Tiffany smiled, “I remember. You were so shocked.”

“You touched my face!”

“With a towel, Taeyeon-ah.” She shoved the towel back into Taeyeon’s pocket. “Stop overreacting.”

Taeyeon sighed dramatically and smiled.

“So...” Tiffany took a step back and pointed at the car. “What do you think?”

“Nice color.”

“You like the blue?”

Taeyeon nodded.

“Good then.”

Taeyeon lifted her eyebrows but said nothing else. “Cake?”

“You aren’t curious?”

“About what?”

Tiffany pointed at the car again.

“Err... no?”

She sighed. “I had expected something different... Oh well.” She handed Taeyeon the keys. “Happy birthday!” And gave her a quick peck. “Now we have couple cars.”

Taeyeon’s eyes widened. “W-WH-WHAT?!”

The boys who were examining the cars up close slowly backed away and disappeared into the office.

“Ow, my ears. Volume, Taeyeon-ah.”

“Wha-...” She gawked at the car and then at Tiffany. “You’re kidding, right?”

“I’m not kidding. Remember your promise!”

“Fany...”

“No! You promised!”

“I said if it’s not crazy...”

“This is not crazy!”

“THIS IS CRAZY!”

“Sky diving is crazy! Jumping off cliffs is crazy!” Tiffany sighed. “*This* is not, okay? Please? Just this once?”

Taeyeon shook her head. “I can’t.”

“Taeyeon-ah.”

Taeyeon saw the hurt in Tiffany’s eyes. “Sigh... I’m sorry but this is too much, Fany-ah.”

“It’s your birthday... and also my farewell present, remember?” She smiled weakly. “Something to remember me by.”

“I don’t need this to remember you by.”

“I want you to have this. Why can’t you just accept it? You promised, Taeyeon-ah. You promised.” She gulped. “Please don’t hurt my feelings? It’s the least I could do. Please? Samchon even helped with the papers.” She thought that mentioning his effort would help her cause.

Taeyeon sighed again. “Why are you doing this...”

“Why do you make it sound like I did a bad thing?”

“You know why.”

“Oh come on. You know I don’t mean it that way. I’m being sincere here.”

“But...”

“Seriously! Can we not argue about this on your birthday?”

“You think I want to argue about this on my birthday?!”

“What is so wrong about getting you a nice birthday present?”

“A card or a cake is a nice birthday present. You don’t have to get me a car!”

Their voices kept getting louder by each sentence.

“Why not?! My gift, my decision!”

“Why won’t you ever think of my feelings?”

“I always think of your feelings!”

“If you do then you wouldn’t have done this!”

“Done what?! Did I do something wrong? Rob a bank? Kill someone’s grandma? I love you, you love cars, so I got you a car! What’s so wrong about that?! It’s my own savings! I didn’t use Daddy’s money!” Tiffany was yelling now.

Taeyeon froze.

Tiffany suddenly realized her mistake. Her eyes went round with shock. “Dammit!” She looked away. *I can’t believe I said that out loud.* She cursed again.

Awkward silence.

Neither knew what to do next.

Tiffany finally calmed down and took a deep breath. “Sorry...”

Taeyeon still didn’t know what to do or say. *Can I say it too? Should I?* She was beyond happy to hear those words but she knew that saying them back would just add to the hurt for when this would be over. She finally shook her head. “It’s fine.” She stared at the key in her hand.

Tiffany looked at the quiet girl. *I know I shouldn’t have but would you say them back?*

“Fine. I made a promise so I guess I just have to take it.”

Tiffany couldn’t help but feel disappointed that Taeyeon decided to not say them back although deep down she knew it was for the best.

“Good.” Tiffany smiled weakly. “Happy birthday, Taeyeon.” She kissed her cheek.

“Thanks, Fany.” The smile was just as weak as Tiffany’s.

“Wanna take it for a ride? We can go to that airstrip...” She held Taeyeon’s hand.

Taeyeon hesitated, “Sure. Why not? Let me take a quick shower first. The cake smell is ugh...”

Tiffany laughed and kissed Taeyeon. “I like it. Makes you taste like cake.” Her lips travelled along Taeyeon’s chin, her jawline and down to her neck, “And I like cake.”

Taeyeon gulped. She quickly pulled Tiffany towards the apartment door. “JISEOK-AH!”

“GOT IT, NOONA!”

----

Tiffany didn’t drop by the next day or the day after that. She didn’t call Taeyeon either. When Taeyeon tried to text, the answers were always short and late.

Taeyeon wasn’t sure what’s wrong but she decided to not ask Tiffany about it. *She’s probably busy*, she thought, as she read yet another late reply to her message.

She was having dinner when she heard the familiar voice. “Taeyeon-ah!” And the footsteps that followed.

“Hi!” Tiffany sat down next to her and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “What are you eating?”

“Ddeokbokki. You want some?”

Tiffany nodded so she fed her the rice cake.

“Mm! That’s good.” She swallowed the food. “Have you had dinner?”

“This *is* dinner.”

“You’re having ddeokbokki for dinner?”

Taeyeon nodded and took another bite.

“That’s not good. You should eat more.”

“Not really craving anything else.”

“Still, this is not a meal. It’s a snack. You better not do this again, okay?”

Taeyeon laughed, “Yes, Mother.” She went back to her food and the TV.

“Sorry I’ve been so busy lately...”

“Hmm?” Taeyeon turned her head and smiled with a mouth full of food. “It’s okay.” She then returned her focus back to the screen.

Tiffany leaned back and observed Taeyeon who was absorbed in her favorite show.

“Why are you staring at me like that?” Taeyeon put down the empty bowl and drank before she turned her body towards Tiffany. The latter could only sigh.

“And why are you sighing like that?”

“I have to return your keys.” She put the set of keys on the table.

Taeyeon caught her breath. *Does this mean...*

“I’m leaving tomorrow.”

Her heart shattered. She tried to swallow but it felt like there’s a huge lump in her throat, blocking everything including air. She could swear she was suffocating.

“O-oh...” Her voice cracked. “I see...”

“We can still video call, email, text...” She gulped. She knew those wouldn’t last.

Taeyeon nodded. “S-sure! Of course.” She held back her tears. She would not cry.

She took Taeyeon’s hand and laced their fingers together. “Don’t forget me?”

Taeyeon smiled. “You know I won’t...”

“Good because I won’t forget you too...”

Silence.

Tiffany wiped a tear.

“Hey.” A tug at the hand. “Don’t cry.” Taeyeon grinned. “We knew this would happen, right?”

“Yeah...” Tiffany tried to smile. “Still sucks.”

Taeyeon laugh. “I know but we had a good run. Best six months of my life, give or take a few weeks.”

Tiffany wiped another tear and sniffed. “No regrets?”

“Of course not.” She paused, “You?”

Tiffany shook her head. “None whatsoever.”

She smiled. “Good.”

“You’re never alone, you know. I’m just a phone call away. Be happy?”

Taeyeon blinked back her tears and nodded. “Thanks. You too?”

Tiffany chuckled. “Might be a bit hard but sure, I’ll try.”

“Please do.”

“We’ll see.” She tried to smile again and reached out to touch Taeyeon’s face one last time. “Thank you.”

Taeyeon grabbed the hand and kissed it. “Thank *you*.” She kissed her and held her tight. “For everything, Fany-ah.” *I love you.*

Tiffany nodded. “You too.” *I love you.*

----

“How are you holding up?”

Taeyeon shrugged. “I’m good.” She looked at him. “You’re the one I’m worried about.”

He chuckled weakly. “Just a cold, Taeyeon-ah.”

“You’ve been having too many of these ‘colds’.” She frowned. “And it’s getting worse, lately. You’re weak and you’ve lost too much weight.”

He sighed. The truth is, his kidney was failing him. The plane crash that took his wife and daughter’s lives had inflicted great damage upon his body. Even though he survived, he had lost a lot of blood due to his injuries. Combined with his high blood pressure problem, the doctor told him that he was lucky to still have one kidney working. Now, after all these years, that one kidney had apparently begun to show signs of failure as well.

He had suspected as much but was only confirmed of his condition after Ahjumma finally succeeded in forcing him to go to the hospital and get himself checked. He was told that he would need to have regular dialysis. The other option was to get a kidney transplant but because of his age and the length of the waiting list, the doctor did not really recommend that option.

The dialysis would cost too much, he decided, and it would be too straining on his body. It wouldn’t even cure him. It would just prolong his life a bit and he refused to have to be hooked to a machine at least 3 times a week for some extra months. He told the doctor that he’d just wait it out.

That check up was more than four months ago – right before the Hwangs left for the States. The doctor didn’t want to tell him how long he had left, saying that he should just stay positive and life live to the fullest. From the way his conditions had worsened, he knew he had to tell Taeyeon now. He couldn’t just leave her suddenly.

“Taeyeon-ah.” He adjusted his position. “We need to talk.”

“No.” Taeyeon had a feeling she knew what it was about.

“Taeyeon-ah...”

“I said no, Samchon.”

He sighed. “I don’t know how much time I have left.” He continued on anyway. Taeyeon had to know somehow. “The doctor told me that my kidney is failing and since I don’t have a backup,” he chuckled, “I don’t know when it will decide to call it quits.”

Taeyeon didn’t react. The news hit her hard. *Just when I have just gotten used to not having Tiffany around anymore... Now you decide to leave me too, Samchon?* “There’s no treatment?”

“There is b-...”

“Then get treated!”

“Taeyeon...”

“How much?”

“It’s not about the money...”

“Then what is it about?!”

“I’m old, Taeyeon-ah. My body had gone through too much. The old doctor said it was a miracle that I have even survived that plane crash with one kidney left in me that managed to hold out this long.” He paused. “The treatment would just push it over the edge.”

He suddenly smiled as a realization hit him. “I think I know why I was spared now.” He chuckled. *Miss Hwang was right. You are one lucky kid after all, Kim Taeyeon. And it’s been my pleasure taking care of you.* He smiled again.

Taeyeon gulped. “There has to be another way...”

“They gave me medications but that’s pretty much it.” He noticed the tears as the girl looked away. “I’m sorry, Taeyeon-ah.”

She was still looking away. *Everybody’s leaving me.* She clenched her fists.

“Taeyeon-ah, you still have Jiseok and the boys, your friends, even Ahjumma loves to feed you especially now that she can’t cook that much anymore,” he smiled. “You’re not alone, Taeyeon-ah. Who knows, one day, even Miss Hwang might come back. And even if she doesn’t return, you’ll find someone else, Taeyeon-ah. You’ll move on, eventually.”

She was still silent.

“Come on now. The doctor told me to live life to the fullest. This is not full living. Humor the old man, please?”

She wiped her tears and turned to him.

He smiled. “Now, how about a round of chess? Did you bring the board like I told you?”

“Yes, I left it in the car.” She stood up. “Be right back.”

She got out of the small living space and took a deep breath of the fresh air. She sat down at the top of the metal staircase and cried her heart out.

----

He had two more months before he decided that he was tired, went to sleep and never woke up. Ahjumma found him the next morning when she was delivering his daily breakfast.

She called Taeyeon and notified the rest of the staff and also Mr. Hwang. The Hwangs flew back a few days later – he was family, after all.

Taeyeon had prepared herself in the months before so she was able to stay calm and composed in front of everyone. She met Tiffany but couldn’t do much but hug her since her parents were there.

Mr. Hwang requested for the man to be buried in the Hwang family plot cemetery and she granted him that request.

She spent every waking moment in those few days watching over the man she considered her own father until the day of the funeral.

“He was a good man.” A deep voice startled Taeyeon. She thought she was the only one left – standing before the heap of fresh earth. She turned to find Mr. Hwang standing next to her.

“Yes he was.”

“I heard he took care of you like his own daughter.”

Taeyeon nodded.

“He treated my daughter like his own too, you know.”

She nodded again.

“I heard you run a small garage?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Now that hyung’s no longer here, can you do me a favor?”

She turned to look at him again, “Sure?”

“Our cars are still here. I’ve sold a few but some of my personal collection and my wife and my daughter’s cars are still here. I don’t know when or if we ever return to Seoul but in the mean time, do you mind checking them regularly? Warm up the engines or take them on a spin around the estate and to the official workshop for their regular maintenance? Make sure they’re okay? Especially during winter.”

Taeyeon was surprised. “Me, Sir?”

He nodded. "You're his daughter so you're practically family." He smiled. "I trusted him, he trusted you so I trust you too."

Taeyeon smiled. *That logic sounds familiar. I guess like father like daughter?* "Thank you for trusting me, Sir."

He dismissed it with his hand. "No problem. My butler will take care of everything. He'll show you around. Tell him if you need anything. Okay?"

She nodded. "Yes, Sir."

"Good." He patted her shoulder. "You need a ride back to the house?"

Taeyeon shook her head. "I'll be fine, Sir. Thank you."

"No problem. I'll see you later."

"See you later, Sir." She bowed and he patted her shoulder again before leaving to give her privacy.

She turned back towards the small plot of earth and bowed ninety degrees – letting her tears fall freely to the grass. "Thank you again, Samchon... and good bye. I love you. I'm sorry I've never told you that before. I love you just as much as I love Appa. Thank you."

----

They gathered in the large dining room. Taeyeon was the last to arrive and she took the only empty seat left, right across from Tiffany. She looked away. She chose to deal with one pain at a time.

The lawyer stood up and began the formalities of the reading of the last will and testament of the late Mr. Lee. Taeyeon tried to pay attention but her mind kept wandering to the person across the table who was stealing glances at her every few minutes.

The man in glasses continued to read the legal document and by the time he was done, Taeyeon was left with everything Mr. Lee had ever owned in life.

He approached the stunned Taeyeon after he was done with distributing the letters Mr. Lee had written for Mr. and Mrs. Hwang, Tiffany, the butler, Ahjumma and every other staff in the house. "Here's your letter," he smiled sadly "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you."

He then took out a piece of paper for Taeyeon to sign and when he was done he shook her hand gently and smiled. "I hope you know how much he cared for you, Miss Kim. Can you drop by my office tomorrow at 9? We need to take care of the insurance papers and after that I'll accompany you to the bank to transfer the funds to your account." He gave her his card, "This is my card. It has my phone number and office address. I'll see you tomorrow morning?"

Taeyeon nodded. "I'll be there."

"Great. Don't forget to bring your ID card and bankbook. I'll see you then."

She received more hugs, condolences and handshakes from the people in the house and Ahjumma cried again on her shoulder. She had to suppress a laugh at hearing her funny sobs.

She bowed to Mr. and Mrs. Hwang – asking for their permission to clean up his living quarters. He reminded her that she now had full access to the estate and the garage so she shouldn't need to be asking such things.

Tiffany was clearly surprised when she heard her father's words but kept her silence.

Taeyeon noticed Tiffany's reaction but said nothing as she left the mansion and went to the small space above the garage.



She was already too drained from all the days of crying so she couldn't shed any more tears as she slowly gathered his belongings – her mind half distracted by the fact that Tiffany was just a building away.

She found an old suitcase under the bed and was putting his stuff in it when she heard the door creaked slowly open.

She turned and found Tiffany peeking in.

"Can I come in?"

"Of course." She continued with what she was doing.

"I'm sorry, Taeyeon-ah."

"Thanks. I'm sorry too. I know he means a lot to you too."

"Thanks..." Tiffany leaned on the door, watching Taeyeon. "Taeyeon-ah."

"Yes?" She opened an old photo album she had taken out of the drawer and smiled. "Wow! I was chubby."

"What? Lemme see." Tiffany walked over and took the album from Taeyeon's hands. She couldn't help but laugh. "That's you?"

"Yeah. See?" She pointed to the text below the photograph – where her name and her father's name were written neatly. "Man... my cheeks. What did Appa feed me?" She took the album from Tiffany again and stared at the faded photograph.

Tiffany laughed again. "It's cute." She looked at Taeyeon and realized how close they were standing. She gulped.

Taeyeon looked up when she realized Tiffany was staring at her. "Looks like you've been well, by the way. Although I prefer your old bangs..." She glanced at the forehead. "But still as gorgeous as I remember you. If not more."

Tiffany couldn't take it anymore. She leaned forward and kissed Taeyeon.

Taeyeon stopped herself from putting her arms around Tiffany and pulled away. "No, Fany-ah."

"I miss you."

Taeyeon smiled, "I miss you too. But we can't."

Tiffany sighed. "Right." She took a step back.

Taeyeon closed the album and put it in the suitcase.

"Why did Daddy say that you now have full access to the garage?"

"He asked me to check the cars regularly while you're all away."

"Oh? How did he know you're good with cars?"

Taeyeon shrugged. "Samchon must've told him? Or Ahjumma?"

"Oh." She watched Taeyeon going to and fro, putting more things in the suitcase.

"How's your mother doing, by the way? She looks healthy."

Tiffany nodded. "She's been a lot more cheerful lately."

"When will your term start?"

"September."

Taeyeon nodded, "I see." She put the last item in and closed the suitcase. "I'll be back for the rest tomorrow." She picked it up and walked towards the door.

"Why did you stop calling?"

The question came out of nowhere and Taeyeon was caught off guard. "W-what?"

"Why did you stop calling?"

Taeyeon sighed, "Why did *you* stop calling?"

“Time difference, school, Mommy...” She paused, “I didn’t want to wake you up or keep you up.”

“Same here.” She put down the suitcase and took a step back – towards Tiffany. “Look, it’s not easy for me too, you know. But we knew this would happen eventually. So...” She didn’t finish her sentence. “I’d gladly wait for you but your father said you might never return to Seoul. What am I supposed to do then? And let’s say you do return. Can we do this? For how long? Until he finds out?”

Tiffany didn’t have any answer to all those questions.

Taeyeon approached Tiffany and hugged her, “No regrets, remember? You still mean a lot to me but we just can’t.” She felt Tiffany’s arms tightening around her waist. “I’m sorry. I still don’t hate you, you know.”

Tiffany smiled. *I wish you would though; then you can find someone else and be happy. And I might even do that too.* She chose to stay quiet although she still didn’t want to let go.

“Fany?”

“No.”

Taeyeon chuckled. “Okay.” She let Tiffany hold her just a little bit longer. *Do you still love me too, Fany?*

She then decided that it was long enough. “Fany-ah.”

No reply.

*Well okay, maybe a little longer then.* “When are you going back?”

“Day after tomorrow.”

“Wanna come with me to the lawyer’s office tomorrow morning?”

The grip finally loosened. “What time?” Tiffany let go of Taeyeon.

“I’m supposed to be there by 9 so I’ll pick you up around 8.30?”

Tiffany smiled and nodded.

“Okay then.” Taeyeon returned the smile and ran her fingers along Tiffany’s bangs – trying to comb them to one side. She frowned. “Seriously. Grow them out, please?”

Tiffany laughed. “I’ll consider it.”

“See you tomorrow.” She couldn’t resist and gave Tiffany a quick peck on the cheek before hurrying to pick up the suitcase and went out the door. She was afraid that a second longer in that room would make her lose her self-control.

## CHAPTER 10

Taeyeon stared at the paper in her hands with wide eyes and mouth agape. “A-are you sure this is correct?”

The two men smiled kindly at her.

“Yes, it is, Miss Kim,” one of them said. “We pride ourselves on being meticulous, you know. We don’t make mistakes.”

“B-bu-but...” Taeyeon stared at the amount on the paper. She had never seen so many zeros in her life.

“The late Mr. Lee had been our client for a long time. He was the sole beneficiary of his wife’s life insurance. Add that amount to his own... well, that’s the total.”

Tiffany put a hand on Taeyeon’s arm. “You okay?”

“Uh-...” Taeyeon was still speechless.

The man chuckled again, “It’s okay, take your time, Miss Kim. But can you please sign it first? I have another appointment soon, sorry.” He handed her a pen.

She blinked and took the pen. “S-sure... I’m sorry.”

He smiled. “It’s fine.” He handed her a copy of the paper and returned her bankbook. “It will be transferred to your bank account as soon as possible. Do contact me when it’s not done so within a week.” He stood up and bowed to everyone before exiting the office.

“Miss Kim?” The lawyer called the quiet girl still holding the paper. He smiled. “We need to go to the bank now.” He stood up.

Tiffany nudged Taeyeon and they both stood.

“Let’s just take my car.” He grabbed the keys. “Shall we?” He led them out of the room and down to the car park.

----

“T-this...” Taeyeon gulped as she stared at the new bankbook in her hand. “W-what is this?”

“That’s the amount after tax and expenses cut, Miss Kim.” The man smiled. “The late Mr. Lee didn’t spend much all through the years, I think.”

“B-but...” Taeyeon found herself staring at yet another long row of digits. “This can’t be...” She never knew that the man had that much money.

He chuckled. “Well, let’s go back to the office so you can pick up your car.”

----

Tiffany stopped the car and turned the engine off. She looked at the girl who was still staring at both her bankbooks. Taeyeon had been doing that during their entire drive back to the house. She smiled. “Taeyeon-ah...” She tucked Taeyeon’s long side bang behind her ear. It was a bit longer than she remembered although still the same color.

“Huh?” Taeyeon finally turned at the touch.

“Stop staring at them.”

“How can I?!” She showed them to Tiffany. “I never knew samchon had this much money!”

Tiffany chuckled. “He must have been saving it up for you. It’s a good thing, right? You can finally finish that beetle, get a bigger place... expand the shop maybe?”

“Yeah... maybe...” Taeyeon took another deep breath and closed the books. “I’ll think about it later.”

Silence.

"It's been a year you know... since we first met, I mean." Tiffany said, her fingers were fiddling with the hem of her shirt.

"I know." Taeyeon smiled. "How can I forget? You were so annoying."

"Excuse me? Who's the rude one?"

Taeyeon laughed. "I wasn't rude..."

"You were."

She grinned. "Well, maybe a little."

Silence again.

"Do you think we can still be friends?"

Taeyeon shrugged, "I don't see why not. Although I doubt we can keep it up for a long period of time. I mean, we lost touch after only what... two, three months?" She smiled. "But you can always text or call me. I don't mind."

Tiffany looked at the smiling girl and smiled back. "Thanks. You can do that too, you know."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Tiffany unbuckled her seatbelt and Taeyeon did the same.

"I know it's selfish of me to even be talking about this... I mean with samchon... I mean..." She sighed, "But if Daddy ever allows this... us... and you're still available, you know, by then... will you... I mean... can we..." Tiffany gulped as her eyes fell on the space between them.

She felt the back of Taeyeon's fingers on her cheek and looked up.

"Always, Fany-ah." Taeyeon smiled. "For as long as you still don't hate me."

She smiled. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Taeyeon pulled her hand away but Tiffany caught it and held it.

"Fany..."

Tiffany pulled the hand and kissed Taeyeon. *Let's hope for that lucky twist of fate, shall we?*

Taeyeon relented and returned the kiss – her hands gently touching the sides of Tiffany's face. *I'll always be here. For as long as you still don't hate me, Fany-ah... for as long as you still love me.*

----

Tiffany smiled into the camera and thanked her classmate for taking the picture. She checked it and showed it to her parents. "Looks good, Mommy." She smiled.

The older woman nodded. "I think I need a haircut."

Tiffany laughed.

"So, dinner?" Her father asked. "It's crazy but ever since I got back from Seoul last week, I can't seem to kick this craving for samgyupsal."

"We've noticed," his wife smiled. "Poor Mrs. Kang had to make that everyday for the past week. I think she's starting to hate pork."

"If she's not then I – for one – definitely am starting to hate pork." Tiffany said as she took the cap off her head and fixed her hair.

"Then you can just eat something else. More meat for me anyway."

"Sigh... and you wonder where I get the stubbornness from," Tiffany shook her head and her father grinned.

----

"I think-..." Tiffany stifled a burp. "I might start to hate beef too now." She leaned back in her seat.

Her father smiled. "Nobody told you to eat that much."

"I deserve to celebrate, right?"

Her shook his head and her mother smiled. "You're ready to go back?"

She reached out for her glass and took a sip. "Not really..." She watched the grains in her tea swirled down to the bottom of the glass.

"What's stopping you?" He asked. "I thought you never wanted to leave Seoul in the first place?"

She couldn't tell him that as much as she wanted to return to Seoul, she was afraid that her only reason to do so had moved on.

"Don't tell me it's that boy... what's his name again?" He turned to his wife and she shrugged. "Danny-... Don-..."

"David, Daddy."

"Oh yeah... him. Is that why?"

Tiffany shook her head. "We broke up more than a month ago."

"What?"

"I told you, you just didn't listen." His wife sighed.

"But what happened to 'oh he's so nice and so smart, Daddy'?" He mockingly asked in a high-pitched voice and almost burped out loud. "Umph... Excuse me."

The women laughed.

"That's what you get for making fun of me." Tiffany said. "I guess I just got bored. He got too clingy."

"I see." He put down his chopsticks and wiped his mouth. "So that would be victim number 100?"

"Daddy!"

"Okay, eighty?"

Tiffany sighed and ignored her father's sarcasm. *It's not my fault that no matter how hard I tried, I just can't seem to have what I had back then with Taeyeon. Sigh... Taeyeon. How are you doing? Are you still blond? Do you still have the shop? Is the beetle finally finished? Why didn't you contact me after that day? I'm too chicken but I thought you're supposed to be the bolder one.* She spaced out as the usual train of thoughts occupied her mind.

His wife nudged him gently and he lifted his eyebrows. She slightly tilted her head towards the daydreaming girl and furrowed her brows. He sighed silently and cleared his throat. "Miyoung-ah..."

The voice brought her back to the present and she inwardly groaned when she heard the use of her Korean name. *What does he want now?* She turned to look at him.

"I know I told you to return to Seoul and help me with things there but I've been thinking..." His wife pinched his thigh under the table and he shifted a bit. "How about you try to help me with things here first? For a year or two? Get used to the work before you go back to Seoul?" Another pinch. "I mean, *if* you want to go back to Seoul."

Tiffany lifted an eyebrow. "If? Did I just hear you use the word 'if'? You mean I actually have a choice this time? Wow! That's new." She sarcastically sneered.

"Now, Miyoung..." Her mother warned sternly. She didn't want another father-daughter blow out.

"What? It's true." She looked at the older woman. "When did I ever have a choice?"

"We just want what's best for you." He tried to keep his temper under control.

Tiffany shook her head. She was tired of the same old argument she knew she wasn't going to win anyway. She emptied her glass. "Whatever, Daddy..."

He sighed and looked at his wife. She understood. "Miyoung-ah..." She gently called her.

Tiffany kept staring at her empty glass.

"I know we've been asking a lot from you and I'm glad that you always managed to follow through somehow..." She smiled. "It's why we let you go to the occasional sleepovers and parties at your friends' house."

Tiffany didn't respond. *So what else is new?*

"We think you're old enough to make your own decisions now. Your father and I only want what's best for you, Miyoung-ah. I know you're probably tired of hearing this but since you're all we have..." She gulped but kept her smile. "We can't help but be a bit more concerned with your future and well-being."

She looked up and saw the woman apologetically smiling at her. She felt guilty. "I know, Mommy. I'm sorry." The last thing she wanted was for her mother to feel bad and relapse into another bout of depression. She had been doing very well during their whole stay in the States.

"So please try to give this a shot? Just for a couple of years? After that you're free to decide what to do."

*Am I also free to love?* She nodded. "Okay." She didn't want to argue and think about it anymore.

----

"Noona!" The man in the black tuxedo hugged the small girl.

"Can't... breathe... Seok-ah!" She slapped the guy's arm.

"Ow! Noona..." He let go and grimaced.

"You asked for it."

He grinned and pulled the young woman in the white dress forward. "This is my wife." His face was beaming with pride.

"I figured that." She laughed and nodded when the bride bowed. "You look beautiful, Hyerin."

"Thanks, Unnie. You too." She smiled at Taeyeon.

"Yeah, Noona. I think this is the first time I've ever seen you in a dress." He whistled. "HOT!"

His wife smacked his head. "Be respectful!"

"Ow! Can't I just compliment her honestly?" He rubbed the back of his head.

Taeyeon laughed. "Thank you, Hyerin. Please do that more often."

"Don't worry, Unnie. I intend to do just that." She laughed and something suddenly caught her attention, "Will you excuse me, Unnie? I think my mother is complaining about something again." She smiled apologetically and quickly took her leave.

"Sure." Taeyeon chuckled and watched her walked up to a woman who was talking to one of the waiters.

"So..." She turned to the grinning young man. "Finally, huh?"

He nodded. "You were right. She's a keeper."

"Well, duh? Eight years with you?" She shook her head. "Someone should give that girl a medal."

He grinned. "I gave her a diamond ring, didn't I?"

"Well give her more. She deserves it." She quietly looked around the room. Getting ready to take her leave in a few more minutes.

"How's the shop, Noona?"

"Talking about work on your wedding day?"

He chuckled, "Just curious. It's been a while since I've last visited."

"Yeah it has, hasn't it?" She smiled. "It's doing good."

"My shop is still number one, right?"

Taeyeon laughed, "Still as ambitious as ever, huh?"

"I have to! I want to always be your number one man." He smiled.

She smiled. "That you'll be, Seok-ah. Always."

He nodded. "Do tell me when the numbers begin to drop. I'll whip those boys back into shape."

"Go easy on them."

He dismissed it, "You know me."

She nodded and absentmindedly took another look around.

"Noona..."

"Hmm?" She turned to look at him. "What is it, Seok-ah?"

He took a step closer and lowered his voice. "It's been six years, Noona."

Taeyeon rolled her eyes, "Not this again..."

"Oh come on, Noona. You know I care about you like you're my own mother..."

"Hey!"

He laughed then turned serious again. "Why can't you move on, Noona? She's not coming back."

She shrugged, "One can always hope..."

"Of course. But come on. Six years? She's probably married with kids by now."

Taeyeon couldn't deny that possibility. "I'll think about it, okay?"

He sighed, "You always say that and yet..." He shook his head. "Please, Noona? I want to see you happy again. We all do."

"Thanks for your concern, Seok-ah, but I'm fine. I'm happy."

"Not as happy as before..."

"Well, that can't be helped now, can it?"

"You'll never listen to me, huh?"

"Not in this case, Seok-ah." She smiled. "I guess I'll just keep hoping." She patted his shoulder. "Thanks, though." She took a step back. "I better get going now. Enjoy the rest of your party, okay? And visit me when you're back from your honeymoon." She reached up but stopped her hand. "Darn! You're not wearing a cap." She pulled his left ear instead.

"Ow! Noona!"

She laughed. "Congrats again, Seok-ah." She waved, "I'll see you around."

"Thanks Noona. Drive safely."

----

"Miyong-ah."

She halted her steps, groaned and turned to look over her shoulder. "It's been a long day, Daddy. Can't you wait until tomorrow?"

"Sorry. Go take a shower first then. We'll talk later."

"Later?"

He nodded.

She sighed and continued to climb the stairs.

She came down half an hour later and threw herself on the large couch in the living room.

"Have you had dinner?" Her mother asked.

She nodded. "Can we just get this over with? I'm really tired right now." She said to no one in particular.

He glanced at his wife and she nodded.

"I'll just get to the point then?" He asked but got no reply. He sighed. "Miyoung-ah, we're going back to Korea. Well, at least your mother and I are."

She was surprised. "Excuse me?"

"I'm feeling much better and I miss home." Her mother smiled. "I miss your grandparents and Ahjumma's mysterious cake and spicy kimchi jjigae." She laughed a little.

"You're allowed to go home?" Tiffany asked her mother.

The woman nodded. "I can always come back for regular check-ups but I'm fine, Miyoung-ah." She gently stroked her daughter's hair. "Don't worry."

"So like I said back then. *If* you want to come with us then you're free to do so. But if you wish to stay here then it's fine with us too." He smirked. "See? I'm letting you choose."

She was still in shock from the sudden news. They're going back home? Just like that?

She'd be lying if she said she didn't want to go back to Seoul and look for Taeyeon but she knew the chance of that girl still being around – or even available – was very slim. "Can I think about it first?"

"Of course. Your choice, remember?"

She nodded and stood up. She needed time to process this. "Okay then. I'll be going to bed now." She kissed both her parents good night and went up to her room.

She lay on her bed and stared at the ceiling. *Just like that. After 28 years, I'm finally allowed a choice? But what should I choose?*

She picked up her phone and browsed through the photos. Even after all these years, she always had their pictures in her phone. She would simply move them from device to device as she upgraded. Her finger slid over the screen and she smiled at one picture she took of Taeyeon and the Herbie trinket box she had given her for Christmas.

She used to replay their moments and her personal list of favorite Taeyeon expressions right before she fell asleep or when she was too lazy to get up. But the memories were fading – her list had grown significantly shorter as time went by.

She turned and reached out to pull open a small drawer. She took out the two envelopes and sat up. She opened the beige one and took out a red Christmas card. She reread the writings for the umpteenth time.

*"Merry Christmas, Fany-ah! I don't really know what to write since I'm not very good at expressing myself through writings so please go easy on me.*

*This is the first Christmas I ever get to spend with anyone else besides samchon and Appa, you know. Well, there's that one Christmas with Yuri and a couple other friends but her parents were there so it wasn't much fun. Anyway, I'm glad I have you to spend Christmas with this year. I'm sure it will be the best Christmas ever! Too bad I can't have more of this 'best Christmas ever', huh?*

*Uhm... I think that's it? Sorry, I told you I'm bad at this. Oh and please don't hate my gift.*

*Thank you for making me happy,*

*Taeyeon.*

*P.S: What do you think of the mistletoes? Hahahahaha."*

She smiled and took out the small Taetae from the drawer. The battery had long run out and she had taken it out of the round metal head. She decided that keeping it in the drawer would help her move on and preserve it better.

She put it back in the drawer and ran her finger on the small pink car next to it before she took out a small cloth pouch. She pulled the strings open and tipped it over the palm of her hand. The silver T



fell out. It was still in perfect shape. She had taken very good care of it although the chain had turned black and she had to throw it away. She smiled as she remembered that Valentine's Day and everything that happened that day. She had no regrets.

She returned the pendant to its pouch and placed it back in the drawer.

She folded the card neatly and inserted it into the beige envelope.

She then opened the white envelope on her lap and unfolded the paper inside.

*"Dear Miss Hwang,*

*If you're reading this then I must be in a better place.*

*First of all, allow me to thank you for being so kind and nice to me all these years. You've never given me a hard time (although there were those little lies to cover for your extra play time) and I truly appreciate that.*

*Thank you for always treating everyone of us with respect and never as less than yourself. You're a wonderful person, Miss Hwang. I'm honored to have watched you grow up into a very beautiful young lady.*

*You may not know this but your father shared a lot of his worries about you with me. He loves you more than anything in this world even though his way of showing it may often seem irrational or mean to you. Trust me, he just wants the best for you and your mother. He worked hard to come this far just so that he could give his daughter the best – the things he never had as a child. So please remember this the next time you have another argument?*

*Lastly, I need you to remember our talk at the hospital. That night you told me that Taeyeon is a lucky girl and I now think you're right.*

*I've come to realize what my purpose is in life. I used to think that being spared from that plane crash was the worst thing that could ever happen to me. But then I met Taeyeon. I didn't expect life to be this hard on such a small and sweet girl but now that I think of it, I'm glad I was there to help her along – although, sadly, not for a very long time.*

*Without trying to sound the least bit arrogant or prideful, I can gratefully say that she's indeed lucky that I was spared from that crash to watch over her. She's my purpose.*

*She's also lucky to have met you. I know that I've tried to discourage you two many times – I honestly thought I was doing what's best for the both of you. After you left, I started to realize my mistake. I should have just let you do whatever makes you happy because you were never happier than when you were together.*

*I'm aware of the fact that your parents might be against this. And since your father really wants you to take over his business, I think he'll be against this even more. I'm not saying that you should rebel against them. But if you can, please try to somehow change their minds about Taeyeon? I know you make her happy and I know no one else will be able to do that.*

*However, if you can't change their minds then can you please try to still keep an eye on her? I don't know whether being friends is a possibility for you two but maybe – just maybe – you can try? I hope I'm not asking too much of you, Miss Hwang and forgive me if I am. I know the money I leave her will be more than enough to let her have a comfortable life and that she's sensible enough to not spend it foolishly. I just hope she doesn't have to live that life alone. I want her to know that there's at least one person in this world who truly loves her and cares for her.*

*In short, I hope you can take over my task of taking care of Taeyeon, Miss Hwang. If that's not too much to ask of you, of course. I know you're hurt by this too so please don't feel burdened or pressured by my request.*

*Thank you again for everything.*

*With love,*

*Your Samchon.”*

She took a deep breath and wiped her tears. *I haven't been trying, Samchon. I'm sorry.* She sighed. *Maybe this is a sign? That lucky twist? Maybe it's time I try to fulfill his request?*

----

She pulled open the large drawer and took three car keys out.

Six years on and she was still doing her regular rounds to the Hwangs' garage to check on the cars – like she promised Mr. Hwang.

She had met him a couple of times when he happened to be in town. He had even asked about her affinity in chess. Apparently, he loved the game too and used to have his own weekly game with Mr. Lee. He made her promise to sit down for at least one game with him one day and she gladly obliged.

The butler had told her that Mr. Hwang was back and that he has taken the Audi so she decided to check the other more frequently used cars just in case he would like to use them too.

She walked to the garage and pressed the button on the wall. She waited until the large white door opened fully before stepping into the vast space.

She chose a key and unlocked a black sedan. She turned the engine on and waited a few seconds before shifting it into gear. She carefully backed out of the garage and took the car for a quick spin around the estate, revving the engine once and checked the brakes. It took less than five minutes to make sure that everything seems to be working just fine. She parked it back at its original spot and turned off the engine.

She cleaned the interior, opened the door and was about to step out of it when her phone rang. She looked at the screen and grinned. She answered the call. “YAH! Why are you calling me? Are you finally back?”

“I am still on my honeymoon, Noona!”

“Sheesh! How long can a honeymoon be...” She saw the grinning man and his wife waving to her from the background. She waved back.

“It's only been three weeks! We'll be back next week, don't worry.”

“Then why are you calling me?”

“Just wanted to show you something.”

The camera panned and she saw a beautiful beach with white sands and sparkling blue sea.

“What the-... You're just trying to make jealous, aren't you?!”

The couple laughed. “This is our loving way of saying... TAKE A BREAK, NOONA!”

“Yes, Unnie. Please go on vacation!”

She groaned, “Not you too, Hyerin?”

The young lady laughed.

“Well, that's all. Good bye, Noona.”

“What?!”

“Yeap. Just wanted to show you what you're missing out.” He laughed and the couple waved again before the line went dead.

She sighed. “Shouldn't have told you about this whole video call feature thing.”

She saw her phone home screen and couldn't resist clicking the video folder. It was still the same phone – the one she gave her. While everyone upgraded from time to time, she chose to stick with that one, with her Yeppeuni hanging from its top corner.

She browsed through the short list and smiled. Part 3 was the most hilarious one. *The old professor's wig was absolutely hideous*. She laughed a little and tapped on part 5 instead. It was her favorite.

"Hi!" The familiar smiling face filled the screen. Taeyeon smiled. "Last part, Taeyeon-ah. I've just finished printing my paper." The camera panned to a stack of papers on the desk and a hand patted the top proudly. "Yep. I've killed so many trees tonight." A laugh. "I can't help but feel proud though. Aren't you proud of me? I'm done! HA!!" Another – louder – laugh.

"Anyway, I should get ready for bed. Gotta get these bound, submitted and everything tomorrow." The girl moved to the bathroom. The camera shook as it was placed to stand above the sink. "You are going to witness a very disturbing scene but since you've seen it live, I don't think this will traumatize you that much." An embarrassed laugh. "Oh! Almost forgot..."

The girl in the video ran out of the bathroom and came back into view a few seconds later while cleaning her face with what looked like cotton and some white lotion. Then came the sound of running water and Tiffany bent out of view, leaving only the top of her head visible. "Ta-da! Welcome to fresh-faced Tiffany!" The wet faced girl grinned at the camera and made a V-sign next to one eye before laughing. "This is so embarrassing." She reached out for a towel and dried her red face. "But a day with me is a day with me. Until the very end." Another smile, although a bit sad this time. "Anyway, I'm not gonna film myself brushing my teeth. Yuck." She grimaced cutely. "I'll just end this here and stop traumatizing you, okay?" She waved to the camera. "Bye, Taeyeon. Good night." She blew another kiss, grinned and turned off the camera.

Taeyeon sighed. She thought that fresh-faced Tiffany was the most beautiful girl she had ever seen in her entire life. She would sometimes pause the video and just stared lovingly at the smiling face. *I hope you're happy now, Fany-ah. I don't like seeing you cry*. She gulped and locked the screen before pocketing the phone, letting her Yeppeuni dangle out of her pocket.

She locked the car and walked over to the next one – passing the pink roadster. She smiled and let her fingers glide on the smooth pink surface as she walked. They touched the front part of the car and she frowned. She placed her palm flat on the hood. It was warm. Her eyes widened. *Has someone been using this car?* She was not pleased with that thought.

She turned around – already starting to run back to the mansion to ask the butler when she saw someone standing at the entrance, just inside the open door.

She froze.

"Hi..."

She couldn't reply.

The girl took a step forward. "I see you still have the videos." A chuckle. "That part was embarrassing, though."

She wanted to say something but her mouth just opened and closed like a goldfish.

Tiffany laughed. "Still blond, I see. That's good. I like that color on you."

"Uh... Ho-how long h-have you been standing there?" She finally managed to blurt out – stuttering.

"Long enough." A smile. "I saw you taking Daddy's car out for a spin so I followed you back to the garage." She paused. "Was that Jiseok?"

"Huh? Where?"

Still smiling. "On the phone. With Hyerin?"

"O-oh! Yeah..."

“Honeymoon huh? They finally got married?”

“Y-yeah...”

“That’s great.”

Taeyeon nodded.

Awkward silence.

Taeyeon cleared her throat. “Wh-when did you arrive?”

“Yesterday.”

“Oh...”

Another pause.

“How long will you be staying?” She asked again.

Tiffany shrugged. “Until I’m bored with Seoul, I guess.”

Taeyeon’s eyebrows shot up. *Does that mean? Wait...* She then frowned. *She’s back? For real? For good?*

Tiffany laughed at the rapidly changing expressions. “Yes, I’m back, Taeyeon. Daddy wants me to start learning the ropes here and help him.”

“Oh. I see.” She let the news sink in for a few more seconds and was about to leap up in joy when she suddenly realized that this didn’t mean that Tiffany would come back to her or whether they could be together. She gulped as Jiseok’s words echoed in her mind. *She could be married with kids by now.*

“I’ll let you get back to work.” Tiffany smiled and turned around. “See you back at the house. Ahjumma’s baking cake.” She waved and walked out – leaving a still confused Taeyeon standing in the garage.

## CHAPTER 11

She met Tiffany's mother when she was returning the keys after her work was done. She was about to bow when the woman came up to her and hugged her – asking how she was doing.

It caught her off guard but she smiled as she realized the woman's kind intentions. They exchanged small talk and she told Taeyeon to go to the kitchen and get a snack. "Miyoung's in there", she said.

Taeyeon was surprised at Mrs. Hwang's last sentence. *How did she know that I know Fany? Or that I was looking for her?*

"Go on. It's okay. Ahjumma baked her mysterious cake. You should try some." She kindly dismissed her with a small gesture of her hand.

"Yes, Mrs. Hwang. Thank you." She bowed and left for the kitchen, still deep in thought. *Maybe she thought that Fany and I are friends since I did ask her to come with me to the lawyer's office that day. But... did she even know where Fany went and with whom?*

The sweet smell of freshly baked cake interrupted her thoughts and she smiled as she sneaked up behind the woman cutting the large cake.

"Ahjumma!" She tapped her shoulders and the woman jumped – letting out a loud and funny shriek.

Taeyeon laughed out loud as the woman held on to her heart. "Don't do that, Taeyeon-ah! I'm holding a knife! It's dangerous!"

"Sorry, Ahjumma. Can't resist." She grinned.

"You're just as bad as Miss Hwang."

"Excuse me? I don't do things like that." Tiffany took a step back from the open fridge and closed the door that had hidden her from sight.

Taeyeon turned in surprise at the sudden remark.

Ahjumma laughed, "Surprised, Taeyeon? What goes around comes around, you know."

Tiffany laughed and Taeyeon merely smiled.

"Here," the woman took a plate and put two huge slices of cake on it. She handed it to Taeyeon.

"W-wha...?"

She then pulled out a large drawer and took out two small forks – placing them carefully at the edge of the plate in Taeyeon's hands.

"You two go eat the cake. Out!" She shooed them with her hands.

"But Ahjumma-...."

"Out! I want to work in peace!" She pushed Taeyeon then walked over to Tiffany and did the same.

"Ahjumma~!" Tiffany whined. She was still not done with the fridge.

"And don't come in here until dinner time!" She closed the door and both girls stared at it with wide eyes – Taeyeon with the plate of cake and Tiffany with a can of soda in one hand and an apple in the other. They looked at each other and laughed.

"What's gotten into her?" Taeyeon asked.

"It's all your fault! You almost gave her a heart attack!"

Taeyeon shrugged. "She was being too serious. She made cutting cake look like brain surgery."

Tiffany laughed. "Like you and your beetle."

"I did not look like that!"

“You did.” She took a sip from her soda. “Come on. Let’s eat that cake in my room.” She turned and walked away.

Taeyeon followed and they went up to Tiffany’s room.

“Looks familiar,” Taeyeon smiled as she stepped into the large pink and white space.

Tiffany laughed. “Those videos are quite embarrassing now that I think of it.” She walked over to her desk to put down the can in her hand.

“They’re not. They’re cute. I like them.”

Tiffany gulped. *Do I still have a chance with you, Taeyeon?* She slowly put down her drink.

Taeyeon came to stand next to her, placing the plate on the desk and took a bite. She smiled widely as she chewed.

Tiffany grinned at the reaction. “Good?”

Taeyeon nodded and used the fork to cut another piece and offered it to Tiffany.

Tiffany hesitated before she finally ate the small chunk. Taeyeon happily continued eating her cake – stopping once in a while to feed the other girl. The food soothed her troubled mind.

Tiffany observed the girl beside her, using every ounce of self-control to stop herself from reaching out to tuck Taeyeon’s hair behind her ear to get a better view of her face.

“Can I ask you something?” Taeyeon finally spoke – still staring at the plate of half-eaten cake slices.

“Sure. What’s on your mind?” She took a bite from her apple and set it down.

Taeyeon let go of the fork and turned to face Tiffany. “Are you married with kids?”

“Wh-...” Tiffany laughed out loud at the sudden and silly question.

Taeyeon was not amused. “I don’t see what’s so funny.”

The laughing girl took a few more seconds to calm down, wiping a tear off the corner of her eye. *It feels good to laugh like this again*, she realized as she smiled at the still frowning Taeyeon. “Do I look like I’m married with kids?”

Taeyeon hesitated. “Not exactly but you’ll never know. Six years is a long time, Fany-ah.”

She smiled at the familiar name. “Are you seeing anyone?”

“Are you?”

“I asked you first.”

Taeyeon sighed, “No, I’m not seeing anyone.” *How could I when I’m never over you?* “You?”

Tiffany shook her head. “Nope.”

Awkward silence.

Tiffany saw the phone accessory dangling out of Taeyeon’s jeans pocket and smiled. “You still use Yeppeuni?”

Taeyeon looked down. “Yeah. Still the same phone too – the one you gave me.” She then looked at the other girl. “You still have Taetae?”

She nodded. “Of course. Safely kept along with the small pink car and the pendant you gave me.”

Another pause.

“So...” Taeyeon cleared her throat. “Where does that leave us?”

“I’m not sure...”

“Do your parents know?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know how to tell them. I thought I wouldn’t have to – since I didn’t expect them to let me go back to Seoul.”

“They made you go back?”

“Not this time,” she smiled. “They finally let me decide on my own.”

A glimmer of hope could be seen in Taeyeon’s eyes. “You *chose* to come back?”

Tiffany nodded. “I have to find out whether this twist is a lucky one or not.” She smiled. *And I have a request to fulfill.*

No reply.

“So is it?” Tiffany reached out to tuck the blond bangs. She couldn’t hold it in much longer. “Can we... well, even though my parents don’t know yet, but like you told me back then...”

Taeyeon smiled. “Like I told you back then...” She held Tiffany’s hand. “Always.” She leaned forward and kissed Tiffany without any reservation – grabbing her by the waist and pulling her close.

Tiffany returned the kiss just as passionately, running her fingers through Taeyeon’s hair. She had missed her so much and no one could make her feel like Taeyeon did when she held her and kissed her like this.

Taeyeon pushed Tiffany back and they stumbled before landing on the bed. She pinned her down. “I miss you.” She said between kisses. “I miss you so much.”

“I miss you too.” Tiffany pulled Taeyeon’s head up and looked into her eyes. “I love you.” She felt tears seeping into her eyes when she heard her own words – the words she hadn’t been able to say wholeheartedly for more than six years. It felt so good to be able to say it. Like inhaling fresh air after being buried alive for so long.

Taeyeon grinned. “I love you too. More than you could ever know.” She kissed her again – gently. *I can finally say it freely without the fear of hurting you. You can finally be mine, Fany-ah. Or at least, we can try to fight this time.*

They didn’t care what would happen next or whether this would last this time around. All they knew was that they had wasted enough time apart and trying to keep everything inside. They were finally back in each other’s arms. And in that moment, nothing else mattered.

They ended up lying quietly next to each other, holding on – not wanting to let go for even a second. Relief washed over them as every yearning, every unspoken word, was finally out in the open for the both of them to hear and feel.

“Still feisty, I see.” Taeyeon licked her bleeding lip.

Tiffany laughed, “Sorry.”

“I guess I’m lucky I didn’t break anything. Six years...” She grinned.

“Shut up.” Tiffany pouted. “Just be grateful that it’s fall. I can wear a turtleneck without being suspected.” She pointed at her neck. “This would leave a mark, you know.” She then smiled. “I can’t believe you’re here.” She traced Taeyeon’s cheek with her finger.

“And I can’t believe you’re here.” Taeyeon smiled. “It feels so good to be able to finally tell you how I really feel about you.” She kissed her forehead. “I love you, Fany-ah. I’ve loved you for six and a half years, give or take a few weeks.” She chuckled.

“Me too. I love you too, Taeyeon-ah.”

They smiled at each other contently.

“How’s business?” Tiffany finally spoke after another long silence – her fingers absentmindedly playing with Taeyeon’s. “Did you finish the beetle?”

“Business is good. Jiseok turned out to be one heck of a businessman.” Taeyeon laughed. “Who would have thought... that silly kid.” She smiled. “And yes, the beetle’s done. You should come and take a look.”

“I will. Where do you live now?”

“Still above the shop.”

“Huh?” Tiffany shifted. “Still there?”

“Yup. I expanded the shop a bit and renovated the apartment but that’s pretty much it. It has too many memories. I can’t bring myself to move out.” She smiled and reached to brush Tiffany’s bangs away, “You’ve grown it out.”

Tiffany giggled. “As requested.”

She grinned. “Thanks.”

Tiffany rested her head under Taeyeon’s chin. “So Jiseok runs the shop now?”

“Nope. He runs his own shop. A much bigger and fancier one downtown. We’re a chain now. Got a couple of the other boys opening their own too. Jiseok’s still the best so far though.”

Tiffany smiled. “You always were smart.”

“Thank you.” She grinned. “Coming from Miss Hwang Tiffany, MBA? That’s high praise.”

Tiffany laughed. “That sounds so awkward.”

Another short pause.

“Did you try to move on?” Taeyeon asked.

Tiffany hesitated.

“It’s okay if you did. I told you to go and be happy, didn’t I?”

“But you waited...”

“That’s different. According to Jiseok that’s just being stupid.” She laughed. “Ooh! I got an idea!” She took out her phone. “Revenge time.” She dialed.

“Yo, Noona! Wanna see more beach?”

“Where’s Hyerin?”

“Toilet. What’s up?”

“I wanna show you something. Haven’t you been calling me stupid for these past six years?”

“Not stupid, Noona. That would be rude. I prefer foolish or silly or simply not smart. A self-torturing hopeless fool maybe?” He took a sip from a large glass with a piece of tropical fruit perched on it.

“Yeah yeah. Whatever.” She grinned. “So who’s stupid now?” She moved the phone so that both she and Tiffany appeared on the small screen.

Tiffany laughed and waved. “Jiseok-ah! Congratulations!”

They heard swearing and saw something sprayed on the screen. They laughed out loud.

Jiseok’s face quickly reappeared – wiping the screen with his palm. “T-Tiffany noona?!”

“Bye, Seok-ah! See you next week!” Taeyeon hung up before the shocked guy could say anything else.

She put down the phone. “That was fun.” She then placed her arm around the giggling Tiffany and pulled her close.

They quieted down and almost fell asleep when they heard a knock on the door.

“Miyoung?”

Their eyes sprang open and they literally jumped out of the bed – straightening their hair and clothes. Taeyeon ran and sat at the chair near the desk, grabbing a fork and quickly pretended to eat the cake.

“Yes, Daddy?” Tiffany answered. She sat on the bed and grabbed Taeyeon’s phone that was still on the bed – holding it to look as if she was playing with it.

The door slowly opened and the man peeked inside before pushing it all the way open.



Taeyeon calmly stood up and bowed. "Good afternoon, Mr. Hwang."

"Hi Taeyeon. My wife told me you're here. I just want to thank you for taking care of everything so well while we're away."

Taeyeon smiled, "My pleasure, Sir. They only need extra care in the winter anyway."

He nodded and was about to say something but stopped himself. "Would you like to join us for dinner?" He asked Taeyeon.

"H-huh?" The invitation took her by surprise.

"Or do you have other plans?"

"Well, no-..."

"Then you'll join us for dinner. I'm pretty sure Ahjumma had cooked for you anyway." He smiled a little but it faded awkwardly. "Okay then. I'll see you girls later." He turned on his heels and got out of the room, closing the door behind him without even a glance at his daughter or a reply from Taeyeon.

Taeyeon groaned. "This is going to be so awkward." She ran her fingers through her hair and sat back down on the chair – throwing her head back.

Tiffany approached her and sat on her lap. "Something's off with Daddy." She felt Taeyeon's arm around her waist.

Taeyeon didn't reply.

"Taeyeon-ah." She pulled Taeyeon's head back up. "Relax." She stroked the blond hair gently.

"How can I?! I'm not even sure why they let me in here in the first place or why they don't ask questions as to why I'm in your room for such a long time!"

Tiffany shrugged, "Maybe they thought we're just talking, friends, since we are the same age and your relation to samchon and everything."

Taeyeon shook her head. "They didn't even know I exist until samchon died, remember?"

Tiffany winced a little at the mention of the departure of their beloved uncle figure.

Taeyeon realized it and tightened her arms around Tiffany, "Sorry for being too blunt. Guess I'm more used to that than you." She smiled.

"Sorry that I reminded you of that fact."

Taeyeon shrugged, "That's just life. Nothing I can do about it."

Tiffany kissed Taeyeon's cheek. *Samchon's right, you grew up too fast.* She rested her head on Taeyeon's. "So what do we do now?"

"Sigh... what do you think will happen if we tell them?"

"TONIGHT?!" Tiffany almost jumped off Taeyeon's lap.

"Ow... Ears, Fany-ah." Taeyeon grimaced. "No, not tonight. If things get ugly and they decide to ship you back to the States or something." She trailed off and shook her head at that thought. "No. Definitely not tonight. I can't let you get taken away from me again so soon."

Tiffany smiled and fixed Taeyeon's hair, "Don't worry. I'm a big girl now. They can't make me do anything I don't want to – technically. I can rebel in a more mature way." She laughed. "Heck, we'll elope if we have to."

Taeyeon laughed, "That's kinda extreme but I'm not really against it." She paused. "Wait. Does that mean you're willing to run away with me and marry me?"

"Who said anything about marriage?!" Tiffany blushed a little.

"You used the word 'elope', Fany-ah. You know what that means, right, Miss Master's degree?"

Tiffany didn't know what to say.

Taeyeon laughed again, “Just kidding.” She kissed the pink cheeks. “You’re too cute. I don’t mind spending the rest of my life with you though.”

Tiffany was surprised. “I-I-...” She gulped.

“Relax. I’m not proposing, okay? Even I know that that’s crazy fast.” She grinned.

Tiffany exhaled and smiled – not really wanting to say no to the whole idea but also not able to confirm it. She chose silence.

“So... tonight?” Taeyeon asked again.

Tiffany sighed. “Are we supposed to be friends who have just met or...?”

Taeyeon furrowed her brows, “I don’t know.” She tried to think of her talks with Mr. Lee. He never indicated that Mr. Hwang knew of her existence or that she and Tiffany knew each other. “Did samchon tell your father about that day he brought the car to the shop? With the flat tire?”

Tiffany tried to think, “That was a very long time ago but knowing samchon, he probably did since it was about the car. Let’s just assume he did. So that’s the first time we met?”

“Unless samchon told him that I was the one who helped you that night at the market?”

Tiffany groaned, “This hasn’t even started yet and it’s already so complicated.”

“Which is why I don’t like to lie.”

“I used to be so good at lying...”

Taeyeon smiled, “Such a bad girl.”

“You said I’m a prim angel!”

“I corrected myself, didn’t I?” Taeyeon grinned. “Can’t believe you still remember that.”

“I tried to remember as much as I could,” she smiled.

Taeyeon returned the smile. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.” Tiffany paused and sighed. “So how are we going to do this?”

“Let’s just go with that flat tire thing as the first meeting. You can just say that it was too dark to see who helped you that night.”

Tiffany smirked. “For someone who doesn’t like to lie, you’re pretty good at this.”

“Coming from the self-proclaimed mastermind? I’m flattered.” She grinned.

“You’re too cute.” Tiffany kissed the blond girl, adjusting her sitting position so that she was now straddling Taeyeon in the chair.

Taeyeon groaned through the kiss, “This is not good.” She couldn’t resist putting her arms around Tiffany – letting her hands inch lower and lower on her back.

Tiffany giggled. “And yet... your hands...”

It took a few minutes before Taeyeon pulled Tiffany’s arm from around her neck. “Focus, Fany-ah. Go sit somewhere else.” She gave her one last quick peck.

Tiffany sulked, “Killjoy.”

“This is important, okay? I don’t want to deal with your father yet.”

“Sigh... Fine!” Tiffany gave her one last long and lingering kiss, knowing that Taeyeon would need some time to recover from it after she pulled away. She grinned proudly as she moved back towards the bed while watching the dazed girl opening her eyes slowly, staring into space.

She giggled. “Taeyeon-ah!”

“H-huh?”

“Focus, remember?”

“Oh right.” Taeyeon cleared her throat and grinned. “Thanks for that, by the way.”

“You’re welcome.” Tiffany grinned.

They decided that – when asked – their first meeting would be when Mr. Lee brought the car to Taeyeon's garage when the tire had a leak, then they became friends but never really contacted or hung out with each other until that day when Taeyeon asked Tiffany to accompany her to the lawyer's office.

What they were doing that entire afternoon was simply talking and getting to know each other better. That last part made them giggle as Tiffany strictly forbade Taeyeon to ever try to get to know someone else better by doing what they just did.

They had just finished talking when another knock came on the door.

"Who is it?" Tiffany asked.

"Dinner is ready, Miss Hwang," the butler said.

"Thanks Ahjussi, we'll be right down." She stood up and looked at Taeyeon. "Ready?"

"Can I have a good luck kiss?" The girl opened her arms.

Tiffany laughed and let Taeyeon hug her before she pecked her lips. "Good luck."

"You too." She grinned. "This reminds me of that day samchon caught us."

Tiffany winced. "Don't jinx this."

"Okay. Sorry." She kissed her one last time. "I wish you could come home with me tonight."

"Byuntae." Tiffany smiled and let go of Taeyeon. She looked in the mirror and gasped. "I almost forgot!"

She half ran into her closet and returned a short while later, wearing a turtleneck. She slapped Taeyeon's arm as she passed her. "Your fault."

Taeyeon laughed and she followed Tiffany out of the room - hoping for the best.

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Dinner went surprisingly smooth with Mr. and Mrs. Hwang talking casually about the late Mr. Lee, some random anecdotes from Tiffany's childhood and the occasional questions about Taeyeon's father and her interest in cars.

Taeyeon was tense at the beginning but Tiffany's encouraging smile from across the table managed to calm her down and she started to relax halfway through dinner.

She was just about to exhale in relief after the maid cleared their dessert bowls when Mr. Hwang suddenly turned to her. "How about that round of chess you promised me, Taeyeon?"

Taeyeon was surprised and grew tense again but then she saw Tiffany's gesturing subtly from the corner of her eye and nodded – trying to smile as naturally as possible. "Sure, Mr. Hwang."

They moved to the living room and she and Mr. Hwang took their seats at the small table with the chessboard while Tiffany and Mrs. Hwang sat on the couch – watching TV.

It was hard for her to concentrate with the man in such close proximity. She gulped and tried to focus everything on the game.

She had just finished another turn when Mr. Hwang suddenly spoke – eyes still on the chess pieces. "So how many shops do you have in your chain now?" He slowly moved his hand over to his pawn.

"Four if you count mine, Sir."

"I see." He then changed his mind and pulled his hand away, resting it under his chin as he reconsidered. "Where do you live?"

"Still at the apartment my father left me, Sir."

He nodded a little and finally made his move.

Taeyeon quietly looked over the board and moved one of her pieces.

“Have you ever considered going back to school? College?” He asked again while reaching for his rook and moving it.

Taeyeon nodded. “I thought about it briefly after samchon died but since I didn’t know who to trust with the garage, I didn’t want to risk it.” She finished her turn.

“Why? You have enough money to live comfortably even if you have to close it for a few years.”

“I know, Sir. But what will happen to the boys? It would be difficult for them to find decent jobs elsewhere with their background. The more senior ones had developed enough skill to be able to work for any garage or workshop but the younger ones...” She paused as she tried to decide on a move. “I couldn’t leave them. Most have families to support.” She made her decision and took one of his pieces off the board.

He nodded, “I see.”

Taeyeon waited for him to make his move by leaning back on her chair. She turned to see Tiffany looking at her with a worried expression. She gave Tiffany a slight nod to indicate that she was okay. Tiffany exhaled and turned to watch the TV again.

“Your turn, Taeyeon.”

“Oh. Yes, Sir.” She quickly leaned forward again – analyzing the board.

The game continued and his questions kept coming. What’s your future plan? Do you intend to stay in that apartment forever? Do you like books? What kind of books do you like? Are your shops making enough profit? Do you have other business plans in mind? Where do you see yourself in ten years?

Taeyeon couldn’t help but feel interrogated. She felt bad for Tiffany’s ex-boyfriends. They must have gone through an even tougher time than this. She knew she had to quickly finish the game to get out of the questioning.

“Check mate, Sir.”

She leaned back and exhaled in relief.

He looked over the board again – not believing his defeat. “Darn. I should’ve seen that one coming.” He muttered to himself. He then looked up and smiled a little. “Good game, Taeyeon.”

She smiled. “Appa and samchon taught me well.”

He nodded then turned to look at his wife. “Honey? What do you say we turn in for the night? Taeyeon has beaten me and I don’t think I want to try to demand a rematch tonight. My pride can only take so much.”

The woman turned and smiled. “Good job, Taeyeon-ah. Now he has to beat both you and Miyoung. Which is good, since he could be so loud when he wins.”

The man stood up. “I prefer calling it enjoying my victory.”

“Boasting is the word for it, Daddy.” Tiffany said.

“Stay out of this young lady. You still owe me a rematch.”

Tiffany laughed. “You know you haven’t won against me in years.”

Taeyeon smiled. *Even I couldn’t win against you back then.*

“Well, I’ll just have to keep trying until I do. In the mean time, I’ll try to beat Taeyeon first.” He turned to the girl. “You owe me a rematch, okay?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Now leave the girl alone.” His wife warned – standing up from her seat. “Let’s go then. I’m a bit tired myself.”

Taeyeon stood up and bowed to both parents. "Good night, Mr. Hwang, Mrs. Hwang. Thank you for dinner."

"Anytime, Taeyeon." She gave her a hug and Taeyeon was again surprised at the gesture. "It's fun having you around. Do come around more often? You can keep Miyoung company before she goes back to work next week."

Before Taeyeon could answer, Mr. Hwang had put a hand over his wife's shoulder. "Now now, Dear. Taeyeon has a business to run. You can't keep asking her to come here. I'm already grateful that she's been meticulously taking care of all our cars even though she's busy."

She detected something awkward and tense in Mr. Hwang's words and tone. She knew that she should just play it safe. "It's been my pleasure to be able to take over samchon's tasks, Sir." She then turned to the kind lady and smiled, "Mr. Hwang is right, Mrs. Hwang. As much as I enjoy my visit here today, I do have a shop to run. I'll try to make time and visit you again soon, though."

"Please do," the woman smiled. "Don't work too hard. You're still young. Learn to enjoy life as well, okay?"

"Yes, Mrs. Hwang."

"Well, good night then."

"Good night Mrs. Hwang," she bowed again. "Good night, Mr. Hwang."

"Good night." He led his wife out of the room.

Tiffany bid good night to her parents and waited until they left.

Taeyeon immediately fell back on the chair once they were gone. Her palms were sweating and she was panting as if she had just run around the estate.

Tiffany laughed and approached her, pulling her up by the hand. "You did well."

"I think I've just lost ten years of my life."

"Don't exaggerate, Taeyeon-ah."

Taeyeon grinned. "It's late. Walk me back to my car?"

"Sure."

They walked slowly, trying to prolong their time together. They didn't dare hold hands though – afraid that either the parents or the staff would see them.

"Wanna hear something funny?" Tiffany asked.

"What?"

"I overheard some of the questions that Daddy asked you during that chess game."

"Oh. And?"

"They sounded like the questions he asked my ex-boyfriends when they came to pick me up for a date." She laughed.

"What?!"

She nodded. "Yup. That's why I was worried." Her smile slowly disappeared, "Does this mean that he knows? He had been acting weird all night... and Mommy too..."

"Your mother hugged me twice today!" Taeyeon said. "That was awkward."

Tiffany laughed. "I know."

"Oh well. Let's just hope for the best."

They stopped near the blue car.

Tiffany smiled. "Still looks new."

"I take very good care of it," Taeyeon smiled. "It means a lot to me."

They smiled and stood there looking at each other – neither daring to make a move.

“No good night kiss?” Taeyeon lowered her voice.

“Daddy has security cameras,” Tiffany lowered her voice as well. She suddenly realized something. “Oh no.”

“What?” Taeyeon saw the panic in Tiffany’s eyes.

“There are security cameras here,” she pointed out some of them.

“So? Let’s just not do anything. You can come to my place tomorrow.”

“It’s not that. That day, after we went to see your lawyer. Here? In your car?”

Taeyeon’s eyes widened. “You don’t think?” She gulped. “He saw us?”

Tiffany was worried now. “I don’t know. He doesn’t usually check them unless the security guard alerted him but I don’t think he did. He’s not that nosy, is he?”

“How should I know?” Taeyeon sighed – wishing that she could comfort the other girl right now. “Your security cameras don’t record sounds right?”

“No. Don’t worry. That’s why I can talk like this.”

“Ok then. Well, I’m sorry I can’t hug and comfort you right now.” She grinned. “Or kiss you good night. But please don’t think about this too much? Let’s give it time. Wait and see. Okay?”

Tiffany smiled. “Okay. Sorry I can’t hug and kiss you too.”

“It’s okay. I have something better.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“I love you.”

Tiffany grinned.

“I love you very much.” Taeyeon said – leaning on her car and crossing her arms.

“You look kinda cool actually.” Tiffany said and crossed her arms too.

“Nice pose. Might look like we’re arguing, no?”

“I hope so. He’s probably watching.”

“Wow, that sounds... very creepy...”

“Welcome to the golden cage, Taeyeon. Where they know your every move and direct your every step.” She smiled bitterly.

“You still managed to rebel somehow.”

“I’m resourceful that way.”

“Yes, you are. But don’t worry. There are worse things in life.” She straightened up. “Well, nice ‘arguing’ with you. I gotta go before your father comes out with a torch and pitchfork.” She unlocked the car and opened the door. “I’ll call you. Don’t go to sleep before I do.” She stepped in and closed the door. She started the engine and opened the window.

“I won’t fall asleep. Jetlag, remember?”

“Good.” Taeyeon put the car into gear and slowly started to reverse. She then shifted the gear again, turning to look at Tiffany and waved. “I love you.”

Tiffany couldn’t help but laugh as she returned the wave. “Love you too. Drive safely, okay?”

Taeyeon nodded and closed the window – driving away.

Tiffany sighed. *Please let Daddy and Mommy approve? Somehow?* She turned and walked back to the house.

----

“T-taeyeon-ah...”

“Hmm?”

Tiffany forgot what she was about to say as she ran her fingers through Taeyeon's silky hair. It took a few seconds before her thoughts started to vaguely resurface. "Tae-..." but one movement from Taeyeon erased everything once again.

"Just relax, Fany-ah." She heard the whisper next to her ear and gulped.

Taeyeon kissed her.

"Ow! Fany-ah!" Taeyeon pulled back. "Not again..." She licked her bleeding lip.

"Oops." Tiffany grinned. She was about to kiss the wound to make it better when she heard that sound again. "Taeyeon-ah..." She called the girl who had already disappeared from her sight once again. "Stop, Taeyeon-ah."

"What?" Taeyeon's face came into view.

"Sshh! I hear something."

"Probably just the guys? They are loud, you know."

"No, I know that voice." She pushed Taeyeon off her and wrapped the blanket around her body before walking out to the living room – ignoring the other girl's protests. She peeked through the curtains to look down at the lot. Her eyes almost fell out of their sockets. "Sh-..." She ran back to the bedroom to find Taeyeon still sprawling in bed. She threw the blanket and it landed on Taeyeon's face. "DADDY!" She quickly picked up her clothes and got dressed.

"Huh?" Taeyeon struggled to pull the blanket off her face and saw Tiffany panicking. "Your father? Where?"

"HERE!"

"WHAT?!" She sat up and quickly got dressed as well. She cursed. "What is it with these men's timings?!"

They heard the doorbell ring and froze.

Tiffany cursed some more and Taeyeon quickly finished getting dressed.

"Bad dejavu... bad dejavu..." Tiffany mumbled.

"Deadly devaju for me." Taeyeon ran her fingers through her hair.

The doorbell rang again.

"Go hide somewhere!"

"My car is down there! You think he wouldn't notice?!"

"ARGH! I'll just tell him I'm checking it for you and that you're at the mall – shopping while you wait."

Tiffany stopped to contemplate. "Brilliant! I'll just stay quietly in the bedroom." She ran out and picked up her shoes, bag, jacket and everything else that belonged to her and ran back into the bedroom.

Another longer ring.

"Go!!" She pushed Taeyeon out the bedroom and slammed the door shut.

Taeyeon steadied herself and took deep breaths before she went out the door – down the stairs. "Coming!"

She took another deep breath before she twisted the lock and opened the door. She faked her shock "M-Mr. Hwang!" She bowed. "What brings you here, Sir?"

"Is my daughter here?"

She shook her head. "She's at the mall, Sir – waiting until her car is finished."

"I see. What's wrong with it?"

“I’m not sure. She said something about it not running as smooth as before. I plan to check on it later. I was in the toilet. I’m sorry I took so long to open the door.”

He looked at her – scrutinizing with furrowed brows.

Taeyeon kept her cool and tried to breath normally. “How can I help you, Sir?”

“Can I come in?”

“O-of course.” She was glad that she had renovated the apartment so it didn’t look as shabby as it was before – although still small in size. She closed the door and led him upstairs. “Please watch your step, Sir.” She was also glad that she had remodeled the stairs.

“Let me take your coat.” She took the coat from him and hung it on the hanger by the door. “Please take a seat.” She rushed to the kitchen. “What would you like to drink, Sir? Coffee? Tea? Soda?”

“I’m fine, don’t worry.” He took a quick look around and sat down on the couch – hands absentmindedly fiddling with the old pieces on the faded chessboard. “Your father gave you this?”

Taeyeon brought two glasses of water, just in case. “Yes, he did.” She placed them on the table and sat on the chair. She tensed.

He put the pawn down and turned to look at Taeyeon. “Look, let’s just get to the point, okay?”

Taeyeon gulped and nodded.

“I know about you and Miyoung.”

Taeyeon had kinda seen it coming but she was shocked nonetheless. She tried to maintain her act of being confused. She creased her brows and tilted her head a bit. “Excuse me, Sir?”

He sighed. “See? Even how you both lie is similar.”

Taeyeon was quiet.

“I know that you two had been meeting each other many times before she graduated.” He saw the confused look on Taeyeon’s face. “I have my... sources,” he explained. “I keep a good eye on my daughter when she’s not with hyung. I know of her parties. I considered them as just the usual teenage rebellion so as long as it’s not dangerous, I let her do as she pleases. Her friends’ parents are my friends so I know a thing or two.” He paused. “At first I thought you two were just friends until I heard how she started to have a lot more sleepovers at her friends’. And someone told me that she had been coming here instead.”

Taeyeon held her breath.

He continued. “I didn’t say or do anything because I thought that this was just another phase – another one of her rebellious streaks. But then I saw your car at the funeral... after our talk... and for the first time ever, I was afraid that it was more than just a phase.”

Taeyeon looked at him.

He explained. “The bank notified me of a large withdrawal from her savings account and I thought she just went on another crazy shopping spree, well a super crazy shopping spree, to be exact. Never expected matching cars...”

The girl held her ground.

“Anyway, I thought it would blow over soon. We were moving to the States so I assumed she would forget about you soon enough.” He sighed, “But then I saw it, that day, in your car, near the garage.” He clenched his jaws. “It was by accident. I was just checking the security cameras to make sure they were still working well. Shocked doesn’t even begin to describe how I felt. You owe your health and intact limbs to my wife.”

Taeyeon gulped.



He kept his eyes on her. “It doesn’t mean that I don’t trust you with the work I let you do, Taeyeon.” His tone softened a little. “I know your skills and I meant what I said – hyung trusted you so I know I can do the same. This is totally unrelated to this whole thing with Miyoung, you understand?”

Taeyeon nodded a little. *There’s no getting out of this one now.*

“Anyway, I didn’t tell her about what I saw or what I knew because we were going back to the States. I still hoped that time would change her mind. And when she started dating all those boys, I was secretly relieved.” He paused, “Unfortunately, none of them lasted.” He shook his head. “I talked to her mother about this and for a moment we thought that keeping her longer in the States would give her more time to find the right person and get over whatever phase she was going through with you. It didn’t quite work out so we decided to just let her choose and accept whatever decision she made.”

He took a deep breath. “I thought I could. I tried. I guess I’m just not as good as her mother.” He smiled apologetically. “I have nothing against you, Taeyeon. You’re a good kid.” He sighed. “Too bad you’re not a boy...”

Taeyeon looked down at her hands.

“I know that her mother is right. I’ve noticed how different she is when you’re around. Happier, brighter.” He chuckled. “At least ten times more cheerful than when she went out even with the cutest, smartest whateverest boy back then.” He turned serious again and he looked at Taeyeon. “You know of my wife’s condition? Why we only have Miyoung?”

Taeyeon nodded. “Yes, Fa-... I mean, Tiffany told me a little bit about that.”

“We can’t have more children.” He smiled, “We used to dream of having a big family with at least three children.” His smile faded. “But it turns out we can’t.” He sighed. “She felt guilty. It ate her up and she became very depressed but she’s better now. Much better.”

He looked at her. “So the next best thing I can hope for is a big family with many grandchildren, Taeyeon. It’s the only thing that I could think of that can somehow reduce my wife’s guilt and make her happy again.”

She knew that that was it. There’s no way she could reason against that.

“So you understand...?”

She nodded weakly.

“My wife told me that I should just let it go and let Miyoung decide for herself. But this is not just about me or her mother. It’s about her future too. I plan to let her take over one day and I honestly don’t know how that would work when she’s, well, with you. Not that you’re not smart or good enough.” He quickly added the last part. “It’s just the people, society...” He sighed and chuckled. “Sometimes I think that all this money and status had brought us more pain than necessary.” He shook his head, “But it did allow my wife to get better and Miyoung to get the best education and life so I shouldn’t complain.” He smiled apologetically. “I’m sorry, Taeyeon.”

She looked up.

“I can’t talk to Miyoung about this – I know she would just argue with me and rebel. We’re too alike.” He paused, “That’s why I’m begging you...”

Taeyeon held her breath.

“Yes, you heard me correctly. I’m *begging* you, Taeyeon. Please.” He sighed again. “If only you-  
...”

The bedroom door opened and Taeyeon shockingly turned. *No. Don’t, Fany-ah.*

“How could you, Daddy?”

He looked up – not surprised at all to see his daughter there. “Miyoung-ah...”

“Fany, don’t.” Taeyeon stood and walked over to stop the crying Tiffany who was approaching her father in anger.

“How could you?!” She yelled at him.

“Fany, don’t. He’s your father.” Taeyeon held the girl back.

“You’ve been running my life for as long as I can remember! And I always... ALWAYS... do what you want! You want a classical music playing daughter? I blew that damn flute for fourteen years! You want me to continue the business? I took that boring business administration major I don’t even like! You want me to take English lessons, ballet lessons, Chinese lessons, piano lessons, extra classes... I did it all! I’m always the top of my class!”

She paused for air. “You installed cameras everywhere! You won’t even let me go anywhere without samchon or some random bodyguard until I was 18! I have never seen the subway until I was 20! My playmates were all nannies, maids, butlers, drivers. No one in school could play with me unless you approved! And even then, you won’t let me play at my friend’s house for longer than half an hour when I was already in middle school!”

“Fany-ah.” Taeyeon gently whispered in Tiffany’s ear. “Calm down, Fany-ah.”

She ignored her. “You want to move the States? I followed. You want me to get a Master’s degree? I did that. You want me to stay at home and accompany Mommy instead of going out with my friends? I did that. What else do you want? I’m 28, Daddy! Can’t I make my own decisions now? Can’t I live my own life? Can’t I just be happy? Love? Because I love Taeyeon, I really do.” She sighed. “I tried, Daddy. Six years! That’s how long I tried to forget her, okay? That’s why I dated all those losers and jerks! But I can’t! You said so yourself!”

Taeyeon was quiet. She held Tiffany tighter. *I love you too, Fany but please, don’t...*

He didn’t reply.

“If Mommy is fine with this then why aren’t you? Why do you care so much about what other people think? We’re not celebrities. We’re not royalties. So what the heck is the problem?!”

“Fany-ah, don’t talk to your father like that...”

He sighed and moved towards the door. “Thank you, Taeyeon. Good bye.”

Taeyeon tried to look over her shoulder, not letting go of Tiffany. “Good bye, Sir.”

“We’re not done yet, Daddy!”

He put on his jacket. “Yes we are, Miyoung.” He turned around and went down the stairs.

“DADDY!”

The door slammed shut.

Tiffany broke down and sobbed in Taeyeon’s arms.

## CHAPTER 12

She quietly listened and waited until the rants and the crying had died down. The exhausted girl in her arms started to loosen her grip on her wet t-shirt – her sobs reduced to occasional sniffs and her breathing slowed its pace.

She moved to the couch, slowly sat down, holding Tiffany firmly in her arms, and kept waiting. It wasn't until she was certain that Tiffany had fallen asleep that she tried to shift into a more comfortable position. She silently sighed. *Why does it never end?*

Although she had expected that their path would be rocky, she hadn't foreseen the reason behind it. The society and status excuses did not bother her. She didn't care about that. Society never did anything to help her and status was just foolish egotistical standards created by people who think they are better than others – she thought. But when he told her about his wife, Tiffany's mother, she knew that it's a fight she couldn't win.

She looked down at the sleeping girl and wiped the damp cheek with her thumb. She fixed the bangs and saw Tiffany shifted a little, snuggling until she found a comfortable position. She smiled. *I still think you're the most beautiful girl in the world even in this messy state.* Her smile disappeared and she swallowed to hold back her tears. *Life is never fair, is it?* She gently caressed Tiffany's cheek with the back of her fingers, taking care not to disturb her sleep. *Maybe I am destined to just be alone forever,* she smiled bitterly. *Even when you're in my arms, I still can't have you.* She kissed the sleeping girl's forehead and Tiffany stirred.

"T-tae-..."

"Sshhh... you're tired. Sleep."

"I'm not..." Tiffany let go of Taeyeon and sat up, rubbing her swollen eyes and wiping her cheeks. She saw Taeyeon's wet t-shirt. "Sorry about that..."

"Oh come on. It's fine." She stood up. "I'll go change, just in case you're going for round two." She smiled and returned a few seconds later wearing a different t-shirt.

She sat down and opened her arms. Tiffany scooted over and let Taeyeon hold her again.

"Can I just stay here?" Tiffany asked after a few more moments of silence.

"Of course."

"I mean, forever."

"Huh?" Taeyeon looked down.

"I'm sick and tired of living under his control. Can I just live here? With you?" She let go of Taeyeon's waist and sat up. "Please?"

Taeyeon sighed, "You know I'd love nothing more but to say yes to that but-..."

"No buts." Tiffany put her hand over Taeyeon's mouth.

Taeyeon gently pried the hand from her mouth, "What about your mother?"

"They've always told me to be independent so I'm doing just that. I don't need them to support me anymore. They can take everything away – I don't care. I'm sure I can get another job. And in the mean time, I have my savings and I-I... I'll even pay rent!"

"You don't have to pay for anything. What's mine is yours..."

"Then what's the problem?!" She was hoping that Taeyeon would be more supportive. "My mother's fine. She has been fine for a long time. You heard him. She's okay with all this. With you. She likes you! You've seen how she hugs you!"

"I know." Taeyeon tried to calm the girl down.

“He’s just a manipulative, over-controlling, power obsessed-...”

“Hey hey, that’s your father you’re talking about there.” Taeyeon sternly warned Tiffany. “No matter what, he’s just trying to look out for you.”

Tiffany sneered. “Right. Sure. Try living with him for 28 years. I bet you’ll sing a different song.”

“At least you have 28 years with him.”

Tiffany stopped herself. She looked at the sadly smiling girl, “I’m sorry.” She held Taeyeon’s hand. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make you sad.”

“I’m fine. Don’t worry.” She paused. “We could still be friends?”

“What?!” Tiffany let go of the hand. “You’re giving up just like that?!”

“What choice do I have?”

“How about fighting? I thought you love me!”

“I do love you!”

“Then why are you giving up so easily?!”

“Because I don’t want to be the one responsible for making your parents unhappy for the rest of their lives! You’re their only daughter!”

“I’m not disowning them, am I? I’ll still be their daughter, you know. And who says they’re unhappy? Mommy’s fine with all this, remember? Daddy just has to learn to suck it up! If I could suck it up this long so he could have his way, then I don’t see why he can’t do the same. He’s a grown man. He’ll live.”

Taeyeon sighed. “You’re not letting this go, are you?”

“No. And I’m disappointed that you’re giving up this easily.”

“What am I supposed to do? I can’t break up a family! I know how much it sucks to live without one. I can’t put you or them through that, okay?!”

“Okay. I know you mean well.” Tiffany soothed Taeyeon, “But you can’t blame me for fighting for my happiness. It’s about time that I step up and take control of my own life. I do not want to lose you, Taeyeon. Those six years were hell. I don’t want to go through that again.”

“I’m not blaming you. I went through the same hell, remember? At least you still have your parents and those boyfriends – no matter how bad I still wish I could forget that fact...”

Tiffany couldn’t help but smile. “I thought you said you’re fine with me trying to move on?”

“Still doesn’t mean I like the thought of you with other people,” Taeyeon sulked.

Tiffany kissed the pouting lips. “That’s why you should try harder to make sure that I stay yours and yours only.”

She smiled, “You know I would like nothing more than that.” The smile slowly faded. “But I can’t do that at the expense of your parents.”

“They’ll be fine! They won’t disown me.”

“No but I’m sure you won’t talk to your father for who knows how long.” Taeyeon sighed. “I know that your father’s trying to use the ‘guilt trip’ card on me. I hate to say that it’s working... BUT!” She quickly silenced the other girl who was about to argue. “The only reason why is because I can’t help but think of your mother. Being caught in the middle of your fallout with your father might take a toll on her health again.”

“And seeing me unhappy for the rest of my life would make her feel better?”

“I didn’t say that.”

Tiffany sighed and buried her face in her palms. “I hate this.”

Taeyeon pulled the hands off the face and hugged Tiffany.

“Why is it so hard to just be happy, Taeyeon?”

“I don’t know.”

“Can’t I be selfish for once? Just once?”

She gently stroked Tiffany’s back. She had no answer to that. “Let’s just calm down first, okay? We’ll think of something.” *I’ll think of something.*

----

Taeyeon had to force Tiffany to go home that night after her father’s visit. She didn’t want Mrs. Hwang to worry about her daughter’s whereabouts. Plus, she needed time to think clearly.

She couldn’t sleep. She found herself down in the shop, cleaning the beetle until the boys showed up for work. She decided to take it for a drive.

She pulled over and parked the small car at the side of the road. She stepped out and leaned on it as she watched the small planes parked behind the large wire fence. She read the large white sign near the building. The airstrip had been turned into a small flying school, apparently.

Her mind automatically went back to the days she spent with Tiffany there. She smiled as she remembered those happier times.

A small white plane glided over her head.

She looked up and closed her eyes, taking a deep breath and letting her tears fall.

*What am I going to do now, Appa? Samchon? I can’t take Fany away from her mother. She’s a nice lady and Fany’s her only child. I grew up without mine, I can’t let her go through life without hers – not when she doesn’t have to.*

Another plane flew above her. She let the wind hit her face and her hair freely.

*I know she loves me, Samchon. Even before you wrote me that letter. And although you told me to fight, I’m not sure I can do that at the expense of her parents. Not when they’ve done so much for her – no matter how wrong I think they can be. I can’t judge them. Nobody’s perfect. Not even me.*

She wiped her tears with the back of her hand and opened her eyes. The words in the letter her samchon left her echoed in her mind.

*“... if she ever returns to you, make sure you never let her go again. Learn to fight for your happiness, Taeyeon. You deserve it. You deserve to feel loved. And I know that she loves you. No matter what happens or who you both end up with; she loves you. Remember that.”*

*And I love her too, Samchon.*

She sighed. *Well, I guess I do owe her just a bit of an effort? Let’s give this a shot then.* She straightened up and got into the car.

----

“Good afternoon, Miss Kim.”

“Good afternoon, Ahjussi. Is Mrs. Hwang here? Can I see her?”

“I’ll go ask her. One moment, Miss Kim.” He bowed and went inside the house.

Taeyeon waited in the large foyer, absentmindedly touching the flower arrangement on the table in the middle of the room.

“Miss Kim?” She turned and saw him standing near the hallway. “She’s waiting for you in the living room.” He stepped aside to let her through.

“Thank you, Ahjussi.”

“Taeyeon!” She was waiting for her with open arms.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Hwang.” She bowed but was again pulled into another hug. She couldn’t help but laugh a bit. “I’m sorry if I come at an inconvenient time...”

“Nonsense! I’m glad you’re here to keep me company. I was just about to have tea. Have you had lunch?”

Taeyeon nodded, silently apologizing for lying. She hadn’t had anything to eat since Mr. Hwang left the house more than 24 hrs ago.

“Well I hope you still have room for cake. Ahjumma’s experimenting again.” She laughed. “I do hope she would stop being so mysterious and just give her creation a proper name.”

Taeyeon smiled.

“So...” She sipped her tea and waited until the maid had finished setting Taeyeon’s tea on the table and left. “What brings you here? Miyoung’s upstairs, in her room. She said she wasn’t feeling well and hasn’t left her room since she came home late last night.”

“I came to see you, Mrs. Hwang. She doesn’t know I’m here.”

“Oh?” She put her cup back on the table. “What’s on your mind?”

She took a deep breath. “Mr. Hwang came to see me yesterday.”

The older woman’s smile disappeared. “Oh no. What did he do?”

“Nothing, Mrs. Hwang. He just wanted to talk to me.”

“And what did he say?”

Taeyeon looked down to gather her courage but before she could speak, Mrs. Hwang had asked her another question. “He told you we know?”

Taeyeon looked up and nodded.

“And I’m guessing he didn’t stop there, otherwise you wouldn’t be here right now, looking this sad.”

She tried to smile. “I’m okay, Mrs. Hwang.”

“You can’t fool a mother’s eyes, Taeyeon. What did he say? Did he threaten you?”

Taeyeon quickly shook her head, “No no. Although he did mention that I owe you for still being this healthy and whole.” She grinned.

The woman smiled. “Don’t worry. His bark is louder than his bite. I’m used to taming him. He’s not a bad person, Taeyeon. He’s just stubborn. It got passed down to Miyoung, unfortunately. Those two fight like bulls but when they find something in common, they’ll stick closer than Siamese twins.”

Taeyeon smiled.

She continued. “I’m sorry about this. I thought he would learn to accept it sooner or later. We’ve known for quite a while, after all.” She sighed. “I guess it hit him harder than he had expected when he saw you two here, together.”

Taeyeon nodded. “I understand, Mrs. Hwang. I know it must not be easy for the both of you.”

She smiled a little. “We’ll get used to it.” She paused. “So what did he say, exactly?”

“Well...” Taeyeon cleared her throat. “Let’s just say that he doesn’t find it fitting for his daughter to be in this kind of... relationship... in this society especially considering that he wants her to take over everything from him.”

The woman dismissed it with her hand. “So many of the so-called socialites are doing a lot crazier stuff. I should tell him what’s really going on with the youngsters these days and he’ll be grateful that Miyoung at least has you.”

That made Taeyeon smile.

She saw it. “You’re a kind person, Taeyeon. I know you’re different. You never failed to do what you promised my husband for six years even though you don’t even need the pay and you didn’t

know whether Miyoung would come back. That says a lot.” She paused. “Oppa told me a lot about you in his letter.”

Taeyeon was surprised. “You mean Samchon?”

She nodded. “If I hadn’t known better, I would’ve thought that he was trying to make us adopt you.” She smiled. “I think he told my husband about you too although I don’t know how much.” She observed the girl sitting across from her, “Oppa knew, didn’t he?”

Taeyeon nodded. “He had tried to warn us and stop us so many times.”

She chuckled, “His letter sounds like he was supporting you all the way though.”

“His letter to me is a bit like that too.” Taeyeon smiled. “I’m a bit surprised actually.”

A short pause.

“Mrs. Hwang?”

“Yes?”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course! Anything.”

“How do you *really* feel about this? I mean. Should Fa-... I mean Miyoung, decide to go through with this? Her relationship with me, I mean...”

She smiled. “I can’t say I’m not disappointed, at first. I used to think that we’d have a lot of grandchildren running around but there’s always adoption. Although I’d have to persuade her father, he’s kinda old fashioned in that sense. It’s also why Miyoung doesn’t have any siblings.” Her smile had a hint of sadness. “Anyway,” she brushed it off. “I’m fine, Taeyeon. It’s about time she does what makes her happy. And like I said, you’re kind and different. It’s quite a relief, somehow.” She paused. “Please keep in mind that I’m saying this without any intention to disregard the man I love and respect so much but Taeyeon, please don’t listen to him. At least not in this case.”

A door opened and in came the friendly Ahjumma with a tray in her hands.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, Mrs. Hwang.”

“It’s fine, Ahjumma. Is the cake done?”

“Yes, Mrs. Hwang.” The woman smiled proudly. “I think I’ll call it ‘Mysterious Cake Number 2’.”

Mrs. Hwang laughed. “Can’t you give it a proper name, Ahjumma? Strawberry cake? Vanilla cake? Chocolate cake?”

“That’s too plain.” The woman frowned. “Besides, I like to keep people guessing.” She grinned and proceeded to place the two slices of cake on the table. “There’s ice cream too, Taeyeon.” She turned to the smiling blond girl. “Come get some before you leave, okay?”

“Yes, Ahjumma. Thank you.”

The woman left them alone again.

Mrs. Hwang reached for her fork to take a bite off her food. “I think Ahjumma has done it again!” She laughed. “I should start stalking her for the mysterious ingredients. You should give it a try, Taeyeon. It’s good!”

“I will, Mrs. Hwang.” She wasn’t finished yet. “So about what you said before... not listening to Mr. Hwang in this case?”

“Yes?”

“Wouldn’t that cause another riff between him and Miyoung?”

The older woman shrugged. “So what else is new? He’ll turn around. At the end of the day, he loves her too much to not give in to what she wants.” She put her small fork down on the plate.

“Besides, she’s 28. Don’t you think it’s time we let her go? I never wanted to raise a spoiled daughter, you know. Maybe this will be a good time to put that to the test.”

“What do you mean?”

“I assume Miyoung has already planned something drastic?” She smiled. “That girl can rebel like the best of them. Although I’m glad she had always managed to keep things in line, no drugs, sleeping around and such.” She paused to drink her tea. “She’s a good kid.”

Taeyeon nodded.

“So just let her do what she wants. At least until her father comes around.”

“And you’re okay with that?”

“I don’t like being made the pitiful invalid, Taeyeon.” Her voice took a sudden serious change. “I’m perfectly capable of making my own decisions and taking care of myself, you know.”

Taeyeon looked down.

She exhaled. “Besides, as long as you keep an eye on her, I’m pretty sure she’ll be fine.” She smiled. “Oppa told me that you’re more than capable to do that.”

“Oh.” She returned the smile. *Thanks, Samchon.*

She took another sip of her tea. “Don’t worry, Taeyeon. It will blow over sooner or later. I’ll talk to him.” She put the cup down and looked Taeyeon straight in the eyes. “Just promise me one thing.”

“Yes, Mrs. Hwang?”

“Take good care of Miyoung, please? She’s all I have.” Her eyes glistened a little as she smiled. “Don’t let her do anything crazy or stupid, okay?”

Taeyeon grinned. “I will, Mrs. Hwang. I promise.” She stood up and took a deep bow. “Thank you.”

“Aigoo. You don’t have to be so formal.” The woman hugged her again. “I know you grew up without knowing your mother and I don’t mind having another daughter.”

Taeyeon exhaled in relief. “Thank you, Mrs. Hwang.”

She let the girl go. “Hope you’ll grow out of calling me that too, one day.” She smiled. “Now eat your cake!”

Taeyeon laughed and went back to her seat, happily eating the cake while letting the woman tell her stories of Tiffany and of herself when she was young.

They were chatting happily along when they heard the sound of something heavy falling to the ground.

The woman turned and they both saw the butler rushing into the foyer before hearing the familiar voice.

“It’s okay, Ahjussi. I got it.”

“Please let me help you, Miss Hwang.”

“It’s fine. Can you put this in my car, please?”

“Yes, Miss Hwang.”

Mrs. Hwang sighed and stood up, “What is that girl up to now...”

Taeyeon followed the woman out to see the butler rushing passed them again – dragging a large pink suitcase behind him.

Tiffany stood up from her squatting position and put the stuff she had just picked up from the floor into her bag.

“Are you going somewhere?” The older woman asked.

“Sorry, Mommy. I just can’t stand living with Daddy anymore. I’m moving out.”



“Oh? And where are you going to stay?”

“Taeyeon’s.”

Taeyeon took a step back and held in her laugh. She was sure that Tiffany hadn’t noticed her from the way she answered her mother’s questions.

Tiffany’s mother knew and decided to play along. “Does Taeyeon know about this?”

“She won’t mind.”

“You know I don’t raise my daughter to be so impolite that she would move into someone’s house without even telling the owner, right?”

“She said what’s hers is mine so it’s technically my house too!”

“Hwang Miyoung...”

Tiffany sighed. “Look, Mommy, with all due respect, you don’t know what Daddy has done this time. He has really gone overboard with all this overprotective stuff. I’m tired. I’m taking a time out. Taeyeon would understand. Can you just let me do this? Just this once?”

“I’m not sure. What do you think, Taeyeon?”

Taeyeon giggled and walked out to stand next to the woman, “I’m not sure either. I don’t want my apartment to turn pink.”

“W-wha...?!” Tiffany took a step back as she watched the two women laughing.

“I suggest you talk to her, Taeyeon. I think I’ll go take a bath before dinner.” She gave Taeyeon another hug before walking towards her daughter and hugging her as well, “Don’t leave without saying good bye, okay?” She smiled and went up to her room.

“What are you doing here?” Tiffany asked as soon as Taeyeon came to a stop in front of her.

“Hello to you too.” She gave her a quick peck on the cheek.

Tiffany didn’t react.

“I came to talk to your mother.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Someone told me I should fight so I fought – in a less hostile way than yelling or dragging a suitcase out of the house.” She grinned.

“What?”

“I asked your mother for advice... on us. I mean, I figured since she’s supposed to be okay with this and that your father’s argument’s basically about her well-being anyway, I thought I’d ask. See what she has to say about it.”

“Oh? That’s... smart, actually.”

She laughed. “See? Sometimes you just have to learn to stay calm and think things through before going into battle.”

Tiffany grinned. “You have your way, I have mine.” She paused. “And?”

“And what?”

“And what did she say?”

“That I should be prepared to clean up after you, that I should let you rant until you’re done and then speak – although I figured that one out already, that I should be patient since you take hours in the bathroom – I’m glad my bathroom’s small so there’s practically nothing you can do in there.” She paused to think. “We might need a bigger place.”

“What?” Tiffany was staring at her with wide eyes. “What the heck are you talking about?! This is not a joking matter, Taeyeon-ah!”

"I am not joking! I don't think my small apartment can contain your stuff. Let's go apartment hunting this weekend."

"Kim Taeyeon." Tiffany took a step back and crossed her arms – frowning.

Taeyeon laughed. "Fine. Sorry." She pulled Tiffany by the waist. "She told me that she's fine with this... with us. And that she'll talk to your father and that I should not listen to him about this and just wait until he calms down and changes his mind." She smiled. "Apparently samchon had told her a lot about me in his letter. I owe that man way too much, really."

Tiffany finally smiled. "See? I told you that Daddy was just being unreasonable."

"But I had to make sure for myself especially because it concerns your mother. I don't want to break your family apart, I told you that."

"I know. I have to admit your way is much better. Less yelling."

Taeyeon laughed again. "That's because neither you or your father was in the room."

She then let go of Tiffany. "Anyway, your mother's fine with you moving in with me. And I'm serious about apartment hunting. After all she's told me, I'm scared about what's going to happen to me and my apartment after this."

Tiffany grinned. "So we'll have our own new place?"

"Yep. You can go be as independent as you want. Just please don't paint everything pink. That's all I'm asking from you."

Tiffany laughed. "I won't. I promise." She pulled Taeyeon in for a kiss. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Taeyeon stepped back. "Still not comfortable doing this here, by the way."

She smiled. "I'm going to talk to Mommy and thank her, okay?"

"You go do that. I'll be in the kitchen. Ahjumma said she has ice cream for me." Taeyeon's eyes were literally glowing at the words 'ice cream'.

"You and your sweet tooth." She laughed and kissed Taeyeon's cheek. "See you later then." She then left to go upstairs.

"Yup." Taeyeon turned and headed to the back of the house.

----

Loud voices made Taeyeon turn from the computer screen. She saw some of her crew trying to appease a very angry looking man who was making his way to her office.

"Where is she?!" Mr. Hwang burst into the office and Taeyeon calmly stood up from her chair.

"Good morning, Mr. Hwang." She bowed.

"Where is my daughter?!"

"At work as usual, Sir."

He hadn't expected that answer and for a second he didn't know how to react. He quickly regained his composure. "What did you say to my wife? Are you really that bent on destroying this family?!"

"I am not trying to destroy anything, Sir. I asked Mrs. Hwang for advice. That's all."

"And made her feel so pitiful that she didn't even stop her daughter from making a very big mistake?!"

"I believe Mrs. Hwang deserves more credit than that and no, I didn't make her feel bad or do anything she didn't want to do. If she had told me to stay away from your daughter then I would have gladly done so."

He scoffed.

"It's the truth, Sir. You can ask her. I didn't make her or your daughter do anything they didn't want to do." Taeyeon repeated herself.

"Then why did you sneak up behind my back and went to talk to her like that?"

"Because you told me that she was fine with me and Miyoung and that her health was your main concern. So I had to make sure whether that's really the case." She paused, "Besides, hadn't you done the same thing towards your daughter by coming here behind her back and tried to make me break things up with her?"

He clenched his jaws.

Taeyeon continued. "I will not meddle in your family's business, Mr. Hwang. I don't wish to break any family apart. I know what it's like to grow up without one and I do not wish for your daughter to go through the same thing."

"Then why do you keep doing this?!"

"Doing what, exactly, Mr. Hwang?"

"Ruining my daughter's life."

"I'm not ruining anything. It's her life, her decision. If she decides to leave me then I'll accept that." She took a deep breath. "I do not care about society or status, Mr. Hwang. I'm a simple person. I don't care about prestige or money and I found that the kindest people – people who have loved me and taught me a lot in life – are those who also don't care about those things. I'm sorry if I don't meet your ideal standard of the person you think should be with your daughter but I know that no one else can do better. I'll do anything for her, Mr. Hwang. I'll give her anything she wants and the best that she deserves until she decides that she doesn't love me anymore. I will back off then but not a moment sooner." *I will fight for this.*

He took a deep breath and shook his head. "How did this even happen?" He muttered under his breath.

Taeyeon stayed silent.

"Is it wrong to just want the best for your only child? So that her life can be that much easier?" He looked at Taeyeon.

She shook her head. "It's not wrong at all, Sir. But I guess sometimes you just have to let your loved ones choose their own paths." She paused. "I wanted Lee Samchon to undergo treatment so he could prolong his life."

He raised his eyebrows.

"But he chose not to and there's nothing I could do about it." She smiled bitterly. "I know it's a different situation but yeah, sometimes you just have to let them decide on their own – even when you think you know better. Like samchon once told me. My life, my decision. And if it's wrong then I guess I just have to deal with the consequences."

He was staring at Taeyeon. "How old are you again?"

Taeyeon grinned. "Same age as your daughter, Sir. Well, a few months older actually."

"You grew up too fast."

"Life didn't give me much of a choice, unfortunately."

He grew quiet. He then shook his head and turned on his heels – leaving the office.

Taeyeon exhaled in relief.

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"So what do you think?" Tiffany stood in the middle of the room with arms wide open.

"I'm just glad it's not pink."

“Mommy~”

She laughed. “Looks good, Miyoung-ah.” She took a look around. “Did Taeyeon even get a say in anything?”

“Uhm... She has a room for her ju-... I mean stuff.” Tiffany grinned.

“So you choose, you decide, she cleans up?”

Tiffany laughed. “Something like that.”

“Poor girl.” The woman looked at the pictures in the shelf. “That’s her father?”

“Yep.” Tiffany walked up to the woman and linked their arms. “Come on, I’ll show you around.”

They spent the next few minutes touring the apartment and had just stepped out of the bedroom when the front door opened and in walked Taeyeon.

“Fany-ah!” She then saw the woman. “Oops. Good evening, Mrs. Hwang.” She bowed.

“Hello, Taeyeon. Just got back from work?”

“Not exactly. I went to the noraebang to celebrate one of the boys’ birthday.” She grinned sheepishly.

The woman laughed. “Now that’s honest.”

“I have nothing to hide, Mrs. Hwang. Fany knows.”

Tiffany smiled. “And I would’ve joined if that slave driver of a father had sped up the meeting.”

“Miyoung.”

“What? It’s true. He went on and on about some random sales figure.” She scoffed.

“Anyway, will you excuse me, Mrs. Hwang? I’m going to take a quick shower first. Have you had dinner?”

“Yes I have. Don’t worry about me. Go go.” She dismissed her with her usual small hand gesture and Taeyeon nodded before strolling into the bedroom and closing the door.

The two women sat down on the couch. “So everything’s okay?”

“Everything’s okay, Mommy.” She paused, “How’s Daddy doing?”

“Getting there. How does he treat you around the office?”

She shrugged. “Cold. Ruthless. The usual.”

“I know he could hold a grudge like no other and that it’s been more than six months but just give him a little more time.”

“I’ll give him as much time as he wants. Just as long as he doesn’t go behind my back and try to intimidate or threaten Taeyeon again.”

“I don’t think he’ll do that.”

“It’s Daddy. You’ll never know.”

“That last talk he had with Taeyeon pretty much shut him up though.” Tiffany’s mother chuckled.

“What last talk?”

“Oh? You didn’t know? Taeyeon didn’t tell you?”

She shook her head.

“He went barging into her office the day after you left home.”

“What?! How dare he?!”

“Easy, Miyoung. I think this is why Taeyeon didn’t tell you.”

She sighed. “What did Taeyeon say then?”

“I’m not sure. He only told me that that girl is too old for her age. Then he mumbled something about his stubborn daughter choosing a path or something.” She smiled. “Whatever talk it was, it had pretty much sealed the deal. Just have to wait until his big ego is deflated enough to finally admit it.”

She gently fixed her daughter's bangs. "He loves you too much. He'll turn around soon." She observed her daughter. "And I know you love him too. You two are just too alike, too stubborn to admit how much you love and miss each other. Isn't that why you're still working with him?"

Tiffany said nothing.

"I'll try and get him to come here with me this weekend. I'll lure him with chess." She laughed. "It's so sad to see him trying to play with Ahjussi and win after three or four moves. He couldn't even boast about it. He said he'd rather play alone."

Tiffany smiled.

The bedroom door opened and a freshly showered Taeyeon walked out. "Sorry to have kept you waiting, Mrs. Hwang. Do you want anything to drink? Eat? I think we still have some of Ahjumma's mysterious cake though I forgot which version."

"It's fine, Taeyeon-ah. I'm good."

"Oh okay then. Fany-ah, want something?" She went into the kitchen.

"I'm good." Tiffany shouted back.

"She's a good kid."

"Too considerate and too neat sometimes," Tiffany laughed. "I had never expected her to be so ahjumma-ish."

"Who are you calling ahjumma-ish?" Taeyeon sat down on the chair.

"You."

Taeyeon shrugged. "Nothing new there."

"Taeyeon-ah."

"Yes, Mrs. Hwang?"

"Do you mind if I bring Mr. Hwang over this weekend?"

"Of course not! You know that both of you are always welcome here." She then paused. "Unless Fany..."

"Oh I've told her, she's fine with it."

Tiffany shrugged. "Parents. Can't stop them anyway."

Mrs. Hwang smiled. "I'll tell him that you're ready for a rematch."

Taeyeon laughed. "Sure thing, Mrs. Hwang. I might even let him win if that helps."

"No. Please don't. We'll never hear the end of it!" Tiffany said.

The other two laughed.

"Well, we'll see. I'll use my special method to get him here." The woman stood up. "I better get going now. It's kinda late." She then hugged her daughter. "Be nice to your father, okay? He's trying."

Tiffany just nodded.

The woman then moved to hug Taeyeon. "I'll see you this weekend."

"See you, Mrs. Hwang."

They were left alone in the living room a few minutes later.

"I have a question."

"What?" Taeyeon put down her glass and reached for the remote.

"What did you tell Daddy that day?"

"What day?" She was busy trying to find the right channel.

"The day after I left home, when he barged into your office."

She turned to look at the other girl. "Who told you that?"

“Mommy.”

“Oh.” She went back to her channel search. “Nothing unusual. Just, you know, that I don’t care and I won’t change my mind about stealing his daughter away.” She grinned.

“I’m serious, Taeyeon-ah.”

“So am I. That’s the gist, basically.”

“Then why did he say that you’re too old for your age? And Mommy said he mumbled something about choosing a path.”

Taeyeon laughed. “Really? So now everyone thinks I’m an ahjumma? Whatever happened to my tough image?” She sighed dramatically.

“Come on, Taeyeon.” Tiffany took the remote from the girl’s hand. “I’m serious.”

“Okay okay.” She grabbed the remote back and turned the TV off. “I just told him that I love you and I will take good care of you and that he should just accept whatever you decide for your life.”

Tiffany raised her eyebrows. She was still unconvinced. “That’s it?”

“Pretty much.” Taeyeon tried to remember. “Oh and I think that I also promised him that I will back off and disappear as soon as you decide that you’re sick of me.” She grinned.

“Oh? Now that’s interesting.” Tiffany smirked.

“How is that interesting?”

“So every time I decide that I’m sick of all your ahjumma nagging, all I have to do is tell you and you’ll back off and leave me alone?”

“What a way to misinterpret my words there, Miyoung.” She emphasized her Korean name. “You even managed to insert an insult.”

“What? Isn’t that what *you* said?”

Taeyeon sighed. “I’m tired. I’m not in the mood for games.” She stood up and stretched. “Let me know when your age has caught up.” She strolled into the bedroom.

“Hey! I’m not done with you!” Tiffany stomped into the room to see Taeyeon getting into bed – slipping under the covers.

“Kim Taeyeon!” She threw herself onto the mattress, shaking the whole bed.

“Yah! What are you? Eight?”

“And what are you? Eighty?”

Taeyeon sighed. “I’m tired.”

“Ahjumma.” Tiffany slapped Taeyeon’s thigh but got no reaction from Taeyeon who had closed her eyes and put an arm over them.

“You just came from noraebang while I had to sit through a three-hour meeting, listening to Daddy yapping about some numbers he didn’t like and to that old boring bald guy ranting about some old-fashioned ridiculous business plan... and *you’re* tired?!”

Taeyeon didn’t move.

“Fine. I guess I’ll just have to do this the hard way.”

Taeyeon peeked from under her arm and saw Tiffany roughly pulling the covers off her. “What are you doing?”

Tiffany smirked and straddled her. “You wanna do this the hard way? Well two can play at this game.”

“I’m not playing any game!” She took her arm off her face. “Get off, Fany-ah. I’m really tired.”

“Oh really?” Tiffany leaned forward – resting her elbows on the pillow; next to each side of Taeyeon’s face. Her fingers played with the blond strands. “Too tired for... this?” She kissed

Taeyeon gently, making sure that each kiss is a bit longer and a bit more intense than the one before. She felt Taeyeon's hands making their way around her lower back and mentally congratulated herself.

"I thought you're tired." She pulled back a little.

"Stop teasing me." Taeyeon lifted her head and Tiffany backed away – pushing herself up and off the girl under her.

"You're tired so go to sleep." She got off the bed to turn the bedroom lights off and walked out to check the front door and switch off the other lights in the house.

She returned to the bedroom to see the small bedside lamp on and Taeyeon sitting on the bed with her arms folded – sulking.

She had to laugh. "The eighty year old has morphed into a ten year old."

"I don't like you, Hwang Miyoung."

"Oh?" She climbed onto the bed and sat next to the sulking girl. "But you still love me, right?"

Taeyeon didn't move.

"Oh come on. Stop sulking." She pecked the pouting lips. "You're too cute when you look like that. What happened to your tough image?"

"Gone out the window that day you called me a puppy."

She laughed. "Not my fault you're so cute." She kissed her again. "Although I prefer the byuntae version."

Taeyeon suddenly grabbed Tiffany's arms and pushed her back onto the mattress. "Stop teasing me," she whispered in her ear and kissed the spot right under it.

Tiffany giggled. "That tickles." She was then silenced by another pair of lips.

"Taeyeon-ah."

Instead of a reply, she felt Taeyeon's fingers searching for the zipper of her hoodie and pulled it down.

"Taeyeon-ah, I thought you're tired."

"Your fault."

She heard the mumble and grinned. "Okay, my fault but you're tired and I have an early day tomorrow."

A groan and Taeyeon lifted her head. "Then why did you tease me like that?"

"Because it's fun?"

Taeyeon sighed and got off the grinning girl and went back to her side of the bed. "Fine. Whatever." She yanked the covers and pulled it over her head – turning away from Tiffany.

Tiffany laughed and reached to turn off the small lamp. She eased herself under the covers too and scooted over and slipped her arms around Taeyeon's waist – hugging her closely from behind. "I love you." She whispered in the blanket-covered ear and leaned her head on Taeyeon's back.

She felt Taeyeon taking a deep breath and pulling the covers off her head. The blond girl turned around to face her and draped an arm over her. She snuggled until her head had comfortably found its resting place under Taeyeon's chin.

"I love you too, you little tease." Taeyeon kissed the top of her head.

Tiffany grinned and pulled Taeyeon closer. "Good night, Taeyeon."

"Good night, Fany."

She closed her eyes. *I have done as you requested, Samchon, and I will make sure I keep at it for the rest of my life... for as long as she doesn't hate me.* She smiled and let the sound of Taeyeon's heartbeat and breathing lull her to sleep.



## EPILOGUE

“Jiseok-ah! Stop fooling around! You’ll burn the meat!”

“I won’t!” He poked the giggling boy’s tummy one more time before returning to his task. “You’re seriously worse than my mother, Noona! Ow!” He held the back of his head and turned to see his wife walking away.

“Thanks, Hyerin.” Taeyeon grinned from her seat.

“Most welcome, Unnie.”

“Here, let me help you.” Tiffany ran to the pregnant woman and took the heavy soda bottles from her hands.

“It’s fine, Unnie. Walking is more troublesome.” She sighed. “Oh wait. Make that sitting too.” She groaned as she tried to sit on one of the lawn chairs.

Tiffany laughed. “Just hang in there a little bit longer, Hyerin.”

Hyerin sighed and decided to just soothe herself with some food.

“Miyong-ah!” Tiffany turned to see her mother approaching them with a large bowl in one hand and a plate in the other. “Ahjumma made more salad and pudding.”

“I think I’m gonna explode before the day is over.”

“Unless that kid burns the meat...” Taeyeon suddenly appeared, making a swift move for the pudding.

“Hey! That’s for later!” Tiffany slapped Taeyeon’s hand away from the pudding.

“What? I can eat pudding whenever I want!”

“It’s dessert, Taeyeon. That’s eaten after the main course.”

“But Jiseok’s still not done with the meat yet!” Taeyeon protested. “Besides, Umma put it here so that means I can eat it.”

Mrs. Hwang chuckled and walked away, “I’m not getting involved in this.” She approached a young girl who was wiping her brother’s mouth clean.

“Sigh... your sweet tooth, Taeyeon-ah.”

“I can’t help it if I like sweet things.” She carefully scooped a slice of pudding onto a small plate. “I like you, don’t I?”

“What the-... that’s just... ugh...” Tiffany grimaced and shuddered. “No. Just... No.”

Taeyeon laughed and planted a quick kiss on Tiffany’s cheek before escaping with her precious pudding in hand.

Tiffany sighed and shook her head. She decided to carry the dirty dishes back into the kitchen on the way to the restroom.

She had just closed the door and switched off the light when she heard her father’s voice.

“Darn! I didn’t see that.”

She moved closer to the living room.

“I have to admit that this barbecue was a great idea, Taeyeon. This house hasn’t been this alive since Miyong’s twelfth birthday party.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“I thought that you have a lot more employees though.”

“Well, these are only the ones who have been with me the longest, Sir. They’re like family to me.”

“I see.” A pause. “Well, your family’s my family, I guess.”

Tiffany was surprised to hear that. After almost two years, she hadn't once heard her father refer to Taeyeon as family – even though he had considerably warmed up to her. She smiled widely and decided to take a peek. As expected, she found the two people sitting at the small chess table.

“Why are you two cooped up in here while everyone's having fun outside?” She approached them.

“Who says we're not having fun?” Taeyeon asked as she moved her chess piece. “We're trying out a new game.”

“Oh? What game?” She saw her father finishing his turn.

“No thinking. Just move as quickly as possible.” Taeyeon made another move and grimaced as soon as she placed her piece on the board.

“Ha!” He happily took Taeyeon's piece off the board. “Bad move there, Taeyeon.”

“Go away, Fany. You're distracting me.”

“In that case, stay, Miyoung. Ask her questions.”

Tiffany grinned. “I'll just leave you two to it.”

Neither player answered as their hands moved swiftly across the board.

Tiffany walked out of the room but stopped to eavesdrop from the hallway.

“Thank you for letting me install the jungle jim and the swings, Sir.”

“Don't mention it. The backyard's empty anyway. Plus, the kids seem to love it.”

“Yeah. Seowoo's nephew is one active boy. I think Seowoo's glad that his niece is there to help care for her dongsaeng. That boy would be too much for him and his old mother to handle.”

“Where are their parents?”

“Divorced. I think Seowoo's brother is somewhere in China, working on who knows what. Not sure where his ex-sister-in-law is.”

“I see.”

A pause.

“You're a good kid, Taeyeon-ah, to take them in like this...”

“Thank you but it's nothing, Sir. Everyone deserves a second chance. Right? I'm just paying it forward.”

A chuckle. “Right.” Another pause. “AHA! Check mate, Taeyeon-ah! Oh yeah!”

A groan. “How did that happen?”

“Now I know how to beat you. We need to play this fast version more often! Ha! I've finally beaten you! You need to speed up your thinking, Taeyeon.” A hearty laugh. “I'm going to announce this wonderful news to my wife.”

Tiffany quickly walked back into the room, pretending that she was returning to say something. “Tae-...”

“Miyoung-ah! I won!” The man pointed at the board happily. “Look! Check mate! I beat Taeyeon!”

She couldn't help but laugh. “Congratulations, Daddy.”

“I'm going to tell your mother the good news! Ha! And she said I'd never beat Taeyeon. Psh... how wrong she is.” He happily and quickly made his way out of the living room to find his wife. “Honey!”

Tiffany turned to the smiling Taeyeon. “You let him win, didn't you?”

Taeyeon shrugged. “Let the man have his fun.”

She approached Taeyeon and sat on her lap – putting her arms around Taeyeon's neck. “Thanks.” She pecked her lips.

“For what?” Taeyeon gently wrapped her arms around Tiffany’s waist.

“For letting him have his fun.”

Taeyeon grinned. “He called me family.”

“I heard.” She laughed. “And I’m glad.”

Taeyeon kissed her. “Thank you for giving me a family.”

“You deserve it.” She brushed the soft cheek with her thumb. “I love you.”

Taeyeon grinned. “I love you too.” She suddenly remembered something. “Is the food ready yet? I’m hungry.”

Tiffany laughed. “I don’t know. Let’s go find out.” She stood up and took hold of Taeyeon’s hand – pulling her out of the living room towards the backyard.

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“Bye! Drive carefully, Seok-ah!” Tiffany waved to the couple who were waving back from inside the car.

“Don’t worry, Noona! I’ll see you around!” He started to drive away.

“Thanks again, Mr. and Mrs. Hwang.” Hyerin poked her head out of the open window and waved one last time.

“Be careful, Hyerin!” Mrs. Hwang warned.

The young lady smiled and gave a thumbs-up before disappearing into the moving vehicle.

“Well, that’s the last of the crazy bunch.” Taeyeon turned to the parents and bowed. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

“Come on, stop the bowing already,” the woman patted her back. “Our house is your house, remember? Besides it’s fun! Can we do this every summer?”

Taeyeon laughed. “Anytime you want, Umma.”

“Good. At least one more time before summer’s over, okay? And you can invite more next time, Taeyeon.”

She nodded. “Okay.”

“I need to lie down.” The man walked back inside. “I don’t feel well all of a sudden.”

“That’s what you get for going crazy with the meat like that, Daddy. I’ll tell Ahjumma to cut you off meat for the rest of the week.”

“What?!”

“For your own good, dear. Think of your health.” His wife added.

He deflated a little. “Fine. Psh... Women...” He grumbled and made his way up the stairs.

“You two want to spend the night?” Mrs. Hwang turned to look at Tiffany then Taeyeon.

“We’ll see.” Tiffany said.

“Okay, let me know when you’re leaving.” She smiled and walked away – following her husband.

“I smell like burnt meat.” Taeyeon sniffed her clothes. “I wanna take a shower and get out of these clothes.”

“Come on then.” Tiffany tugged the hand in hers and they both went up to her old room.

“Don’t fall asleep while you wait. You’re stinky.” Taeyeon said as she made her way into the bathroom.

“Thank you for the kind words.” Tiffany threw herself on the bed. “Go shower! Hurry!”

A sigh before the bathroom door closed.

She stared at the discolored star-shaped stickers on her ceiling and took a deep breath, smiling to herself. She felt relieved and happy. *No more drama. I have everything I could possibly need.* Her

mind replayed some of the moments of that day and her smile grew as she remembered her father's words. *I guess we are a family now.* She felt her eyelids growing heavier by the second and was about to doze off when a cold hand touched her cheek. She jumped. "Yah!" And saw Taeyeon laughing – one hand still drying her hair with a towel.

"I told you not to fall asleep while you wait. Go! Shower!" She pulled Tiffany up by the hand.

Tiffany groaned. "Fine." She sat up and noticed that Taeyeon was clad in a bathrobe. "I hope you're not wearing anything under that." She smirked.

"And you called me byuntae?" Taeyeon laughed. "Not gonna happen, Miss Hwang. You're sticky and stinky." She pulled Tiffany again, forcing her to get off the bed.

"Fine. Always a killjoy." Tiffany sulked and lazily made her way to the bathroom.

Taeyeon sat down. "At least I'm not a tease!" Taeyeon said before she heard the door slam shut. She laughed.

She was still drying her hair when her phone beeped. She stood up and grabbed the device from the table. She clicked the incoming message.

"Thanks for today, Noona! We had fun. Even the little devil is so full that he's now taking a bath without protest. That's historical! Thanks, Noona."

She chuckled and replied. "You're welcome, Seowoo. The Hwangs said that they want to do this again before summer is over. Make sure you come, okay?"

"You bet, Noona! Send them my thanks, please."

"Will do."

She lay back down on the mattress and sighed contently. *I have a family now, Samchon, Appa. Thank you.*

She was about to check for other messages when her eyes fell on the video folder icon. She smiled and clicked it open. She had finally upgraded her phone after endless nagging from Tiffany and made sure that all the videos were safely transferred to the new device.

She browsed through the list and clicked on a video.

"Psstt... Taeyeon-ah..." The screen showed dark and blurry shots of Tiffany. "Wanna see how scary yet boring Daddy is during a meeting?" Tiffany whispered and snickered before the camera shook and rustled.

It then showed Mr. Hwang sitting at the end of what looked like a long table. His hands were flipping through some papers and he was talking sternly about how disappointing something was.

"See? Now he has been doing this for the past twenty minutes. I am so bored." Another whisper came and something white blocked the view. Taeyeon assumed that Tiffany was covering the camera with some papers.

"Oh and you'll love this. Old Professor Choi's wig has nothing on this. Watch..."

The camera rustled again, shaking roughly until an image of a bald old man with a very strange looking comb-over hair appeared on the screen.

Taeyeon laughed. No matter how often she had seen this video, that man always made her laugh.

"I should apologize to Professor Choi. His ugly wig was a million times better than this failed attempt of covering a soccer field with what now... two, three little leaves of grass?" Tiffany snickered and Taeyeon laughed. "Well, I better turn this off now before Daddy finds out and kills me."

Some more shaking and rustling before the camera returned to a quick shot of Tiffany's face. "Bye bye. Love you." A grin and the video ended.

She grinned. She liked how Tiffany sent her random pictures and videos when she was bored. She clicked another one.

It showed herself sleeping accompanied by Tiffany's snickers and whisper. "See how cute you look when you're sleeping?" The camera zoomed in on her face.

"Do not film me when I'm sleeping."

The camera shook and fell on the mattress. The screen went dark.

"Yah! I thought you're sleeping!"

"I was. Until someone started snickering and shaking the bed." Some muffled arguing and rustling before half of her sleepy and unhappy face filled the screen. "Yah! Are you using my phone?"

A laugh. "Yes." The camera zoomed out to show her rubbing her eyes and sulking. "I just want to show you how cute you look when you're sleeping."

"Give me that." A hand covered the camera and some more noisy and shaky images filled the screen before it showed Tiffany pulling the covers over her head.

"Don't!"

"What? You filmed me when I was asleep but refuse to show your bed hair? So unfair, Fany-ah!" A hand reached for the covers and pulled.

"Fine!" She let the covers slid off her head. "Happy now?"

The sound of Taeyeon's laugh echoed from the video as she zoomed in on a very messy looking Tiffany. "Rocker Hwang!"

"Shut up." Tiffany grabbed the camera.

"Hey!"

More noises and violent shaking before it stopped on a view of the ceiling.

"Now where is my phon-mmph?"

Kissing sounds could be faintly heard before a hand grabbed the device. "At least turn the video off first, Fan-..."

It ended.

Taeyeon grinned at the memory of what happened after that.

"What are you doing?" The bed shifted as Tiffany took her seat.

The voice startled her and she dropped her phone on her chin. "Ow!"

Tiffany laughed. "Ouch. Sorry." She gently rubbed Taeyeon's chin.

"You're going to pay if I get a bruise."

"Oh don't be such a baby. You'll survive." She let go of the chin with a light pinch.

Taeyeon sat up. "That's quick?"

"Don't want to keep you waiting for too long." She was drying her hair furiously with the towel.

"Reallly? Why is that?" Taeyeon smirked.

"You owe me."

"Owe you what?"

"An answer."

"To what question?"

"What are you wearing under that robe?" She dropped her towel on the floor.

Taeyeon laughed. "Wow, someone's very straightforward today."

"Fine. I'll just go see for myself." Tiffany reached for the knot on Taeyeon's waist but a hand grabbed hers before she could pull it loose.

"Who says I'm letting you?" Taeyeon smirked.

“Playing hard to get is totally not recommended right now, Taeyeon.”

“It’s not fun being teased, is it?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.” She pulled her hand away and undid the knot of her own robe.

Taeyeon’s smirk immediately faded, replaced with wide eyes and a loud gulp.

Tiffany grinned. “Now then.” She held the edges of her robe, keeping them closed. “What do you think I’m wearing under this?”

“Uh-...” Another gulp. “I’m hoping... nothing?”

Tiffany shrugged and retied the knot firmly. “Guess you’ll never know.” She stood up and bent down to pick up the wet towel from the floor, making sure that Taeyeon got a quick glimpse of her backside while she did so.

“That’s it. I can’t take this anymore.” Taeyeon grabbed Tiffany by the waist and pulled her back onto the bed, straddling her and pulling at the knot.

Tiffany laughed. “You know you can’t win against me.”

“Then let me reward you for your victory.” She tugged at the knot one last time and leaned forward to kiss the laughing girl, feeling Tiffany’s hands trying to untie her robe.

“Wait. Did you lock the door?” Tiffany asked between kisses.

“Don’t know, don’t care.”

“Taeyeon-ah.”

“They will knock first.”

“What if they come in before we could stop them?”

She sighed and pulled away. “Fine, I’ll check.” She got off the bed and rushed to lock the door before running back and jumping onto the bed.

Tiffany giggled as she felt Taeyeon’s lips making their way down to her shoulder. “Taeyeon-ah.”

“Hmm?”

She lifted Taeyeon’s face with her hands and looked into her eyes. “I love you.” She smiled.

Taeyeon returned the smile. “I love you too.” And gave her a kiss. “I love you very very much.”

“Me too.”

Taeyeon leaned her forehead on Tiffany’s and took a deep breath. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Everything. For listening to Samchon’s request, for taking care of me, for giving me a family.”

“My pleasure. You’re never alone, Taeyeon-ah.”

“I know.” She kissed her. “And I have you now.”

“Forever.”

They smiled.

“Yes, forever.”