

Learning a New Language

Part 1

I stopped outside of his door, contemplating on whether I should accept his open invitation or not. I knew he wouldn't mind, but I still felt like I would be intruding. After all, wasn't it supposed to be his time to catch up on work or something? What did he even do this early? I glanced around my surroundings and took note of the hallway that looked too eerie when it wasn't filled with bustling students.

Shaking my head, I raised my hand and knocked on his door, rationalizing that if he didn't want me there then he wouldn't have offered in the first place.

"Taeyeon?"

I smiled shyly. "Morning, Mr. Hwang."

It took him a few seconds to get over his initial shock. "Ah, sorry, come in. I was just prepping for my morning class," he smiled, eyes disappearing into crescents, and he stepped aside to let me in. I wasn't used to hearing him speak Korean. Even outside of class, he would always insist on speaking English if we came by his room to have lunch or to ask him a question. He told us it was good practice—and it was. I learned more English outside of class than I did in it.

"So, finally decided to drop by in the morning, huh?" he grinned, smoothing out the crinkles in his blue dress shirt.

Walking past all the empty seats in the front, I settled into my usual seat near the back of the room and replied, "Thought it'd be a nice change of scenery. Plus, the library's always cold, and there are too many people in there anyway."

He nodded and took a sip of what I could only assume was coffee before muttering something under his breath that I couldn't quite catch. "You kids study too much," he sighed. "Well, I usually get here an hour early anyway, so you're always welcome to hang out here instead."

He had slipped back into English, and I could only catch a few words. Luckily, it was enough for me to get the gist of what he was saying. Mr. Hwang was one of my favorite teachers. He had this way of making me feel comfortable around him, even when speaking in a language I barely knew. He talked to me like we had known each other for years, and as weird as it may sound, he made me feel special—like I actually mattered.

"Thanks," I grinned. He was always in one of those infectious good moods. I think that was one of the reasons why I liked sitting in his classroom so much.

He continued to make conversation with me for the rest of the hour. I didn't get half as much studying done as I would've if I had chosen to just study in the library, but my steps began to feel a little lighter that day.

By the end of the week, I realized that he had offered more than just a quiet place for me to study or catch up on sleep—he had offered his company, and surprisingly enough, I found myself enjoying our light conversations more than I did catching up on well-needed rest.

The rest of that school year, I always came to his class in the morning, and we would always talk about the most trivial things. Most of the time, the topic would revolve around school, or he'd say something in English that I didn't know and he'd spend at least twenty minutes getting carried away and teaching me more. That was another thing I liked about Mr. Hwang; he was so passionate about almost everything he did, and it made listening to him talk that much more enjoyable. Between the two of us, he definitely talked a lot more—not that I minded much. I never really had much to say anyway. Even after the year was over and he was no longer my teacher, I still stopped by his room every morning.

He liked to talk about his family a lot. He had a son and two daughters, and apparently one of them was the same age as me. He'd always brag about them and tell me how they were doing. His son was studying somewhere in the States, his oldest daughter was already settled down somewhere in California, and his youngest—if I were to quote him exactly—was involved in so many extracurriculars it made his head spin. What I could tell from his ramblings about his kids, Stephanie—the youngest and the one that was the same age as me—was definitely the most troublesome.

But, he never once talked about his wife. I never wanted to ask because it was obvious that it was a sensitive topic. We had gotten along fairly well—more so than I ever thought I could get with a teacher—but I wasn't sure if I could even call him a friend. What exactly were we? I didn't know, but I *did* know that our relationship wasn't anywhere close to the point where I could ask him about something so personal.

It turns out, I didn't have to.

"Taeyeon-ah," he called out one day, "I'm not going to be here tomorrow, so don't come by tomorrow."

I looked up, surprised. He was always here. It was like the guy never got sick or something. "Oh, why not?" I asked him curiously.

His jaw tightened and I could've sworn I saw his eyes get a little teary. It made me wish I hadn't asked and just left it alone.

"Mr. Hwang, I—"

"My wife died."

It was the quietest I had ever heard him speak, and it was the most somber I had ever seen him look.

“She died—two years ago, actually,” he smiled sadly, “Well, almost two years ago. It’ll be two years tomorrow.”

“I’m sorry.”

I didn’t know what else to say.

He cleared his throat and shook his head. “Don’t be,” he told me. He stared at me for a couple minutes, and I shifted uncomfortably under his melancholic gaze.

“Um, Mr. Hwang?”

He opened and closed his mouth several times, trying to figure out what to say next. It was odd to see your favorite teacher at such a loss for words. “Can I...can I ask you for a favor?”

I knew he was serious because he had slipped into Korean. I nodded, “Of course. What is it?”

“Would you be willing to listen to me?”

I was confused for a few seconds. Hadn’t that been what I did every time I went to go see him? But then I saw the pleading look he gave me; he wanted to talk about his wife.

“It’s been a while since I’ve talked about her,” his voice wavered, “My kids...I can’t speak about her in front of them, especially my girls. They just...they look so much like her.”

It was hard for me to watch him break down so willingly in front of me. For some reason, he trusted me, and it was then I realized that I cared about him more than just as a favorite teacher. To have so much trust in me for him to speak about something so personal, he deserved more than just that title from me.

“You can tell me whatever you like,” I spoke softly, feeling like my voice disturbed the silence too much.

He told me all kinds of stories about her, ranging from how they met, to when they got married, and to dealing with their three children. There was a different kind of light in his eyes, and I wondered how much brighter they would’ve been if this conversation had taken place two years ago.

“It happened a few months before we moved to Seoul. Me and her had gotten into this huge argument about whether or not I should accept this teaching job. She...she wanted me to take it. I wanted to stay. So when it happened, I decided to move here. For her.”

I tried to hide my shock. He always seemed so happy when I saw him. I couldn’t imagine him not wanting to be here.

“Don’t get me wrong Taeyeon,” he quickly got defensive. I guessed that he took the expression I had on the wrong way. “I’m happy that I’m here now. I mean, I got to meet so many wonderful students, including yourself.” I made a mental note that he only said *students*. Did he not get along with the other teachers?

“It’s okay, Mr. Hwang. You don’t have to justify your decision with me,” I reassured him, “I get it.”

He smiled and took a breath before continuing. “Michelle was already settled down, and Leo only had a year left before he graduated high school, so I let him stay with a close family friend. Stephanie was the only one that came with me. She’s actually the one that convinced me to come. I think she wanted the move more than I did—which is funny because the whole reason I wanted to stay was because of her. I didn’t want her to leave all her friends...I didn’t want her *here*. Michelle and Leo would’ve been fine...but not her. And I think...I think if her mother knew what I knew then she wouldn’t have pushed me to take this job so much.”

That was where I had lost him. I wasn’t sure what he had meant. What would’ve been so wrong with one of his daughters living here in Seoul? What was so different about Stephanie that would’ve given her trouble here?

“If Stephanie knew herself what I knew then she wouldn’t have pushed me so much either,” he muttered.

I tilted my head to the right in confusion. “What’s so wrong with her living here?” I asked, my curiosity getting the better of me.

He blinked and looked at me as if he just noticed that I was sitting there. “Oh no, I didn’t mean it like that!” his voice rose and startled me, “I just mean, Stephanie...she...she...”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to tell me,” I told him when I saw that he couldn’t bring himself to finish his sentence.

I listened to the clock tick for five minutes before his sigh broke the silence. “Thank you, Taeyeon.”

“For what?”

He chuckled. “For listening to me. What else?”

It never once crossed my mind that he found comfort in our conversations as well. Just as much as I enjoyed listening to him, he enjoyed having someone listen; just as much as I enjoyed his company, he enjoyed mine.

I smiled at him. “Mr. Hwang...are we friends?”

He raised his eyebrows, amused. “Well...yes, I believe we are.”

“Then I hate to use such a cliché line, but,” I grinned and slipped into English, “what are friends for?”

I was disappointed when I heard he wasn’t going to be able to be there for my graduation. Apparently, his daughter’s graduation was the same day. I understood, of course, but the disappointment was still there.

I had no idea where I wanted to go or what I wanted to do. The future was a topic I always tried to avoid because I didn’t like feeling so lost. I opted to go to a university nearby. My mom wasn’t happy because she thought I could do better, but she pretended to be happy for me anyway. Just like how I pretended not to hear her talk about how much of a disappointment I was to her sisters.

My brother understood though, and my sister was just happy to spend some time with me. I was happy to have them, at least.

There was always this weird tension with my parents, and I knew that part of it had to do with the fact that we never really talked. I couldn’t remember that last time I had sat down with them and told them about my day or how school was going for me. Communication was never really our strong point. For some reason, I never really felt obligated to make that extra effort to get along with them. I was thankful for all that they had done, of course, but I just didn’t feel all that connected with them. It made me feel guilty. Why couldn’t I put in that extra effort? Hadn’t they deserved at least that?

I never told anyone about how I felt towards my parents because I feared that most would look down on me and consider me an ungrateful child. Disrespectful, a disgrace to my family...I could already hear it.

After high school, I realized just how lonely I really was. I would go to class mindlessly and go home and lock myself in my room. I got so depressed that I even stopped talking to Hayeon, who had a knack for barging into my room when I was in a bad mood. Though, I suppose that being in a bad mood ninety percent of the time didn’t help much.

“Unnie!” she ran in yelling one day. I was lying on my bed, trying to nap before getting started on the mountain of homework I had.

“Whatever it is, I’m tired.”

“But...”

“Just leave Hayeon.”

She walked out dejectedly, and a few minutes later Jiwoong replaced her.

“Taeyeon-ah,” he said sternly.

I turned around so I was lying face down and groaned into my pillow. “What do you want, oppa?”

I heard him sigh and felt the bed sink down. “You’re scaring Hayeon. She came to me crying saying that you didn’t like her anymore.”

The guilt finally set in and I let out a muffled sigh. “I’ll go apologize,” I mumbled. I felt him rubbing comforting circles on my back and I relaxed a little. It wasn’t until then that I wondered how long had it been since I talked to him.

It was sad that I lived with them and I could still go days without seeing them.

“Taeyeon-ah,” he whispered soothingly, “what’s up with you lately?”

I wanted to cry because I didn’t know what was wrong. I just felt so lonely all the time and I wasn’t sure how to fix it. “It’s just school getting to me oppa. Don’t worry about me. I just need some more time to adjust.”

“I’m just worried about you, you know? Hell, even Hayeon knows something is wrong with you and she’s barely eight!” He paused and I knew what was coming next. “Mom and dad are worried too.” His hand fell off my back. “I know you and them are all...weird, but they still care.”

I turned around and seeing his concerned face only made me feel more guilty. I wished I could fix myself so they would stop worrying so much. Especially Hayeon. She didn’t need this. “I know, I know. I’m trying, okay? But...” I looked away and stared at the ceiling, “I’m just so lonely, you know? Even when I’m around my old friends I still feel so lonely.”

Part of me hoped that when I looked back at him he would have this look of understanding and say that he felt the same at one point, but when I did, he looked more scared than anything. That knot in the pit of my stomach, the one laced with dread and anxiety and fear, only tightened. “Taeyeon-ah...we’re here for you. There’s no need to feel lonely. We’re here, your friends are here.”

I shot up in bed, angry. “You don’t understand!” I yelled. I didn’t care if our parents heard, but I immediately quieted down when I thought of Hayeon. “I *know* that. I *know* that you guys are here, I *know* that my friends are here, but I *still* feel this way. I just can’t help it, okay? I’m just...just leave me alone, oppa.”

He didn’t leave. “I think you should talk to mom and dad about this.”

I scoffed, growing even angrier, and stood up. I paced back and forth in front of him, not missing the frustration on his face. “If *you* can’t understand, then what makes you think *they* will?”

“Hey, they’re more understanding than you think,” he tried to reason with me.

“Easy for you to say,” I rolled my eyes, stopping in front of him.

He furrowed his eyebrows and glared at me. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means they treat you differently. And before you go on to say that just because we’re treated differently it doesn’t mean they love me any less. I already know that. I know they love me, okay? The bottom line is, you’re the only son and you’re the eldest. They treat you like you can’t do anything wrong! Everything I do, they compare to *you*. Because apparently we’re close enough in age for me to do just as well as you. And don’t even get me *started* how differently they treat me just because I’m a girl.”

I ran my hands through my hair and let out a frustrated sigh. He was looking at his lap and remained quiet.

“Go talk to Hayeon,” was the only thing he said to me before he stood up and left the room.

I shook my head and decided to listen to him for once. I didn’t think I could stand not being on speaking terms with my entire family. My parents were sitting out in the living room when I walked out. My mom made eye contact with me, but neither of us said anything to each other and before I knew it, she looked away.

I knocked once before walking into Hayeon’s room.

“Hayeon-ah?” I called out softly. I knew she was still scared of me. There wasn’t a response, but I saw her curled up in bed, sniffing. “Are you okay?”

“Are you going to yell at me too?”

“What do you mean?” I walked over and sat on her bed with her.

“I heard you yelling at oppa.”

The guilt increased ten-fold. “Oh gosh, Hayeon-ah,” I pulled her into a hug, “That was just a misunderstanding, okay?” I felt her nod against my shoulder. “And I don’t hate you, okay? I’m just...having a hard time right now. But I don’t hate you. I would never.”

I felt her nod again and we stayed like that for a while.

“Unnie.”

“Hm?”

“You don’t look happy anymore.”

I frowned and she pulled away.

“I just want you to be happy again.”

I went to go visit Mr. Hwang as often as I could. My visits averaged to about once a week. I would talk a little more now, since we usually had a lot to catch up on now that we didn't see each other every day. He asked me about school a lot, curious about how I was doing and if I was keeping up. I never really told him outright that I never really made any friends, but I knew he knew anyway. I guessed it was implied in what I had told him.

We started to talk about more personal things. Stuff like how I was dealing with being away from all my old friends and how I felt like my parents were disappointed in me. He talked about his kids a lot. It made me wonder if he had anything else to talk about.

He told me that one of his kids, Leo, was dealing with depression. I asked what that was when he told me; the word in English was unfamiliar to me. When he described it, it sounded a lot like me. I think he knew that I could relate because there was always this look in his eyes that told me that I should be listening carefully to him whenever he talked about it.

It was all completely new to me. I wasn't used to things like depression being talking about so openly.

“I was so caught up with dealing with my own stuff when she died that I didn't see how hard he, or any of my kids were taking it. I didn't even know he was depressed until after I left, and it kills me that I wasn't there. Part of me wishes that I stayed or that he would've came with me... I must have called him every night after I found out for almost six months, just to make sure he was still there.”

I wondered how my own parents would react if I told them I was depressed. Sad to say, but I didn't think I knew them well enough to be able to guess their reactions accurately enough.

“The family that he was staying with kept me pretty updated though. He got better, and despite how he kept telling me that I was calling too much, they all said he secretly loved my phone calls.”

“Mr. Hwang, you're a really good father.”

The words left my mouth before I knew it, and he smiled softly at me. Thoughts of my own father were brief as I silently wished that I had a father like Mr. Hwang.

“If you don't mind me asking, how's your relationship with your parents?”

I wasn't sure how to tell him that it was practically nonexistent.

“I take it you aren’t on good terms with them?”

I hesitated before deciding to nod. “It’s not like they yell at me or hit me or anything...”

He stopped me. “It’s okay. Tell me when you’re ready.”

I let out a sigh of relief and he skillfully changed the topic.

A few more visits and we had broached the possibility of me studying abroad. He told me that he thought it’d be good for me to get away. The more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea of being away. I’d miss certain people, like Hayeon and Jiwoong oppa and Mr. Hwang, but I knew they’d understand. I couldn’t stay, they all knew that.

One day he handed me a stack of papers.

“It’s the same program Stephanie has been looking into. It’s a chance for you to study in California. I know money might be an issue, that’s why there are some scholarship offers in there too. If you play your cards right, I think you have a good chance.”

I leafed through the papers he gave me with my mouth wide open, shocked that he had gone through all this trouble for me.

“Mr. Hwang...I don’t...”

“We’ve talked about this before, and we both agreed that it’d be really good for you,” he smiled. “You’re a smart kid, you shouldn’t run into too many problems over there.”

I laughed. He was already talking about it as if I was going there for sure. When I finally agreed to give it a shot, he grinned and began grading papers again. He asked how I was doing, and I finally confessed to him that it had been really lonely since I graduated.

He was frowning when I told him I hadn’t made any friends, and he said something to me that day that I don’t think I’ll ever forget.

“You’re an amazing person, and people deserve to know that.”

He was too busy rearranging a few papers that had fallen off his desk previously to see that my eyes had teared up. An overwhelming amount of gratitude filled me up and was practically spilling out of me. He said it so simply, like he really believed it—as if it were a fact that I was indeed an amazing person. Just knowing that there was at least one person that thought so made me happy.

And for a second, I believed that I was an amazing person.

Part 2

My heart pounded erratically when I pulled out the stack of bills in the mailbox because on the very top was a letter addressed to me. I rushed back up the stairs towards my apartment, tripping and falling on the ninth step. Cursing, I stumbled to the top and hastily let myself in. Throwing the bills and junk mail on the table, I ran into my room and silently wished that there was a way to lock my bedroom door. It wasn't until I looked at my hands that I found out that I had accidentally crushed the letter in my hands.

I found it funny that I had rushed all the way there just to open the letter only to hesitate when I had the chance.

I thought about the two directions my life could go at that point, whether I had been accepted or not. If I ended up not being accepted, I felt like I would be slightly relieved. Because at least that way, nothing would change and I wouldn't have to adjust to an entirely new culture. At least that way, I wouldn't have to spend any time missing everything I would be leaving.

If I *was* accepted, then what? Wasn't change what I had always wanted? What would I really miss if I left?

Hayeon.

Jiwoong.

Mr. Hwang.

...My parents?

I shook my head. I already ran through every possible scenario I could think of in my head when I applied. There was no use thinking about them again.

Taking a deep breath, I ripped open the envelope.

The next few months were a bit of a blur to me. If you asked me what those months were like, all I could really tell you was that there was a crying Hayeon, a supportive Jiwoong, frustrated parents, and one very proud Mr. Hwang.

I could kind of remember telling my family about my acceptance. They were all shocked, and it was exactly the reaction I was expecting because I never told them that I had applied. They had no idea that I was even thinking about such a big decision. Jiwoong was definitely the most supportive. Hayeon couldn't really wrap her head around the idea that I was leaving. My parents' initial reaction was to laugh because apparently the thought of me living on my own was just too funny to them. They were hesitant to send me off so far, but when they realized that they couldn't change my mind they stopped trying to convince me not to go.

It was probably hard for them. After all, I was the first to leave the house. I wondered if it had hurt Jiwoong's pride a little bit. And then I wondered when it had become a house and stopped being a home.

There was only one moment that I remember very vividly—telling Mr. Hwang. He was actually the first person I told. Not my parents or Hayeon or Jiwoong or any of my friends that I barely kept in touch with.

I laughed at his excitement. It seemed like he was more excited than I was. He looked up from the paper, grinning at me. His eyes had lit up the moment I showed him the letter, and it wasn't until that very moment that I felt like I had accomplished something great, that I had done something worth doing. When he pulled me into a hug, I never felt more proud of myself. It finally felt like I was doing something right with my life, like I was going in the right direction.

I kept his words in mind as I got lost in the airport and was tempted to get on the next flight back to Seoul.

"I'm proud of you."

Jiwoong had said it to me before I left, and Hayeon told me she was happy that I finally looked happy again, but for some reason there was something different about the way Mr. Hwang had said such kind words to me. It was different when it came from someone you admired so much. I wasn't sure when I had started admiring him so much. He loved his kids so much, and it showed even when he talked about how troublesome they could be. I wondered if they knew how much he talked about them.

It wasn't like my parents didn't love me or they weren't proud of me. I knew they were, but it was always just something I sort of assumed just because they were my parents. They never really expressed it very much, and I could understand because I was the same way with expressing myself. When neither person was willing to be the first to reach out, it was a little hard to make a connection with each other. But we left each other on good terms, surprisingly. I hoped that maybe a little separation was what we needed to become closer to each other.

I suddenly missed my parents very much, more so because I missed the familiarity than anything else. All the English was overwhelming. I had prided myself on knowing so much English, but hearing the speedy conversations around me made me doubt my knowledge of the language and I suddenly felt inferior—like I didn't belong. It didn't help that all I could see around me were signs in English. It was like everything I had learned had flew straight out of my head and left me staring dumbly as I tried to find my room, forgetting everything that I was informed only moments earlier.

Then I saw a girl walking confidently in front of me. I got excited because I heard her speaking in Korean into her phone, and I unconsciously followed her, not knowing what else to do. Luckily, she was heading the same way I was supposed to be going and before I knew it, I was where I needed to be. I felt some of my confidence come back, and I made sure to stay close to

the Korean girl when a crowd had rushed by. It was easy because of all the pink the girl had. It was hard *not* to spot her.

I didn't notice that the girl I stayed close to the entire time had approached me as I momentarily looked away trying to remember my room number.

"Excuse me?"

I blinked and took a step back when I saw how close she had gotten to me. I assumed she noticed how uncomfortable I was because she smiled apologetically. "Um, yes?" I answered, feeling very conscious about my accent.

"Are you Taeyeon?" she asked cautiously, as if she were afraid she'd scare me away. The excess amount of pink was blinding me at that point.

I nodded dumbly and was slightly taken aback when she grinned. It was then I discerned that she was the probably polar opposite of me. It was just in the way she presented herself.

The nervousness quickly faded away when she spoke in Korean. "We're roommates," she held out a hand for me to shake.

"Tiffany Hwang, right?" I interrupted before she could introduce herself, silently hoping that I had remembered her name correctly. I was sure her last name was Hwang though because it reminded me of Mr. Hwang when I had first seen it.

Her grin grew even bigger. I took note of her pretty eyesmile. It was almost as blinding as her pink luggage. "Correct!" she chirped happily. I couldn't help but laugh at how enthusiastic she was.

We walked together to go find our room. She saved me the hassle of trying to remember the room number—207.

I remember walking in and letting Tiffany choose the bed she wanted. She took the one I was hoping she wouldn't take, but I shrugged it off and placed my stuff on the other bed. I looked around the room and smiled to myself.

It was extremely small, but I had never felt so free in my entire life.

I felt a little guilty because I didn't get homesick after the first month like a lot of others started to feel. It hit Tiffany real bad.

I was actually a little grateful for that because if it weren't for her feeling homesick then we would've never gotten so close. The first month was just filled with greetings here and there and

setting some basic rules. She'd always speak in Korean to me, and it was nice to have that little taste of my home country. I guessed that she did it for that same reason.

It wasn't until she started to have trouble sleeping that we had our first real conversation.

"Taeyeon?" she called out softly, as if she wasn't sure I was awake or not.

"Hm?" I answered, "What are you doing awake?"

I heard her shifting slightly on her bed. "I should be asking you the same question." She was looking in my direction. I could feel her eyes on me, burning a hole through my head—as if I was the solution for her sudden bout of insomnia.

"I'm always up this late," I told her, glancing at the time on my phone. 3:27 A.M.

"Really?" She sounded hopeful, and it made me wish I could lull her to sleep somehow.

"Yeah, I've always had a little trouble sleeping," I confessed, "It used to be worse, but lately I've been able to fall asleep around two or three."

"What about tonight, then?"

I turned so that I was looking at her too. "I heard you shuffling around. I'm a pretty light sleeper."

I could barely trace her features in the dark, but the exhaustion was evident. "I'm sorry," she replied guiltily.

"It's okay." There was a brief silence before I decided to speak up again. "Homesick?"

"Yeah, aren't you?"

"Not really," I paused and thought about *home*. "I mean, I miss a few people, and I miss knowing where the heck everything was," she laughed at that, "but honestly? I'm glad I'm not there anymore."

She hummed in understanding, and I was glad she decided not to probe any further. "What do you do when you can't sleep? You just lie there?"

I shook my head. "Sometimes I'll take sleeping pills, but I've never been a big fan of those. Most of the time I'll just get up and walk around, or I'll go out into the commons and catch up on homework or read or something." I sat up. "Do you want to go for a walk? It might help."

She sat up and smiled. "I'd like that."

Whenever she couldn't sleep, we'd go for a walk around the commons or we'd just talk until we fell asleep. I think it helped me too because I never felt as well rested on the mornings after the nights I'd be up alone compared to the nights I'd be up with her.

It was easy to open up to her. I wasn't sure if it was just her or the late night atmosphere that made me so unguarded. Maybe it was both.

"Hwang Miyoung?"

I could spot her red cheeks even in the dark. Cute. "Now you see why I never told you?"

"Well, I like it. Miyoung-ah." I liked teasing her. She was too adorable not to tease. "Can I call you that?"

She huffed. "Only when no one else is around, okay?"

I laughed and nodded in agreement. "Okay."

"You know, your English is really good."

"Not as good as yours," I laughed. "I always forget to ask, but you were born here, right? Then how is your Korean so good?"

"Yeah, I was born here in California. My parents would always speak in Korean to me, so that helped. I moved to Seoul my second year of high school, and that was when I *really* learned Korean."

"You lived in Seoul? Why have we never run into each other?" I frowned. If I had known Tiffany back in high school, would anything have turned out differently?

"Seoul's a pretty big place. It's no surprise that we didn't run into each other," she laughed. "So how is *your* English so good? It's a lot better than what I've heard back in Korea. Your pronunciation could use a bit of work, though."

I grinned sheepishly. Pronunciation had never been my strong point. "I had a really good teacher back in high school. Plus, I practiced a lot. It helped me keep my mind off of things."

"Well, why don't we work on your pronunciation then? Let's start speaking to each other in English."

I laughed. "Alright. I guess it wouldn't hurt."

“So, are you some type of music major or something?” she asked, pointing to the guitar case placed in the corner of the room. “I’ve seen that guitar lying around all the time, but I’ve never seen you play it.”

“That’s because you’re too much of a social butterfly to be here when I do,” I drawled. I chuckled at the pout on her face.

All of a sudden, she climbed out of bed and grabbed my guitar, sheepishly making her way over to my bed and holding it out to me. “I want to hear you play.”

I sat up and raised my eyebrows at her, a small smile on my lips. I hesitantly grabbed the guitar from her hands. “Now?” I questioned when she sat down across from me.

“Yes, *now*,” she mimicked my voice and impatiently tugged on my arm. “Hurry up and play something!”

I waved her hand away and laughed at her sudden childish behavior. “Hey, quiet down, you’re going to wake up everybody in the building.”

She only grinned at me and it took me a moment to get my head screwed back on. I cleared my throat, suddenly feeling very nervous in front of my audience. I played the first song that came to mind—a Korean song Jiwoong listened to a lot.

*I suddenly asked you one day
“Why do you like me so much?”
You answered
“Why are you curious?”
“I like you because of your smile.”
Suddenly, like a surging wave
You came into my heart
When you open your eyes
Like the rising sun
I’ll naturally be by your side*

I stopped and opened my eyes. I hadn’t even realized that I had closed them in the first place.

“You know, I didn’t ask you to sing...” she grinned.

“Oh, sorry,” I avoided her gaze, feeling my cheeks burn. “Must have been a force of habit or something, I don’t know.”

A hand on mine stopped me from blabbering any further. “Don’t be sorry. I really liked it,” she told me, her voice soft. I finally looked at her and was surprised when she looked dazed, her eyes glazed over mine. “You have a really pretty voice, Taeyeon.”

My cheeks burned even more. “Thanks,” I mumbled and put aside the guitar. It wasn’t that I wasn’t used to the compliments about my voice, but from her they were just different. “I’m not a music major, by the way. I’m a biology major.”

I’d never seen her eyes get any bigger. “Seriously?”

“Yeah,” I laughed. “Why is that so surprising?”

“I don’t know...you don’t seem like the type. And after hearing your voice...I just thought you’d have something to do with music, you know?”

I shrugged. “I never really thought about it.” It was true that there was a very special place in my heart for music, but I never once thought of pursuing it.

“Well, you should. I think you’d be really good at it.”

There was a very sincere look in her eyes and I smiled back at her. “You know what? I think I would be too.”

“So hey, I forgot to ask you the other night, but what’s your major?”

“Business.”

I propped myself up on my elbows. “Really?”

She chuckled. “Yup. Is that surprising?”

“Actually, no, not really. I can see you as, like, some big-shot CEO of some company bossing everybody around and forcing everyone to wear pink.”

“Hey!” she shouted and threw a pillow at me. I shushed her, hoping that she hadn’t woken anyone up.

“Well, I wouldn’t force everyone to wear pink...” she muttered to herself.

“I know, I know,” I laughed.

“You know, I actually thought about being a teacher once. Maybe teach English or something.”

I tried to imagine Tiffany as an English teacher—as *my* English teacher. “I think,” my voice cracked, “you’d be a very good teacher.” I wasn’t sure I’d learn much if she was.

“You think so?”

“Yeah. Probably break a bunch of poor little boys’ hearts, though,” I joked.

“What is *that* supposed to mean?”

“It means you’re gorgeous, Fany-ah,” I let slip out in Korean. I bit my tongue, mentally cursing myself when there was an awkward wave of silence that came over us.

I glanced at her bed and saw that she had shifted so that her back was turned to me, the covers pulled up to her chin. “You too, Taeyeon.”

Family was a taboo topic. The both of us seemed to have our own reasons to keep quiet about our respective families. I wondered if she had the same problems as I did, and I briefly wondered how long it had been since I talked to my parents. Only once, I realized, right after I got situated in my dorm. It had been nearly two months since then, and I’d be seeing them again in about two more months when the semester would end.

There was only one time we talked about family, and that was when we both silently agreed never to talk about it again.

“You’re not very close with your family, are you?”

It was the middle of a chilly October night, and I broke out into a sweat. “What makes you say that?” I asked quietly, hoping she didn’t hear the tremble in my voice.

“Because you’re not homesick. You don’t seem to miss them very much.”

She was looking at me, I could tell. Her eyes burned a hole through my head. “That’s not true. You just saw me talk to my brother and sister a week ago.”

She sighed before asking her next question. “And your parents?”

“It’s complicated.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

The conversation awkwardly ended there.

I don’t remember when—I had stopped counting the nights—but somewhere along the way she started sleeping in my bed even though it was barely big enough for one, even someone as small

as me. I didn't mind, and I was sure she didn't mind either. I wasn't even entirely sure how it happened. I couldn't seem to remember the moments that led up to the parts that I *could* remember.

I remember the feel of the bed sinking beneath our combined weight.

I remember her hesitation before she curled up next to me.

I remember her arms wrapped around my waist and how mine pulled her closer.

I remember how her body fit against mine and thinking about why she wore so little clothes to bed.

I remember her face buried in the crook of my neck and the brush of her lips against my skin.

I remember how our legs tangled together and how cold her feet were.

I remember how nice her hair smelled and wondering if she used some type of special shampoo.

I remember my heartbeat and hers and how they were both racing.

I remember it was cold, and then it wasn't.

It never once crossed my mind during that night, or any night, what the flips in my stomach could mean. I was too lost in the moment to realize that I wanted to keep holding her even when the night was over.

“How many people have you kissed, TaeTae?” she asked one night. She had taken a liking to calling me TaeTae after she walked in on a video call with Jiwoong and Hayeon and heard it.

“Three,” I answered. I didn't think much of her question. Tiffany had a knack for asking the most random things.

I tried to hold in a yawn. It was funny, I always wished I could fall asleep easily, and now that I could, I didn't want to. What was even weirder was that I could've sworn that Tiffany was sleepy too.

“Who were they to you? Boyfriends?”

I inhaled her scent, hoping she wouldn't notice. If she did, she didn't say anything. “No, not really,” I answered quietly, “The first guy happened in high school, and it was just because of some stupid bet with a couple friends. The other two happened the year before I came here. They were...well, I just thought they'd help me feel less lonely.”

“Did they?”

The answer was too easy. “No, not at all. No matter what I did with them...I still felt the same. It’s like, there was this hole at the bottom of a cup, you know? And anything that I tried to put in it went straight out the bottom—like nothing could ever fill it up.” I let out a deep breath and closed my eyes, burying my face into her hair. I didn’t want to sink back into old memories. I liked where I was then, in that moment. The past was never something I liked to think about at night, and with Tiffany there, I never did.

Her hand moved to hold mine resting on top of my stomach. She squeezed it lightly before asking, “Do you still feel like that?”

I had to think twice about my answer that time because it wasn’t until then that I realized that I wasn’t the same. “I...I’m not sure. I haven’t really thought about it ‘till now.”

“So, think about it a little more.” She shifted her head to look up at me. “How do you feel?”

“I feel,” I paused, “different.”

Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Good different?”

“I think so,” I whispered back. “I think I might even be a little happy. At least, I am right now.”

“And why do you think that is?” she asked, even quieter than she was before. I could’ve sworn she was inching closer to me, but my pounding heart distracted me from all else.

“I—I think it’s because of you,” I answered honestly.

She lifted herself up so that she was hovering above me. I was momentarily stunned by a sight that I’d seen multiple times before. She took my breath away every time, and I was too narrow-minded at the time to wrap my head around the reason why.

She rested her forehead on mine, and my breath hitched. She inched closer and closer and didn’t stop until our noses touched, and by then I was sure that I had stopped breathing completely.

I wanted her to kiss me.

I didn’t think about why, or what that could possibly mean about *me* or who I was. I just wanted her to kiss me, to feel her lips on mine and to stay like that forever, and I could’ve sworn she wanted the same thing.

But, instead, she closed her eyes and sighed before pulling away, resting her head on my chest.

“Goodnight, Taeyeon.”

I couldn't bring myself to mutter back a response. My mind was too bombarded with a million thoughts, all trying to bury the one thought I knew I shouldn't be thinking.

I wanted to kiss her.

"Daddy, do you think I should try to switch dorms?"

I froze outside our door. Tiffany didn't want to room with me anymore? I tried to think about what I had done to her. Nothing came to mind.

"I just don't know how much longer I can do this..."

I never told her, but there was something about her English that I loved. Her tone was so different when she spoke it.

"I really like her."

Was she talking about me? I felt bad for eavesdropping, but I couldn't help it. It didn't make sense to me though. If she liked me, then why did she want to switch?

The door opened as I was lost in my thoughts.

"You want to switch dorms?" I blurted it out before I even knew what I was saying.

She was angry. I had never seen her angry before. Quite honestly, it was a little frightening. I didn't like the thought of Tiffany being mad at me.

"You were eavesdropping?" she hissed.

From what I could tell, it wasn't just anger. She was scared—a look that I knew all too well. "I didn't mean to," I was surprised at how calm I was, "I was just about to come in and overheard you asking your dad if you should switch dorms."

"You still shouldn't have—"

"Did I do something wrong? Is that why you're switching?"

To be honest, I was a little scared too. I didn't want her to leave me.

"Taeyeon-ah," she sighed.

"Please don't leave."

I didn't mean to sound so desperate and hoped that she hadn't heard my quiet plea. The slight furrow of her eyebrows told me otherwise. I wasn't sure what she was feeling, though. All I knew at the point was that I wasn't the same when she wasn't by my side.

"Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere," she reassured me, "I promise."

I decided not to ask any questions, too scared of what the answers would've told me, and let it be.

There was a day when all the pieces had finally started to come together, and my confusion had begun to morph into fear. I sunk into a state of panic, not knowing what to do and suddenly wished I could talk to Mr. Hwang again because I was sure he would be the only one who could possibly understand.

Tiffany and I would always eat lunch together on Wednesdays because those were the only days that we were both free at the same time, but one day she told me she couldn't make it.

She had a date.

I thought about her eating lunch with some guy, probably touching his arm because Tiffany liked to do that, especially when she laughed. She liked to play with hair a lot too—at least, with mine she did. I felt nauseous when I imagined her running her hands through some guy's hair.

Suddenly, I wished we weren't sharing a bed. I didn't want her touching me anymore.

The image of her on a date couldn't seem to escape me, and I loathed myself. Partly for being unable to stop thinking of it, and partly for being so angry at the thought.

It crossed my mind for a brief second—that I might like her as more than a friend. But I brushed it off, because I wasn't *gay*. I didn't like girls, so of course it wasn't possible for me to like Tiffany—a *girl*. I even laughed at myself for thinking that I could, but the laugh came out more bitter than I thought it would.

I remember I almost burned my tongue with my coffee when I saw her on her *date*.

And it *definitely* wasn't what I thought it was.

Instead of the anger and jealousy I expected to feel, I was confused. Because, yes, Tiffany was sitting there and laughing and touching her date's arm just like I predicted.

Well, not *exactly* like I predicted, because next to her was not some *guy*.

It was some *girl*.

I tried to brush it off as them just being friends, but then she kissed her on the cheek and it didn't look like a friendly peck. She saw me staring, I knew she did. Neither one of us said or did anything when we made eye contact. I walked away, feeling the dread in the pit of my stomach start to take over.

"I thought you were on a date?" I asked when she had come back to our room.

She busied herself by making the bed she hadn't slept in for almost two weeks. "I was."

"But you were..."

She sighed and turned around to face me. "But I was what, Taeyeon?"

She tried to act like she was mad at me, but I knew better. She was scared, nervous, anxious—and so was I. "But you were with a girl."

Another sigh and she plopped down onto her bed. "She was my date."

"So, you were on a date...with a girl?"

"Is that a problem?" She was quick to get defensive, standing back up and crossing her arms.

"No!" I shouted quickly, shaking my head. "It's just, isn't that a little weird?"

I regretted my choice of words as soon as they left my mouth. Tiffany wasn't angry though, but I wished she was. Angry, I could've handled, but that look she gave me right then and there was too much for me. I hurt her. And it was then, when I saw the pain in her eyes, that I realized how much power words could hold.

"I didn't mean to say that!" I yelled when I saw her make a run for the door. I was in such a panic that I didn't realize that I had switched to Korean. "I—I didn't mean to say *you're* weird or anything, I just—Fany-ah!"

She was already long gone.

I slept alone that night. Tiffany didn't come back to the dorm, and I assumed she crashed at another friend's place. I wondered what she told them and if she hated me or if she was with that girl I saw her with.

And I wondered if she missed my company as much as I missed hers.

It took me nine days to gather up the courage to go out and find her. I was afraid that if I waited for her to come to me that, well, she wouldn't ever come. I saw her with a couple people I recognized as her friends. Some of them were mine too.

"Tiffany," I called out. She ignored me, and our friends raised an eyebrow at the interaction. According to them, we were usually attached at the hip. I guessed that they didn't know what happened, and I wasn't sure whether to be happy about that or not. Part of me wanted to know that she had at least talked about me to someone. At least that way I'd know if she was thinking of me.

I called out her name a few more times, getting slightly embarrassed. People were starting to stare, and I was thankful when our friends awkwardly gestured to me in order to shift her attention.

"What do you want?" she asked in Korean, and the others stood between us, even more confused than they were before. We never spoke Korean in front of them because, obviously, they wouldn't be able to understand.

"I just want to talk," I told her meekly. The others walked away, awkwardly saying their goodbyes.

"Taeyeon-ah," she sighed, "I know you think I'm a freak or—"

"No, stop," I interrupted, taking her hand and leading her into a secluded room, feeling slightly uncomfortable with all the people that had been walking by and staring at us in the hallway.

"I don't think you're a freak. You're far from it. And before you say anything else, just let me finish what I have to say, okay? I've spent the past nine days running this conversation through my head and I need to get it all out before I lose my confidence." I took a deep breath before continuing, looking down at our hands that were still holding onto each other, because I didn't have the confidence to look her in the eyes. "Honestly? Yeah, I thought it was weird at first. I mean, I haven't been exposed to a lot of this stuff, you know? It's all...very new to me. But, the more I thought about it, the more I realized it didn't matter; who you like and who you date, it doesn't matter. I just want us to keep being friends." I noticed her grip on my hands loosened.

I looked up at her and hoped that the hurt was gone, but it was still there—hidden by a beautiful smile.

"You don't get it, do you?" she asked me softly.

I shook my head. I knew. On some level, I always knew; I just refused to admit it. I wasn't as oblivious as everyone liked to believe I was. "I do get it, though. And I know it's selfish of me to ask, but please stay with me."

She took a step back from me, and I knew I had to take two steps forward if I didn't want to lose her.

“You know,” I smiled, “you’re the first real friend I’ve had in a long time.”

Up until then it had only been a growing suspicion since I saw her with that girl, but the way she hugged me back when I wrapped my arms around her in fear that she would run away from me again made me sure of it.

She liked me, and the fact that she did didn’t scare me as much as I thought it would.

Even with her back in the room with me, she kept to herself for a few days. I understood why, and I felt slightly guilty for not giving her the space away from me that she needed. I knew I should’ve let her drift away because having her stay with me would be torturous for her.

But, being away from her would be torturous for *me*. I wanted her by my side. She made me feel safe, alive, *happy*. It was like she was that little push I needed for me to get out of my shell. Our friendship was too important to me for me to let it go. I was far too selfish, and we both knew it.

It killed me at night when I would see her shivering under the covers of her own bed. Ignoring all the voices screaming at me in my head, I climbed out of bed and made my way over to her. Her back was to me when I climbed in next to her. She tensed up when my arms wrapped around her waist, pulling her closer to me.

She shivered again when I chuckled. “You gotta’ start wearing more layers to bed, Fany-ah. You’re freezing.”

I buried my face in her hair and she finally relaxed in my hold, putting a hand over mine.

“I missed this,” I heard her mumble. It sounded like she hadn’t meant to say it out loud, so I pretended not to hear it.

She came back a little tipsy one night, probably from some party.

“TaeTae!” she hiccupped, “Oh, my gosh, It was so much fun! You should’ve come.”

She giggled and pushed me down onto my bed, landing on top of me. I tried to get her to quiet down. Tiffany could barely control her volume when she was sober. She was just naturally loud.

“You’re going to wake people up,” I whispered, letting her rest on me. It had been a long time since she had willingly cuddled up to me like that, so I savored the moment while it lasted.

“Sorry,” she breathed in my face, and I almost gagged from the smell. “But seriously, you should come with me next time.”

“Parties aren’t really my thing,” I laughed, stroking her back out of habit. I wiggled out of her hold and grabbed a bottle of water. “Have some water before you sleep, Fany-ah.”

Surprisingly, she listened to me and gulped down half of the bottle before pulling me back in bed with her. “TaeTae,” she mumbled, rolling on top of me. Her hair splayed across my face, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Fany-ah,” I spit out her hair, still laughing. This wasn’t the first time she had come in the room a little drunk. Tiffany was definitely a party girl. She only looked up and grinned at me before resting her head back in the crook of my neck. My hands started unconsciously rubbing her back again.

“TaeTae,” she repeated, a little more serious than before.

“Hm?”

“I like you.”

My hands stopped. “I know,” I choked out.

Lifting herself up, I found myself in a familiar position. She stared down at me, looking more sober than I remembered. Then, I briefly recalled her telling me once that she had a high alcohol tolerance and wondered if she had faked it all those times she stumbled into the room and was extra touchy with me—or if she was even faking it right then and there.

Her forehead touched mine, and I closed my eyes, letting her breath fan my face. “Please don’t be scared,” she whispered.

“I’m not,” I breathed, “not of you, at least.”

I could sense her inching closer to me, and I had to stop myself from leaning forward when her words burned against my lips. “Then what are you afraid of?”

I opened my eyes and time stopped. I swear it did.

Her eyes were closed, forearms resting on either side of my head. She was so close to me I could count her eyelashes if I wanted to. It wasn’t just *something* about her that took my breath away, it was *everything* about her. Her hair, her eyes, her nose, her lips, her lips, her lips.

Her eyes fluttered open and we locked gazes.

She was an angel, I was sure of it. There was no other explanation for how beautiful she looked in that moment.

“I…” I found it hard to breathe. “I don’t know.”

She let out an understanding hum. She inched just a little closer, enough for our lips to brush against each other. I could tell it was an accident because she recoiled quickly.

My hands found their way to her waist and I stared up at her, silently begging her to kiss me, to touch me, to do *anything* to me.

Kiss me, I remember thinking.

When she fell asleep on me a few moments later, I thought about it again.

Kiss me.

And then I realized what I was scared of—*who* I was scared of.

Me.

I became increasingly aware of my increased heartbeat around her. I was addicted to how my breath would hitch when we would lock gazes and the butterflies that would go crazy whenever she touched me.

The one thing I hated the most about the whole thing was how jealous I got. I'd catch myself glaring at her dates more often than I should've. Not once had I ever thought of myself as a jealous person, but with Tiffany I grew more and more possessive. Usually I could keep it in check, but there was one time that got my blood boiling with rage.

I had an evening class, and when I walked back to the dorms I saw her outside our room pushing some girl up against the door and making out with her.

I cleared my throat loudly and they pulled away from each other. Tiffany guiltily stepped aside, and I stormed into our room, not sparing the two another glance and slamming the door behind me.

I was sulking in my desk chair when I heard the door open and close quietly. I ignored the small footsteps that came my way and pretended to rummage through my stack of unorganized papers. I stopped when I felt her hands on my shoulders.

"How was your date?" I asked quietly.

"Good."

A few moments later there was a sigh and she walked away. I couldn't bring myself to turn around and face her and instead of the usual comfortable silence with us, it grew rather awkward. There was this weird unresolved tension in the air that I wasn't sure how to get rid of.

I caught myself glancing back at her lazily flipping through some magazine on her bed. Silently cursing at myself for letting my anger subside so easily, I got up and sat down next to her. She ignored me until I put my head on her shoulder.

“TaeTae.”

She put aside the magazine.

“Hm?”

She wrapped her arms around my waist.

“Are you okay?”

I played with my hands in my lap.

“I’m fine.”

Her hand found its way to my hair.

“You know you can tell me anything, right?”

I closed my eyes in content.

“Then, can I ask you a question?”

Her other hand grabbed one of my own, stopping my mindless fidgeting.

“Of course. Go ahead.”

I started playing with her fingers.

“How did you find out you were gay?”

Her hand was really soft.

“Hm.”

The hand in my hair stopped moving.

“I fell for this girl back in Seoul.”

I squeezed her hand.

“Oh.”

She squeezed mine back.

“How...how did you know you fell for her?”

I interlaced our fingers.

“Just like how you know you’ve fallen for anyone else, Taeyeon. You just know.”

My eyes opened.

“Can I ask you one more thing?”

I pulled away to look at her.

“Anything.”

I wasn’t even sure I heard her.

“What’s it like kissing a girl?”

She kissed me.

Part 3

Dizzy, yet things had never been more clear.

Speechless, as if she had stolen the words right from my lips.

Breathless, but I had never felt more alive.

Quick, like it hadn't even happened.

"Taeyeon?"

My eyes snapped open, the world coming back into color except all I could see was Tiffany. I had kissed others before, but this? *This* was my first real kiss.

The grip on my hand loosened, and she pulled away, afraid.

"I—I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—"

I pulled her back, more confident than I had ever been, and sealed her lips with mine.

When I pulled away, she looked just as dazed as I was.

"Don't be sorry," I breathed. I don't know what I was thinking at that point. I don't think I was.

And in that moment, there were no worries. No thinking about my parents, no thinking about how Mr. Hwang was doing, no thinking about if anyone even missed me at all, no thinking about anything or anyone else but Tiffany.

As we went onto the final stretch of the semester, I lost myself in her.

I didn't know who I was anymore or where I was going. I thought I would be able to find some sort of clarity with her, but I was less sure of myself than I had ever been. All that consumed my thoughts were ones of her or what reminded me of her, but nothing about *me* or who *I* was. And as happy as she made me, there was that nagging feeling inside of me that something was wrong and it was all I could think about, like some seed that had been planted inside of me a long time ago and Tiffany was the light it needed to grow.

All I really knew for sure was that I wanted her—I *craved* her attention. And the more I focused on *her* the less I focused on *me*.

We never once said out loud what we were to each other. She stopped going on dates and we both holed ourselves in our room for the last month before we would head back to Seoul, the

both of using the excuse that we had to study for finals. And while there was studying involved, there was also a lot of touching and kissing.

And staring, on my part at least.

I was well aware of how insanely creepy it sounded, but I just loved to look at her. There was something about the way she would read with her lips mouthing the words every once in a while, or how she'd brush her hair back behind her ear, or the pout that would appear whenever she'd get confused; it was all just so endearing to me. It drove me crazy that all these simple things could get my heart racing. Sometimes she'd catch me and she'd just smile at me, her cheeks painted with her favorite color. And sometimes, she'd reach over and grab my hand and there'd be this content look in her eyes.

I wondered how I looked to her, if I looked as content.

If I looked as wonderful.

“Where are you going?”

I watched her curl her hair, still a little groggy from the nap I had just woken up from.

“Henry’s throwing a party,” she replied, still concentrated on her hair. I knew Henry. He was in one of the composition classes that I’d started sitting in on. We’d only talked a few times, but I knew that he was fairly popular and lived in an apartment right off campus. The perfect place to party, apparently.

“You should come. Show off your new hair color,” she smirked, “I feel like we’ve been cooped up in here too much anyway.” She always liked doing all these fancy things with her hair. I was far too lazy to do anything with my own hair, but a few days before that she complained that I was too boring and we spent the rest of that day dying my hair blonde.

“I don’t know,” I mumbled, closing my eyes and lying back down on the bed, “I like being cooped up in here.” I felt her sit down beside me and I unconsciously started twirling a strand of her hair. I wondered why had decided to keep her hair black. She seemed like the type that would’ve liked to experiment.

“Isn’t it lonely?” she asked, grabbed my hands and pulling me to sit up.

“No, not with you here.”

I leaned in for a quick kiss and grinned at her. She only shook her head at me and laughed, standing up and grabbing her things. “I’m still going, Taeyeon. But, you know, you should still come,” she smiled at me. She knew I couldn’t resist her smile. “Even if it’s for a couple minutes. You might like it. And...”

She looked away from me and walked towards the door. “It’d mean a lot to me.”

I held in a sigh. I knew what she meant—what going out with her would mean. “I’ll think about it, okay?”

“Okay,” she said softly. She gave me one last look before walking out the door.

I stood up and stretched, feeling oddly out of place without her. Scanning the room to see what I could do in her absence, my eyes stopped at her desk.

I am a sinner.

It was what I thought when I’d see that bible on her desk. I wasn’t exactly what I could call a religious person, but Tiffany definitely was. Her Christianity was such a big part of her, it was hard to ignore no matter how much I wanted to. I wanted to ask her about it, if she ever felt like a sinner like me. It baffled me to no end. If she could feel okay about it, then why couldn’t I?

And I wondered when this idea had been drilled into my head, when I had begun to think that being with a girl was so wrong.

Before I could form a clear idea of what I was doing, I bolted out the door.

“Taeyeon!”

I shuffled uncomfortably in place and tried to maneuver my way through the crowd.

“Wait, Taeyeon!”

I wondered where Tiffany would be. Dancing? Having a drink? Making out with some guy? Some girl?

I cringed at those last few thoughts.

“Hey, wait up!”

It was possible though, wasn’t it? It wasn’t like we were anything, were we? At least, not officially. Did I want anything more, though?

Maybe I did.

So what if I did?

“Yo, Taeyeon!”

A hand on my shoulder startled me and I let out a loud shriek.

“Whoa, sorry, didn’t mean to startle you. You walk real fast, you know that?”

I turned around and let out a sigh of relief, blushing when I saw that I had attracted the attention of quite a few people around me.

“Hey Henry,” I greeted him over the loud music. I saw his mouth moving, but I couldn’t make out anything over the noise. “Sorry, I can’t hear you!”

He grinned at me and skillfully led me away from the crowd to a quieter area. “I was trying to tell you, I’m glad to see you here. I didn’t think you would come when I asked you about it.”

I tried to remember when he had even invited me. “Honestly, I didn’t think I would come either.”

“Yeah, you don’t seem like a partying type of girl,” he laughed.

“I’m not,” I admitted with a half-smile, still keeping an eye out for Tiffany.

He held out the drink in his hand, silently offering me the cup. I wasn’t sure what it was. Probably beer.

“No thanks, I don’t drink anymore,” I politely declined, and he raised his eyebrows at me.

“So you just gonna stand there all night?”

“Well, actually I was looking for...”

And it hadn’t really hit me until then that I had only come for Tiffany.

“For who?”

My words got caught in my throat.

“Um, Taeyeon?” Henry waved a hand in front of my face. “You okay there, buddy?”

Sometimes Henry liked to talk to me in a certain tone, like I was a little kid even though we were the same age. I never really minded much, but there was something about that moment that just irked me. It wasn’t just him; it was the damned party and its ridiculous music and the rude people and the stupid alcohol and Tiffany and Tiffany and Tiffany and Tiffany.

“*I’m fine*,” I hissed. I took a deep breath and tried to control my sudden anger. I *knew* I was being irrational, but I couldn’t stop the rage boiling over inside of me. “I think I’m just going to leave now.”

“Aw come on, you just got here!” he grinned and put a hand on my arm. “Here, I’ll help you look for—”

“I don’t need your help!” I screamed and pushed him away.

I took a step back and tried to calm myself down, ignoring all the stares and whispers. And then I spotted her in the corner, holding a drink and staring right back at me with a concerned gaze, one of her friends still talking in front of her.

In the corner of my eye, I saw Henry sheepishly rubbing the back of his neck. “Sorry,” he mumbled. I could barely hear him.

I tore my eyes away from Tiffany and stormed out of the apartment.

My legs took me music room and I sat down in front of the piano, not daring to go back out. I sat still, embarrassed that I had just run out and caused an entire scene. All because of what? Because I was jealous? Jealous of what? Of something that hadn’t even happened? At the possibility that it could’ve? Or was it because I was scared? Scared of what? *Because of what?*

One hand hovered over the keys, and I slowly felt myself relax. I pressed down on one key, letting the sound echo. I lifted my other hand and let myself sink into the music that flowed out. Tiffany had been such a distraction that I hadn’t realized how much I had been ignoring my music -- how much I had been ignoring *myself*. When had been the last time I played the piano? The last time I touched my guitar? The last time I was even in the music room? The last time I had focused on anything other than Tiffany?

The tune that came out was too familiar, a song that Tiffany liked to blast in our room lately.

*‘Cause you are the piece of me I wish I didn't need
Chasing relentlessly, still fight and I don't know why*

*If our love is tragedy, why are you my remedy?
If our love's insanity, why are you my clarity?*

The door opening and a hesitant pair of heels clicking their way towards me stopped me.

“Taeyeon.”

I didn’t respond and kept my eyes on the keys in front of me, my heart beating faster when she sat down next to me. I loathed myself for not stopping her from scooting close to me, even more when I realized I didn’t want to.

“Why’d you stop?” she whispered.

I shrugged and my hands fell to my sides.

She grabbed one of them and rubbed the back of my hand with her thumb. The last of my anger faded away and what replaced it was an extreme exhaustion, like the weights on my back had finally broken me.

The silence broke me even further.

“Fany-ah,” my voice cracked. I needed to say something. I needed sound, noise, *music*.

“What’s wrong?” She ran her fingers through my hair, and I leaned into her.

“I—I don’t know.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“I don’t know what to talk about.”

“Anything, Taeyeon-ah. What’s been on your mind?” She pulled away to look at me, and that’s when I knew she knew. It even felt like she knew me better than I did.

“You. You’ve been on my mind.” She smiled and waited for me to continue. “I want—I want to be with you.” I waited for a response, but there was more, she knew there was more. “And I want to...to not be afraid anymore. I thought I was okay with it, you know? You liking girls, I mean. I could’ve sworn I was okay with it. It doesn’t matter to me what kind of label you put on yourself and who you like. I just want you to stay with me. You’re still you.”

She still had that smile on her face that urged me to keep on talking.

“But when it comes to me,” my voice cracked, “it’s just *different* for some reason and I can’t understand why.” I stood up and started pacing. “I just, I think about telling my old friends, my brother and sister, and my parents, *oh God, my parents*.”

Tiffany stood up and put both hands on my shoulders. “Taeyeon-ah.”

“My whole life, I just wanted to be *normal*.”

“Taeyeon-ah,” she repeated, “what do you mean? You’re perfectly normal. What in the world gave you the idea that you aren’t?”

“I...It was just...I don’t know.” I moved away from her and slumped back down on the piano bench. “I don’t know anything.” I hunched over the piano, burying my face in my hands.

“It’s different for everyone, you know? I have a friend back in Seoul who lived there her whole life, and she accepted herself real easily.” She moved to sit next to me again. “And I have another friend from San Francisco who took it real hard.”

I looked up from my hands, staring at the random sheets of music in front of me. “How did you take it?”

There was a long pause before she answered. “I was actually really okay with it. I was lucky; I had an amazing group of friends, and my family...they were really amazing too.”

I turned and smiled at her. “That’s great, Fany-ah.”

Another round of silence.

“You know Henry likes you, right?”

“What?”

“Why do you think he was so happy to see you there today?”

“Oh.”

And then another one.

“Feeling any better?”

I shrugged. “I guess. Just a little bit though...” I sighed and sat up straight. “I just...I feel so helpless, you know? Like I’m not capable of anything...like I’m drowning and I’m just waiting for some knight in shining armor to come by and save me.”

“Listen,” she sighed, grabbing one of my hands again, “I wish I could say that I’m enough for you, that I’m all you need, that I could be the one that saves you, but I’m not. The only person that can do that is *you*.”

“How exactly do I do that?”

“I don’t know,” she smiled at me again, “But...it’s okay to let people help you along the way. You’re not alone.”

I returned and smile and squeezed her hand. “I come with a lot of baggage, you know.”

Her smiled turned into the one that made my stomach do flips. “So do I.”

“I was wrong earlier when I said I didn’t know anything. I know one thing, for sure.”

“What’s that?”

“You make me happier than I’ve ever been.”

Her eyes glazed over and the butterflies in my stomach refused to stop fluttering.

“So, um,” I rubbed the back of my neck nervously, “Do you, uh...would you...”

She laughed and grabbed both of my hands. “Kim Taeyeon, would you like to be my girlfriend?”

I grinned and pulled her in for a kiss.

“Yes.”

*Walk on through a red parade and refuse to make amends
It cuts deep through our ground and makes us forget all common sense
Don't speak as I try to leave 'cause we both know what we'll choose
If you pull then I'll push too deep and I'll fall right back to you*

*'Cause you are the piece of me I wish I didn't need
Chasing relentlessly, still fight and I don't know why*

*If our love is tragedy, why are you my remedy?
If our love's insanity, why are you my clarity?*

“So how’s life in California? Run into Brad Pitt yet?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yes, because we just so happen to run in the same circle.”

“Your sarcasm is not appreciated, Taeyeon-ah.”

“Ignore her; I don’t think she’s had lunch yet. But seriously, what have you been up to? You must have been doing something crazy. I mean, you’re *blonde* now! How the heck did that happen? Not that you don’t look good with it or anything.”

“A friend convinced me to do it.”

“Must be one hell of a friend. And also, your parents have been asking us about you. You haven’t responded to any of us for the past two months.”

My parents asked about me?

“Just been really busy with school,” I shrugged. “What about you two? How’s life back in Seoul?”

“The same, really. We both finished up our last exams today. Don’t you still have exams?”

“My last one is tomorrow,” I admitted sheepishly.

“Is this why you’re finally talking to us? Because you want to procrastinate?”

“Come on, you know it’s not like that,” I sighed and adjusted my laptop screen as I shifted in my seat uncomfortably. “The past two months have just been a little hectic, that’s all.”

“Well, whatever’s happened to you the past two months, it must have been something really good.”

“What do you mean?”

“You look happier.”

I tried to hide my grin. “Really?”

“She’s right, you do. A lot, actually.”

“Honestly? I feel a lot happier,” I smiled.

The two of them grinned at me. “I think I speak for the both of us when I say that we’re really happy to see you’re doing so well.”

“Yeah, you’ve been really out of it the last two years or so, you know? Glad to see you’re doing better.”

“Out of it?”

“Yeah!” the shorter of the two shouted so loudly that I winced, “You have no idea how much we were worried about you.”

“It was scary, seeing you every day like you were. And it sucked because we didn’t know what we could do.”

The guilt started to set in. These two were my closest friends and how long had it been since I closed myself off from them? And they still stuck by me, still reached out to me.

Tiffany said she was lucky. I was starting to think that maybe I was too.

“I’m sorry,” I blurted out, part of me wishing that I could reach out to them. I wanted to hug them, I needed that physical reassurance that they were indeed still there for me. Communicating with them via webcam, looking at them through my laptop screen, it just wasn’t enough. I was suddenly very happy that I would be going back to Seoul soon. I needed to make up for lost time with them—with everyone.

“What are you apologizing for?”

“I’m just... I—I mean, it wasn’t because of you that I wasn’t happy, you know? And...I’m sorry if I’ve ever made you feel like it was, or like I wasn’t thankful for your company...I’m sorry if I’ve ever made you feel like your company wasn’t enough. And, you know, just...I don’t know if I’ve ever said this, but thank you for staying with me.”

They were really quiet for a brief moment. “You were going through a lot, weren’t you? We knew that you were, and we would never hold that against you.”

“We know you have work out things on your own before you ever decide to open up to us, and we’re both going to be right here when you do.”

I grinned, feeling overwhelmed. “You guys are the best.”

“So, if you don’t mind me asking, is there anything specific that’s been making you so happy?”

“Anyone, I think is what she means.”

I tensed and laughed nervously.

Surprised gasps from both ends. “There is!”

I was always a bad liar.

“Who’s the guy that’s stolen our little Taengoo’s heart?”

I flinched and nervously laughed again. “Little? We’re practically the same height!”

“Don’t change the subject.”

A barrage of questions came my way.

“Who is he?”

“Where’d you meet him?”

“How long has this been going on?”

“Are you going to bring him back home?”

“Is he older than you?”

I was suddenly very glad that Tiffany was at the library.

“We’re the same age,” I started out carefully, “We’re both heading back to Seoul together, but only because she’s from there too.” I observed them carefully. They didn’t seem to notice. “This has been going on, almost a month now. Officially, at least. And I met...I met her at the

beginning of the school year..." I could see the gears start to move in their heads. "She's...she's my roommate."

They were quiet for a few minutes. I don't think I had ever seen them so speechless. I could feel myself start to break out into a sweat.

"She's the girl in most of your pictures, isn't she?"

Her voice was quiet.

"She's really pretty."

I smiled. "She's gorgeous." They grew quiet again. "When I come back...I'd like for you guys to meet her."

A short pause before an answer. "I'd like that."

"Me too."

They smiled at me, and I felt the relief start to set in.

"Taeyeon-ah."

"Yeah?" My voice cracked.

"We're really happy for you."

I was really lucky.

We were leaving tomorrow, and I hadn't told my parents yet. I only told Jiwoong, so I assumed they already knew.

"Fany-ah, are you still awake?"

"Yeah."

She was lying. "Go back to sleep."

I felt her shake her head against my chest. "No, talk to me," she mumbled, tightening her hold on me. "What's wrong?"

"I remember this small little thing that happened back in middle school."

She lifted her head to look at me. "What was it?"

“My mom was lecturing me about something—I don’t really remember what.”

“Yeah?”

“And she got really angry, and she shouted, ‘*why can’t you be normal!*’”

“Taeyeon...”

“She kept saying that to me, you know? She would scream it at me. Why can’t you be normal. Why are you so strange. Things like that.”

She kissed my cheek and guided my head to lie in the crook of her neck.

“I just wanted to be normal, Fany-ah.”

“I know, Taeyeon, I know.”

We were both look for our respective families in the large crowd. Would they all be there? Or would it just be Jiwoong?

“Nervous?” she asked. I squeezed her hand.

“Yeah,” I mumbled. I wasn’t sure what to expect.

Suddenly she let go of my hand and rushed off in another direction.

“Daddy!”

I turned my head towards them and my mouth dropped when they broke apart from the hug.

She pulled him towards me.

Both of our eyes widened.

“Mr. Hwang?”

I wasn’t sure which one of the three of us was more surprised.

Part 4

“You two know each other?”

“Mr. Hwang is your dad?”

“Girls,” Mr. Hwang cut in, eyes slowly shifting between the two of us. “Stephanie.”

Stephanie.

I suddenly remembered that he had told me that his daughter was going to study in California as well.

“This is...Taeyeon is the girl you...you guys are...”

“Stephanie?” I croaked.

“It’s my real name,” Tiffany explained, “I started going by Tiffany when my mom...”

Her mom what?

The atmosphere grew solemn and I glanced back at Mr. Hwang, who was avoiding eye contact with the both of us.

Oh.

Mr. Hwang’s wife.

His daughter’s mother.

Tiffany’s mother.

Oh.

“Mr. Hwang was my English teacher a few years back,” I changed the subject. I took note of the sigh of relief from the both of them. “He’s the one that convinced me to study abroad.”

“Ah, you’re the student he was always talking about!”

The feeling of pride suddenly welled up inside of me, and I grinned at Mr. Hwang. “You talked about me?”

“He said you were his favorite student,” Tiffany laughed. “And here I thought teachers weren’t allowed to have favorites.”

He grinned, and I could finally start to see the resemblance between the two. “We aren’t, so shush,” he said, playfully pushing her aside.

She giggled before grabbed my hand again and pulling me closer. I felt the heat rise to my cheeks. The thought of meeting her family had been terrifying enough, and I wasn’t sure that knowing her father was Mr. Hwang made me feel any less uneasy. If anything, the pressure to impress him was even greater than before.

Mr. Hwang.

Tiffany’s father.

I was still struggling to connect the dots, to believe that they were actually the same person.

“Taeyeon’s the girl I’ve been telling you about,” Tiffany admitted proudly, beaming at me the entire time. I nervously smiled back.

“Couldn’t have picked someone better myself,” he smiled, a small amount of relief flooding through me. “What a small world.”

I wondered how much she had told him about me and if they both had hid this from me the entire time because the shock seemed to wear off too quickly for them.

“I wish we could stay and talk, but we really have to get going. “I’ll see you around, I hope,” he smiled at me. It was not as reassuring as I hoped it’d be. “I’ll be looking forward to hearing about your time over in California...but it looks like it’s been treating you well.”

“Too well,” I admitted. Tiffany was too good for me.

I looked back at her and all I wanted to do right then and there was walk up and kiss her goodbye. I wasn’t sure when I’d be able to see her again, and I wanted to soak up as much of her before she walked away. I had been too spoiled beforehand. I wasn’t sure how I’d cope with her being gone for who knows how long.

My mouth suddenly felt very dry. There were too many eyes on me.

Mr. Hwang put a hand on her shoulder and whispered something in her ear before walking away.

“Well this is a surprise,” she laughed, gripping my hand even tighter.

“You don’t seem very surprised.”

Her nervous smile gave it away.

“You knew?”

“I had an inkling, but I wasn’t entirely sure. I mean, daddy never really told me your name and I—”

“Taeyeon-ah!”

Jiwoong.

I withdrew my hand from Tiffany’s and automatically took a step back at the sound of his voice. I didn’t miss the hurt look that flashed across her face. My eyes scanned the crowd and I cursed my short stature before I finally found him carrying Hayeon on his back and I wondered how I could’ve missed them in the first place. I couldn’t help but break out into a smile at the sight of them.

I guess I missed them more than I thought I had.

“Unnie!” Hayeon screeched, jumping off his back and into my arms. “I missed you!”

And there was just something about knowing I was missed that got to me.

“I missed you too,” I mumbled. I was never one to be very affectionate, but for her I’d make an exception.

And Tiffany too, I suppose, but that was totally different. The thought of her made me glance back at her for a brief second.

Jiwoong only patted the top of my head and grinned at me and I knew that he missed me too. Maybe being unaffectionate was something that was genetic. I wasn’t sure; I was asleep half the time in my biology classes.

I glanced behind them, not sure what else I was expecting.

But Jiwoong saw and he knew what I was looking for before I did.

“Sorry, it’s just us,” Jiwoong informed me with a said smile.

It took me a moment to regain my composure. Not that I had much of one in the first place.

“What are you apologizing for? I wasn’t expecting anyone else anyway.” I awkwardly shuffled away from them. I turned back around to face Tiffany, but she had already left. I couldn’t hide my disappointment.

“We almost didn’t recognize you, unnie!” I was thankful for Hayeon’s interruption. “You changed your hair!”

I laughed at her enthusiasm. Sometimes I wondered if she was even related to us; she was a lot more energetic than Jiwoong and I ever were at her age.

“It actually looks pretty good on you,” Jiwoong grinned. A compliment from my brother? That was when I knew he must have really missed me.

“So, who was that girl you were with?” he asked, picking up one of my bags for me.

I looked back one more time, just to make sure she really wasn’t there anymore.

She wasn’t.

“She’s,” I paused, “a friend of mine I made back in California.”

“She’s really pretty,” was all he said in response.

For a moment I wondered what he would’ve thought if a girl he was interested in was taken by his very own sister, and for a moment, I was amused at the idea. But that moment was over in what seemed like less than a second and was replaced by a feeling of dread.

I shivered when we walked outside.

Korea was a lot colder than I remembered.

“You get home okay?”

“Yeah, even with Jiwoong’s horrible driving.”

“Your relationship with your siblings is so cute, you know that?”

“That’s not the first time someone’s said that to me...”

“Well, more reason for you to believe it, then. Sorry I had to leave without saying goodbye. Daddy was really rushing me.”

“It’s alright.”

“So, do you have anything planned with your family? I’m not interrupting you from anything right now, am I?”

“No, you’re not. We might go out for dinner or something later tonight when my dad gets home, but I’m not too sure about that.”

“Oh...have you seen either of your parents yet?”

“Just my mom.”

“She must be happy to see you again.”

“I guess so.”

“...You know, daddy was asking about you the whole ride home.”

“Oh.”

“Are you mad that I didn’t tell you?”

“No.”

“Taeyeon-ah.”

“What? I’m not mad.”

“Look you—wait, hang on.”

“...Fany-ah?”

“Sorry, I have to get going. We’ll finish this later, okay?”

“There’s nothing to finish. I’m not mad.”

“...Alright then. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Bye.”

I wasn’t mad.

So Tiffany might have known that me and her father were connected in some way. So what? What difference did it make? It’s not like she knew for sure anyway. What reason would I have to be mad?

Nothing. No reason at all.

Right?

“So how was California?”

The clinking of everyone’s utensils suddenly sounded much louder. I held back a scoff. We had been eating for almost ten minutes in silence before anyone had decided to ask me anything.

So much for being missed.

“It was really good.”

“Didn’t run into any problems?”

So maybe I was a little mad that she kept it from me. If she had suspected anything, then why didn’t she just ask me about it? I didn’t understand why she didn’t—why she chose to keep it from me instead. Did that make me mad? Maybe. I don’t know.

“Nope.”

“That’s good.”

I glanced up at my parents who looked like they were struggling to figure out what to say to me.

I asked myself when it had gotten to that point where we couldn’t even have a normal conversation with each other anymore. Who was it that had pushed the other away? Me? Them? Maybe it was the both of us.

Maybe I missed them more than I thought I had too.

“Um, I was thinking of changing my major, actually.”

“Oh.” That definitely got their attention. “To what?”

“Music.”

My parents shared a look.

All of a sudden I was reminded of Tiffany and her father and their playful relationship back at the airport. I thought about all the things he had said to me about his kids, about Stephanie who was supposedly a little troublemaker. Somehow, the idea wasn’t so hard to imagine.

Had I ever been that close with either of my parents? Did they like to talk about me? Brag about me like Mr. Hwang did with his children?

“What exactly do you plan on doing with that?”

I shrugged. “I...I’m not really sure yet.”

“Well you know,” my brother cut in, “Taeyeon’s always been really good with that kind of stuff. Plus, I mean, you’ve heard her sing.”

“Just because she can sing doesn’t mean she’ll be able to make a living off it.”

It'd be a lie to say that didn't hurt.

Jiwoong stayed quiet, and I didn't blame him.

"Look, Taeyeon-ah, we're not saying you're not talented because we really do think that you are," my father spoke up, something he rarely did. When I was younger I always thought my mom was the one making all of my decisions for me. I found out very soon that my father was the one controlling the strings and my mother was just the voice. "But you have to think about your future. Do you really think you're going to be successful with something like this?"

I looked down at my bowl and absentmindedly played with the last bits of my food. I no longer had much of an appetite. That seemed to happen a lot whenever I had dinner with my family.

I wasn't mad at them. I knew that they just wanted the best for me. Disappointed, maybe, but not mad.

I only shrugged before shoving the last of my food in my mouth. I wished that they hadn't decided to take me out for dinner. If we had been at the house I could've just stormed off to my room and avoided the awkward silence that followed that short conversation.

My mother spoke up again on the ride home.

"Taeyeon-ah," she sighed, "I just don't understand you sometimes."

I don't understand you either is what I wanted to tell her.

The fear buried in the pit of my stomach reached up and bound my lips shut.

Maybe that was why we never really got along well, because we didn't understand each other. And it didn't seem like either of us were very willing to even try anymore.

"But you just—you know what? Just do whatever you want."

I suppose I should've been happy with that. Even though she didn't agree with my choices, she was still going to let me do them. That was a good thing wasn't it? If it was, then why didn't I feel happy about it?

It was all I thought about when I tried to go to sleep that night.

Why wasn't I happy with what I had?

A vibration from my phone pulled me from my thoughts. I knew it could only be one person.

Miss you <3

I rolled onto my back and stared at the screen, thoughts of Tiffany and Mr. Hwang coming back to me. Was it possible to miss someone and still be angry at them at the same time? My bed suddenly felt empty and I realized that this would be the first night in a while since I had slept without her by my side. Whatever anger I had waned, and I typed back a response telling her I missed her too before throwing my phone aside.

What really frustrated me the most was that even with Tiffany, I still wasn't happy. Better, of course, in some weird kind of way, but still not really happy. And the realization hit me harder than a ton a bricks.

I wasn't happy.

Even after all that I had been through, I still wasn't happy. I started to grow angry at myself for believing that just because I had flown halfway across the world and met an amazing girl that things would just magically fix themselves. What did I think would happen to myself when I came back to Korea? That my parents and I could finally have a normal conversation? That I would finally be content with myself?

Any sort of improvement had been solely dependent on Tiffany. I felt like I had gotten nowhere, and that was the most depressing thought.

I wasn't happy.

Why?

I shuffled nervously waiting for her to pick up the phone. I never thought that a building could look so intimidating.

"Hey, I think I'm here," I said as soon as I heard her pick up, not even bothering to wait for a greeting.

"Okay, wait there."

It wasn't long before I saw her rushing out the front door, and I knew I was in trouble when I realized just how much I had missed her in the span of one week.

"Hey there."

She didn't say anything in response and only hugged me. Probably thought I was still mad, if that's even what I was in the first place. I still wasn't sure.

"You could've just knocked, you know," she said as she pulled away, grabbing one of my hands and pulling me towards the door.

“I didn’t want anyone else to open the door,” I shrugged, “and besides, I wasn’t even sure I had the right house. You know how horrible I am with directions.”

“Right,” she laughed, “almost forgot.” We stopped in front of the door. “Michelle and Leo can’t wait to meet you. And daddy’s real happy you’re here too.”

A nervous laugh was all I could seem to get out of myself.

A smile and a squeeze of my hand before she opened the door.

It was bigger than the small old apartment I lived in, but still relatively modest. Very homey—comfortable.

“Taeyeon,” Mr. Hwang walked in the room, “glad to see you could make it.”

Before I had the chance to make any more observations, I found myself sitting at the dinner table with the whole family. There was something extremely odd about seeing your teacher—no matter how close you happened to be with them—outside of their usual classroom setting. The next hour flew by too fast and it was just Mr. Hwang and I in the kitchen. I offered to help him clean up. I wasn’t sure where the other three had gone off to, but I got the feeling that it had been deliberate to leave the two of us alone.

“So, feel good to be back in Seoul?”

“Yeah,” I shrugged, “I guess.”

“Home sweet home, huh?”

Home.

“Something like that.”

He raised his eyebrows at me, but didn’t comment and continued washing the dishes. He always seemed to know what was going on, even without me actually telling him anything. I wasn’t sure if I was just that obvious with my feelings or if he was just that good at reading people. He always knew the right topics to avoid, though, as if he knew which topics I was comfortable talking about and which ones I weren’t. I sighed and put down the dirty dishes in my hands.

“Mr. Hwang, can I ask you something?”

“Of course.” He turned to face me, ignoring the pile of dishes in the sink.

“Did you...did you know...about...”

“About what? You dorming with Tiffany? No, I honestly had no idea.”

“No, not that.” I played with the hem of my shirt. “Did you know...about *me*.”

“Oh.” He paused. “Yes.”

I looked up at him and his expression grew serious. “How?”

He let out a long sigh before leaning back against the counter and folding his arms across his chest. “Well, I’m sure you remember Soonkyu. One of your best friends, right?”

I nodded. “What about her?” What did she have to do with anything?

“The way you looked at her.”

“Wha-what?”

“The way you looked at her,” he repeated. His deadpan expression turned into one of guilt. “Oh God, you didn’t know.”

Soonkyu.

I thought about her a little more, about how she was one of my best friends and how well we always got along—about how my stomach used to twist and turn around her.

And I paled.

“I’m sorry, I thought...I thought you’d have figured it out by now.” I wish I could take away his guilt. It wasn’t his fault. He had absolutely nothing to do with it.

I remembered my conversation with her and Sooyoung a few days before I left and how the both of them were supposed to meet Tiffany before the break was over. I wondered if either of them ever had a clue.

“No,” I shook my head, finally starting to regain whatever composure I had left. “I think...I always knew on some level. I just never wanted to admit it. And I’ve just had so much on my mind lately that I didn’t really think twice about it. With school and the culture shock and...”

“And Stephanie.”

I nodded. “And Tiffany.”

“Don’t think I’ll ever get around to calling her Tiffany, no matter how much she hates it,” he chuckled, “but I’m very happy for you two, you know that?”

I leaned against the counter, suddenly feeling very overwhelmed.

“I guess you know that there’s something I’d like to tell you.”

I tore my gaze away from the sink and looked up at him.

“You’re not just one of my previous students to me. I care about you a lot. And,” he sighed, “I’m sure it’s fairly obvious that I care a great deal about Stephanie too. I’d give up everything for her. I don’t want to see her get hurt, Taeyeon. I think you already know that. That’s why I wanted to talk to you.”

I nodded, and I wasn’t sure what I was really expecting to hear from him after that. A threat, maybe.

“So if you two ever do happen to leave each other...”

Something like, if I hurt his little girl then I’d be in big trouble. Something like that.

“I just want you to know that even then, you can still come to me for anything.”

“I think you have an obsession.” I picked up the pink pillow from her bed and shook my head. Tiffany had whisked me away from her father and her questioning siblings and took me up to her room.

“Shut up,” she laughed, sitting down on the edge of her bed. “So how was it today?”

I shrugged and took a seat next to her. “Not as bad as I thought it’d be, honestly.”

“Just how bad did you think it was going to go?”

I shrugged again. “I don’t know, I just thought I wouldn’t really know what to say to anyone.”

“Yeah, well—”

I cut her off with a kiss. I couldn’t help it; it had been too long.

She pulled away first, bashful for some odd reason, and stood up and sat down in front of her desk.

“So what did daddy want to talk to you about?” she asked, her cheeks still red. To say it was odd would be an understatement, but I didn’t question it. It had always been the little things I did for her that got her to be so shy.

“Just about how he’s happy for us.” I opted not to mention his last few words to me. Besides, us breaking up was the last thing I wanted us to even be thinking about.

“He hasn’t stopped telling me that since he found out. He really adores you, you know,” she laughed. “He did get really mad that I didn’t tell him though.”

We had avoided the topic all week, but I knew she wanted to talk about. And I knew that we had to if we wanted the weird tension between us to be completely gone. It didn’t make me want to do it, though. Talking in general had never been one of my strong points. I showed how I felt through my actions, not words. I was never quite eloquent enough to get anything significant across.

“Just answer honestly, okay? Are you mad that I didn’t tell you? I’ll understand if you are, you know.”

“Honestly?” I fell back onto her bed and closed my eyes. The exhaustion was starting to creep up on me. “I was, maybe just a little bit. But I was more...confused. And maybe a little frustrated. And shocked. Definitely shocked.”

I felt her lie down next to me. I hadn’t even heard her get up from the chair. “I’m sorry.”

I made the mistake of opening my eyes.

Beautiful.

Too damned beautiful.

And it was in those moments that I wondered what on Earth she was doing with someone like me.

“I just want to know why you didn’t tell me. Michelle and Leo even said they came to the dorm a few times. How come you never let me meet them then?”

“I didn’t,” she took a deep breath, “I didn’t want you getting too close. That’s why I didn’t tell you and why I made sure you were out whenever they came. I mean, I like you a whole lot, but we weren’t really...anything, you know?”

I nodded, getting up from the bed. “Yeah, I know.”

“But.” She grabbed one of my hands and pulled me back down to sit. “We’re something now.”

She kissed me, and I wondered if that was what it would be like from then on. A kiss and all would be forgiven.

“Are we okay?”

I laughed and kissed her again. “Yes, we’re okay.”

“So,” she started suddenly, “when am I going to meet *your* family?”

“My family?” my voice cracked.

She sighed and grabbed my hands. “How are you and your parents, Taeyeon? You’ve never talked about them much.”

I shrugged. “There’s not really much to say, I guess.”

“Really?” She was skeptical. “What about your mom telling you you’re not normal? There’s not more to that?” She was angry, too. At who, though, I wasn’t so sure.

“My mom just wants what’s best for me. So does my dad.” Quite honestly, I wasn’t even entirely sure why I was defending them.

“But you’re not really happy with them, are you?”

“I...I don’t know. I guess not...I know that they care about me and they’re just looking out for me but...I’m not. Honestly? I feel like a bad kid. I feel like I should be happy because they’ve done so much for me, and even though they’re not happy with what I’m doing, they’re still letting me do it. I should be happy about that, shouldn’t I? It’s not like they’re stopping me from doing anything I don’t want to.”

Her thumbs rubbed circles on the back of my hand. “But?”

“But...I know they’re not happy with what I’m doing. They don’t make much of an effort to hide it.”

She let out an understanding hum and urged me to go on.

“And I guess that’s the thing. I want more than just tolerance.”

It was funny that I hadn’t realized that was what I wanted until then, until the words had actually come out of my mouth.

“Is that asking for too much?”

“Of course not!” she answered almost immediately. “It’s a perfectly legitimate thing to want.”

I thought about what I strived for all of high school. Acceptance. From my teachers, from my friends, from my classmates that I barely talked to.

From my family.

My parents.

“It’s what I’ve always wanted too.” It was so quiet that I almost didn’t catch it.

“But your dad loves you so much.”

She smiled. Not the one that I loved to see, though.

“Daddy’s always been supportive. From day one. He knew about me before I ever had an inkling. He’s good like that, you know.”

I knew.

“But my mom didn’t have a clue... You know, she was always the religious one out of my parents. And I... well, I wanted to be just like her. She was my role model. She was great, always so strong and confident and she went through so much for us.”

I listened attentively, waiting for the bomb to drop. I knew there’d be one.

“And she was also extremely homophobic.”

Even if I had known what words to say, I was sure that anything that tried to come out of my mouth wouldn’t have come out.

“It was never obvious, you know. I didn’t even really realize it until after she passed away.”

I wanted her to stop talking. I didn’t want her to tell me more. I only wanted her to tell me about things I could fix.

I realized later that sometimes you just had to let things break.

“Daddy knew, though. Sometimes I swear, it’s like he knows everything. He’s just so good at reading people like that.”

She was crying.

“But, I like to think that she loved me enough to accept me. Because she did love me a whole lot. Not once have I ever doubted that.”

My voice had finally found me again.

“If she was anything like you, then I’m sure she would’ve.”

“You’re late.”

I wasn’t expecting anyone to be up when I got home.

“Sorry, I got held up at my friend’s house.”

My mom just sighed and stepped aside so I could walk in.

“Jiwoong’s girlfriend was just leaving.”

My head snapped back. “Girlfriend?”

She looked surprised. “I thought she told you.”

“Who told me?”

I walked into the living room and I couldn’t decide if the sight before me was more or less shocking than the discovery that Mr. Hwang was Tiffany’s father.

It was definitely more disturbing.

“Sooyoung?”

They jumped apart and shared a guilty look.

“Taeyeon!”

“How did you guys...when did this...”

Sooyoung spoke up first. “About two months after you left, your parents started asking me about you. So Sunny and I came over to talk to them and to go see Hayeon and well...”

I’d never seen Jiwoong look so terrified of me.

“How come neither of you ever told me?”

Secrets. More secrets. One after another.

“We both thought it’d be better if we told you in person.”

Jiwoong was still quiet.

“Oh. Well, congratulations.” I hadn’t meant to sound so bitter, but the words came out before I could stop them and I stormed off to my room.

Barely two seconds after I closed the door, Sooyoung came in after me.

“You’re mad.”

It wasn’t a question.

“I’m not.”

“You’re lying.”

“I’m not.”

“You are.”

“Sooyoung. Get out.”

She didn’t budge.

“You’re mad.”

I sighed in resignation and collapsed onto my bed. “Guess that’s just what everyone seems to think these days...”

“Hey, it’s not like you haven’t kept your fair share of secrets, Kim Taeyeon. You’re the one that flew off to another country without even telling us!”

“What are you talking about?” I sat up on my bed. “I told you guys!”

“Yeah, the day before you left. I’m surprised you even told your parents that you were leaving. We thought you would’ve just packed up and left without saying anything at all.”

I had forgotten how well Sooyoung knew me. And Sunny too, but she was the last person I wanted to be thinking of.

I fell back onto my bed. “I’m sorry.”

There was a brief silence before I heard her sigh. “Don’t be. That was different. I shouldn’t have brought that up.”

I buried my face into my pillow. “...You always did think he was cute.”

She laughed and moved to sit on me. For someone so damned tall, she was really light.

“Yeah, and you always yelled at me whenever I said that.”

“He’s my older brother. It’s weird. And, you know, he always said you were hot. I should’ve seen this coming.”

We laughed together, and I knew we were okay.

“Sorry we didn’t tell you.”

“It’s okay, I get it.”

She got off of me and we shifted so that we were sitting next to each other.

“...You didn’t mention anything about Tiffany to him or my parents, did you?”

She shook her head. “No, of course not. I’m not stupid. Sunny and I haven’t told a single soul.”

“Good.”

“...Are you going to tell them before you head back?”

I shrugged. “I don’t think I’m ready for that.” I didn’t think I’d ever be ready for it.

“Well, Sunny and I really want to meet her. We want to know who’s stolen our little Taengoo’s heart.” She reached over and pinched my cheek and I shoved her away.

“I think you and Sunny have been spending way too much time together,” I laughed. “You guys will meet her sometime before we have to head back.”

A knock on the door interrupted us.

“Everything okay in here?” Jiwoong popped his head in.

“Everything’s good,” I answered.

“I actually should get going now.” Sooyoung hugged me tight before standing up. “I’ll talk to you later, Taeyeon.”

“I’ll drive you home. It’s late,” Jiwoong offered.

Sooyoung stepped out of the room, and I stopped Jiwoong before he could follow her.

“Taeyeon-ah, I’m sor—”

I pulled him into a hug.

He remained stiff.

“Treat her right.”

I felt him relax and he returned the hug hesitantly. “I will.”

“...I missed you.”

That was it. That was what I needed to do.

I needed to take the first step if I wanted anything to change.

“I missed you too.

...And so did mom and dad.”

“I know,” I sighed.

One step at a time.

It was almost Christmas. Two days until Christmas, actually. Not that it mattered much because my family didn’t do much for it. Tiffany’s did though, so I made the extra effort to get into the holiday spirit.

Tiffany introduced me to a few of her friends. The weird thing was I was actually already fairly good friends with one of them back in high school.

Surprises. One after another. Secrets and surprises, that’s what the entire break had consisted of.

And another one came when I got home that day I met her friends.

Only, that surprise wasn’t something that I could ever really get over. Not like Mr. Hwang being Tiffany’s father, not like the realization that I used to like my best friend, not like Jiwoong and Sooyoung, not like the mutual friend Tiffany and I shared.

Not like anything I’d ever really expected.

“Who’s the girl in all your pictures, Taeyeon?”

My parents and I had made great progress in the past week. I was finally starting to feel a little more comfortable around them.

Baby steps, I remember telling myself.

“That’s Tiffany.”

Who knew that it wouldn’t make a difference?

Not me.

“Taeyeon-ah. Tell me the truth. Who is she to you?”

I should've known as soon as I saw the pictures in her hands.

"She's a good friend."

"You kiss all your good friends?"

I didn't even remember when that picture had been taken.

"I...I..."

Both my parents were standing in front of me now. Jiwoong stood behind them, confused. Hayeon was sleeping in her room.

"Taeyeon-ah."

My mother stepped forward and reached out to me.

Only not in the way I wanted her to.

"I always knew you weren't normal."

Part 5

“I can explain.”

No I couldn’t. Not in a million years could I ever explain what I felt for Tiffany or what Tiffany meant to me.

“We send you over there and *this* is what you do?”

Send me over there.

I bit my tongue. No one *sent* me. I made it there on my own, with a little push from Mr. Hwang, of course.

“I expected a lot of things from you. Drinking, smoking, maybe a boyfriend, but not *this*.”

“We were drunk!”

I wasn’t ready to tell them the truth.

My father stepped forward, and I took a step back in fear, tripping over the leg of a chair.

“Taeyeon-ah.”

“I didn’t even know that picture was in there. I didn’t even know someone took a picture of it. I swear.” My voice trembled and I was sure that they noticed.

“Okay.”

They lectured me about drinking and being responsible before they let me go. I rushed off to my room, grabbing the pictures that I had forgotten Tiffany asked me to print out. I knew they didn’t believe me. I looked back at the picture they found and unconsciously let out a sigh. I knew exactly when and where the picture had taken place. It was two days before we left and Tiffany asked one of our friends to take a picture of us. It was a random memory that I cherished.

I shook my head and threw the pictures down on my desk, plopping down onto my chair.

Unsurprisingly, Jiwoong walked inside my room without bothering to knock.

“You’re lying.”

I sighed and slumped in my chair. “I know. And they know too. They just don’t want to admit it.”

I couldn’t look at him. I wasn’t sure how I’d react if I saw what I figured would be disgust on his face. He walked over and picked up the stack of pictures on the table.

“She was the girl at the airport.”

I nodded slowly, not sure what to make of his tone.

“You look happy, Taeyeon.”

I finally looked up at him. He was smiling as he looked through all the pictures of me and Tiffany.

“What?” I asked dumbly.

“In these pictures with her. You look happy. The entire time you’ve been back...you look happier than you were when you left.” He set down the pictures and grinned at me. He kneeled down so that we were at eye level with each other.

I began to think that maybe I had been wrong when I had convinced myself that I had gotten nowhere. I had gotten somewhere, apparently. Where I was, though, I wasn’t so sure. I could only hope that wherever I was, it was better than where I was before.

“How long have you known?” he asked softly.

And I knew right then and there that Jiwoong was someone I could confide in, someone I could trust. I felt foolish for believing that I couldn’t.

I shrugged. “Not until I met Tiffany, but a part of me always sort of knew.”

He nodded and glanced back at the pictures on the table. “Well...your girlfriend’s kind of hot,” he grinned mischievously.

“Hey!” I playfully hit the top of his head. “You’re dating Sooyoung. My best friend. You’re not allowed to say stuff like that.”

He laughed and I couldn’t stop myself from grinning alongside him. “Just telling you the truth.” He paused, growing serious. “I’d like to meet her. She’s here in Seoul, isn’t she?”

“Yeah, she is,” I smiled. “I was planning on introducing her to Sooyoung and Sunny. You should be there too.”

We were avoiding the topic he really wanted to talk to me about.

“Sunny,” he said with a raise of his eyebrows. “Now that I know, can I ask you something?” He stood up and plopped down on my bed.

“What?”

“Did you like Sunny back in high school?”

“Wow,” I laughed, “Was I really that obvious?”

“A little. Maybe I just know you really well.”

“Maybe you do.”

He sat up and leaned his back against the headboard. “I’m glad you’re happy now, Taeyeon.”

Was I really happy, though?

“I don’t feel very happy,” I admitted.

“But you’re better than you were before,” he swung his legs off the bed, “And I’m taking that as a sign you’re going in the right direction.” I laughed and shook my head at him. “You don’t look like you believe me.”

“Because I don’t. I want to believe you, I really do. But I just...I don’t feel any different.”

“You look pretty different.” He stood up again and grabbed the pictures. “Especially in these pictures.”

Jiwoong was always the best at beating around the bush.

“Then maybe it’s just this house,” I mumbled.

He looked up at me again with a sad smile.

“We all just want you to be happy, Taeyeon-ah,” he told me softly, kneeling down in front of me again. “*All* of us. Even mom and dad.”

And there it was.

“Oppa, don’t.”

“Just let me finish, would you?” He stood and sat back down on the bed. I had forgotten how fidgety and restless he could be. He could never sit still in one place for very long. “I think you should tell them, and honestly? I think they’ll be fine after the initial shock. They love you a lot, you know that? This isn’t going to change that.”

“You—”

“But,” he interrupted me, “if they do end up not taking it very well, then you should know that...” He paused to take a deep breath.

“Whatever they decide, I’ll always be your older brother.”

I think people underestimate the power of words.

They have the power to tear you down and rip you apart piece by piece. If you knew the right words to say, you could hit someone right in their very core and take them down from the inside out.

But, they also had the power to lift you up and put you back together. If you knew the right words to say, you could make someone realize that they are not as worthless as they once thought they were.

“So they know now?”

“Sort of,” I sighed and interlaced my fingers with hers. “They’re not dumb. I’m pretty sure they knew I was lying. I think they’re just in denial.”

I followed her gaze to the two girls in front of us who were racing to see who could finish their smoothie first.

“What are you going to do now?” she asked softly. I tightened my grip on her hand.

“No idea. Jiwoong oppa thinks they’ll be okay with it.”

I felt her gaze on me, but I focused on the sight of Yuri choking on her drink.

“And what do you think?”

Yoona was celebrating now.

“Honestly? Part of me still thinks he’s wrong, but another part thinks he kind of makes sense.”

She let out an understanding hum and moved to rest her head on my shoulder.

“I’ve never met them, but parents in general can be surprising. You never know, Taeyeon-ah, they could surprise you.”

“Maybe,” I shrugged. “Can we not talk about this now?”

I didn’t feel like talking. I just wanted to enjoy what felt like limited time with Tiffany. She didn’t say another word before she kissed me.

“You bet against me? You’re supposed to be on my side!” Yuri’s loud complaining broke us apart.

“Don’t make a scene, Yuri-yah,” the blonde said lethargically. “Did you honestly think you were going to win against this glutton over here?”

Yuri frowned. “But—”

Jessica leaned forward and kissed her before she could start complaining again. “Shush. Now that you guys are done can we all order now? Don’t worry about the bill, Yuri’s paying for everyone.”

“What? Everyone? Even the lovebirds?”

I tried to hide my blush. I always had to whenever someone implied that we were in love with each other. Tiffany only grinned sheepishly. “Sorry, Yuri.”

“Taeyeon! I thought old buddies were supposed to stick together!”

“If it helps at all, I wanted to be on your side but Fany told me not to.”

I grunted when Tiffany elbowed me in the stomach.

“Can we all order now?” Hyoyeon asked impatiently. “We all knew Yuri was going to lose anyway,” she mumbled under her breath. She ignored the glare from Yuri.

For a moment, I had forgotten about all the tension between me and my parents the past few days. I let myself sink into the good company, something that I hadn’t done in a while with anyone other than Tiffany.

“So now that you’ve met her, who do you seriously think would win in an eating contest? Sooyoung or Yoona?”

Tiffany rolled her eyes. “Yoona, hands down.”

“You’re only saying that because she’s one of your best friends.”

“And you’re only choosing Sooyoung because she’s one of *your* best friends.” She grinned at me before opening the door. “You want to come in?”

I nodded, in a rush to get out of the cold winter air, and ran in. I wondered how winters were back in California and if they ever got as harsh as the ones in Korea. I made a mental note to ask Tiffany about it later.

“You totally won them over, by the way. Sunny and Sooyoung couldn’t stop talking about you when you left the table,” I laughed, “Jiwoong even complimented me on my good taste.”

She grinned at me. “That’s good to know. You’ve won over my friends and family too, by the way. But you probably already knew that.”

I took off my shoes and followed her into the house. “Where is your family anyway?” I glanced at the clock and saw that it was almost midnight. I pulled out my phone and couldn’t help but feel a pang of disappointment when I saw that I had no missed calls or text messages.

“Daddy called me earlier. Said that they got held up at my aunt’s house so they won’t be back ‘till morning.”

“Oh.”

I looked at one of their family pictures and sighed. I spent a lot of my time thinking about what I should do, how I should tell my parents or if I should even tell them.

The more I thought about it, the simpler the answer seemed to be.

“How are you getting home? It’s late.”

I turned back around to face her and shrugged. “Jiwoong’s probably asleep by now, so I’ll probably just walk.”

Tiffany made a face and grabbed my hands. “Or you could save yourself the trouble and just spend the night here.”

I grinned. It’d been a while since I shared a bed with Tiffany. “Or I could do that.”

“You sure your parents won’t mind?” she asked as she led me upstairs.

I shook my head and followed her into her room. “I doubt it,” I sighed. “And speaking of my parents, I’ve been thinking...”

“What is it?”

“I want to tell them about us.”

She stopped whatever she was doing to turn and give me a concerned look. “When did you decide this?”

I pulled her to sit down on her bed and took a deep breath. “Today. When you were talking to Sunny about how you convinced me to dye my hair blonde.”

She laughed. I loved her laugh. “Taeyeon, what does that have to do with anything?”

“It just sort of hit me right then and there, while you were talking about me.”

“What hit you?” She was smiling. I loved her smile.

“That I love you. That’s all the reason I need to tell them.”

I loved her.

She looked at me like I had just given her the world.

I leaned in and kissed her, and she didn’t pull away until my hands had gone under her shirt.

“Are you sure?” She was breathless. She was beautiful. “We don’t have to do anything if you’re not ready.”

I said the only words I could think of. “I love you.”

She mumbled something back, but her words were lost somewhere between the pink walls, between the tangled limbs, between me and her. But they still found their way to me somehow.

“I love you too.”

There were four days until the year was over. That was when I decided to tell them.

They were fine when I told them I’d be bringing a friend over. Happy, even. My efforts to mend our relationship since I’d been back hadn’t gone to complete waste.

They were hesitant when they saw that it was Tiffany, but they treated her well. I felt myself relax when they complimented her while she was playing with Hayeon. Hayeon loved her too, but it was never that hard to win her over.

They were disappointed when Tiffany said she had to leave. And I felt more confident than ever.

They were stoic when I had pulled them aside and told them the truth. Jiwoong took a curious Hayeon back to her room when he realized what I had just told them.

They were relentless with their criticisms when the truth had finally sunk in. They told me that she had corrupted me, that she must have been the reason that I dyed my hair blonde—as if that really had anything to do with the situation. They told me it was wrong, and then later they told me they always knew that I was strange. Which made no sense to me because if I had been that way all along, then how was Tiffany the one who corrupted me?

When I told them Tiffany and I were in love, they were quiet for a long time because they told me that I didn’t know what love was.

At the end of the night, they gave me a choice. I could either leave her or them.

That night, I remembered an old memory with one of my favorite cousins.

Her name was Seohyun. She was the type of person that was always respectful to everyone. So she was baffled at the way I treated my parents and how we were so distant from each other. One day she asked me something.

“Do you know how much your parents love you?”

And it made me wonder if anyone ever asked my parents if they knew how much I loved them.

I thought it would've been easier. I thought the choice would've been clear when the time came, and no matter how much I had wished that it would never come, I suppose a part of me always knew it would. I was always under the assumption that the pieces would fall where they should. But things don't just fall into place. You have to pick up the pieces yourself and try to put them where you think they belong.

“Unnie?”

I hadn't expected anyone to be home, and I froze in the midst of throwing as many things as I could in my bag.

“Where are you going?”

I tried to compose myself, but I couldn't stop the tears from overflowing at the sight of her.

“...Are you leaving?”

She looked confused and walked into my room. “I thought you were supposed to stay for another three weeks?”

“I—I have to go.”

She was a smart kid, and I could tell that she got the hint that when I left this time, I probably wasn't going to come back.

“But you can't leave,” her voice cracked and my heart fell to pieces.

“I'm so sorry, Hayeon-ah, but I have to go.”

She ran into my arms and I didn't have the heart to deny the bone crushing hug.

“Is this because you love Tiffany?”

I knew she heard all the arguing the night before. I shut my eyes tightly, still trying to compose myself. “I do love her. I love her so much. But this is because of so much more than that. When you’re older, you’ll understand. But for now, just know that I can’t stay here.”

“Mommy and daddy told me that it’s wrong.”

I pulled away from the hug. “I know.”

“But I don’t believe them. If Tiffany unnie makes you happy, then you should be with her.”

I looked down at her and smiled. “I love you. Don’t ever forget that, okay?”

I wandered around aimlessly until the sun had set. I mentally scolded myself, wondering what the hell I had been thinking when I left. Where did I think I could go?

I knew I had to go somewhere for the night. I couldn’t face Tiffany, not yet. Sooyoung and Sunny would’ve pried and called Jiwoong. I couldn’t go to them either. There was only one person I could think of that would let me stay and still let me have my privacy.

I knocked once praying that she hadn’t left to go stay with family for some sort of New Year’s Eve celebration. Thankfully the door cracked open a few seconds later, a head poking out to see who had come over so late at night.

“Taeyeon-ah?” She opened the door all the way when she realized it was me.

“Sorry, I woke you up, didn’t I?”

“Of course not,” she said unconvincingly before a yawn. “Okay, maybe you did, but it’s midnight. What did you expect?” She stared at me, finally noticing my bags. “What are you doing here?”

“I just,” I gulped, “I need somewhere to stay the night, and I need you to promise you won’t tell anyone. Not even Jessica. And especially not Tiffany.”

She narrowed her eyes at me.

“I’ll answer questions later,” I said quickly when I saw the unsure look on her face. “I promise. I just need a quiet place to stay without any questions right now.”

She sighed, and I knew her answer before she said it. “Come in.” She stepped back and let me through.

“Thanks, Yuri-yah. I owe you one.”

I was there for a week without any questions from Yuri. She had left for two days to go celebrate the new year with her family and most likely Jessica too. We didn't talk much while I was there, but I could tell she was angry with me. That was the only time Yuri could stop talking, actually. I tried to stay out of her apartment as much as I could, only coming back to sleep.

"Yuri." I couldn't take the silence anymore. It was killing me. "Just go ahead and yell at me now."

She practically jumped at the chance. "Everyone's worried about you." I could see the guilt on her face. "And I've just been hiding you here. Damn it Taeyeon, do you know what the hell you're doing to everyone? I don't know what happened, but your problems don't just go away by running away from them! You know what you are? You're a coward."

"Then why are you keeping me a secret? Why haven't you told anyone that I'm here?"

I was curious. I knew she was far too nice for her own good, but even the nicest people in the world had their limits.

"Because, Taeyeon," she sighed, sitting down across from me. "As angry as I am with you right now, I can understand where you're coming from. You need time to think, I get that. But you can't hide here forever."

I stared at her and realized that at one point, she might've gone through the same thing I was going through.

"How long have you been with Jessica?" The question caught her off guard.

"It'll be two years in a few months. Why?"

"So you were with her back in high school."

She nodded slowly. "She's the one that wanted to hide it. She wasn't ready yet."

"And you were?" The entire time I had known her in high school I had no clue. But it did explain why she had turned down all those guys back then.

"It's never really been something I was afraid of admitting. I know it sounds weird, but it's true. I was in love, and I wanted everyone to know it." Her defenses went down and she smiled at me. "It's okay to be afraid, though, Taeyeon-ah."

"You just called me a coward."

"For running away from everyone. Not because you're having a difficult time coming out."

Our conversation ended there.

She was more civil to me the next day, but she constantly reminded me of how worried everyone was. The thought of it was nagging me in the back of my head the entire time I had tried to lose myself in a book.

I kept telling myself that I wasn't ready, but when would I ever be ready?

I snapped out of my daydreams when someone knocked. As soon as Yuri had opened the door, a familiar figure came bursting in and I dropped my book in shock.

Mr. Hwang.

"Taeyeon-ah, how dare you?"

"Mr. Hwang, I don't—" my eyes flew back and forth between him and Yuri, partly hoping Yuri would be able to help me out, but she looked even more lost than I was.

"How dare you take away our opportunity to help you." He towered over me, staring me down.

I opened my mouth to form some sort of rebuttal, but I remained frozen, only moving to look away from him. I couldn't handle the intensity of his gaze; it was almost as if it were piercing through me. Even when I looked away, I could still feel his eyes on me, tearing what was left of me apart piece by piece.

"You can't do this to us. You can't just come into our lives, make us care, and then just leave without a trace. All because of— because of what? You can't, you can't do that. It's not fair. To me, to Stephanie, to your friends...and to you. It's just not fair."

I watched Yuri quietly step out of the room, giving us our privacy. I didn't know how to respond.

"Mr. Hwang," my voice wavered. I wasn't even sure why I had started talking. I had no idea what I was going to tell him. I stupidly asked the first thing that came to mind. "How did you find me?"

He was surprisingly calm. I had expected him to be angry. "Apparently Yuri's a pretty honest drunk. Her and Jessica went drinking last night."

"Does Tiffany know?"

"Not yet."

He let out a frustrated sigh and sat down next to me. "Did something happen between you and your parents?"

It took me a few minutes to form any words, but he waited patiently anyway. "They made me choose between them and Tiffany."

He didn't say a word.

"Mr. Hwang, would you hate me if I told you that I couldn't decide?"

"Of course not, Taeyeon-ah."

We were quiet for a long time. I lost track of how many minutes had passed.

"I love Tiffany."

"I know."

"And I love my parents too."

He turned to me and there was a sad smile painted on his face. "I know," he repeated.

"I still think they're genuinely good people, you know? As much trouble as they've given me, they still took care of me for eighteen years. I've been here the past week just thinking about them and how much they've given up for me."

I remembered back when I was a kid and I had scraped my knee in the middle of the night fighting with Jiwoong and my father had run out to buy me ice cream because we had none left.

"This entire time, I never once doubted that they loved me unconditionally because even after all the times I screwed up, they were still there."

There was another time when I was caught ditching one of my classes in high school. My mother was so angry, but when I got sick the next day, she stayed home and took care of me the whole day.

"And I think that's what really hurts the most."

I remembered all the time my father had invested into teaching me how to ride a bike. And then when I had gotten older, how to drive a car.

"Feeling like they only loved me for who they thought I could be and not for who I am."

And then there was my mother, who had taught me everything I knew about cooking.

"How are you supposed to react, Mr. Hwang, when the people you thought would love you unconditionally all of a sudden, don't?"

"I don't know, Taeyeon-ah."

Another round of silence enveloped us. I wasn't used to Mr. Hwang not talking. He always had something to say, but this time it felt like he was waiting for me to say something instead.

"You must think I'm a coward."

"No, I don't."

"Well I'm sure everyone else does. I've disappointed everyone."

I looked up at him, and he had the same smile on his face.

"Look, I don't know what your parents think of you, or what your friends think of you, or what *you* think of you. Maybe your parents think you're a disappointment, maybe your friends think you're a coward, maybe you think you're a failure. I don't know, Taeyeon-ah. But I know what *I* think of you.

And I think you're wonderful."

Part 6

Mr. Hwang always complimented me. He said things about me that I could never really bring myself to believe. How could he still be so kind to me when I had been so horrible to his daughter?

“I’m sorry, but...I just need some time to think.”

He was beyond frustrated with me at that point, I could tell. He frowned at me and didn’t move to get up from his seat. “Time to think...isn’t that what you’ve been doing for the past week you’ve been here?”

I held in a sigh. “It’s complicated.”

“I know it is, but there’s a reason I decided to come here before telling Stephanie. She’s so—”

“Worried about me,” I finished for him, “I know. Yuri keeps telling me that.”

“*Then why the hell aren’t you doing anything about it?*” He was struggling to keep his voice level, and I could tell he wanted to just explode at that point. But instead, he took a deep breath and calmed himself again. “I’m trying to be understanding, I really am—we all are. But it’s hard for us to do that when you won’t talk to us, Taeyeon.” He took a deep breath before continuing. “I know you want everyone to leave you alone and let you think and to just...pretend everything’s normal. Well, I can’t do that for you. You can’t just expect me to see you like this and do *nothing*. You can’t expect me to pretend there is absolutely nothing wrong when it’s so obvious that there *is*. I am your friend. You can’t expect me to do that. You just can’t.”

I couldn’t wrap my head around it, the fact that he still cared so much about someone like me. I didn’t deserve it, any of it. That’s what I told myself for the longest time.

What *did* I deserve, then?

He gave up and decided to leave, but not before leaving me with something to think about. “You know,” he sighed, “part of the reason I trust you so much is because I believe you’re capable of making good decisions. Everything you’ve done, you’ve done with good intentions, Taeyeon. I still believe that.”

Good decisions? Good intentions?

I wasn’t sure where to draw the line between *good* or *bad* anymore. As much as I wanted things to be colored in black and white, they weren’t. That day and the next few ones that followed felt so surreal to me, like someone had painted over the canvas with colors I couldn’t recognize.

I fell asleep that night replaying my conversation with Mr. Hwang.

The next few days were filled with a mix of relief and anger when news had gotten out among my friends where I had been hiding the entire time.

“Tiffany’s lost it, Taeyeon. And what the hell have you been doing? Just sitting here and hiding from everyone?”

“I know, okay? I know.” It was all I had the energy to do. Nod along and agree. I was exhausted. Too many things to think about. Too many colors to try and discern.

Jiwoong and Hayeon came to see me one day. They avoided any mention of what had happened and pretended like nothing had changed in the past month. It was strange because it was exactly how I thought I wanted people to act around me, like nothing was wrong. Except, everything was wrong, and ignoring the truth wasn’t going to make it go away.

I could hear them, but I refused to listen. For some reason, the words couldn’t seem to sink through. I was knocked so far back that I was struggling to get back up on my own two feet. I was afraid that any hand that reached out to me would take the form of a fist, ready to beat me back down again.

So when Jiwoong came up to me at the end of the day telling me that our parents wanted to see me, I wasn’t sure what to do. I wanted to run again, but run where? I ran all the way across the world and they still found their way to get to me, they still consumed my every other thought—at least until I had decided to think of Tiffany and only Tiffany during my stay there.

I waited for her. I had seen everyone else, and I figured it was only right she would be the last person to come give me some sort of pep talk. I was sure she knew where I was at that point. I wanted her to come and fix me, to make me feel better. She was good at that.

So, I waited. A day. Two days. Five. A week.

Everyone tried to get me to get out of the apartment, but I refused to leave. Because what if she came for me and I wasn’t there? I kept thinking that as long as I stayed still, she would find me and fix me like she always did. It wasn’t until the middle of the fourth day that the thought that maybe she wouldn’t come for me had entered my head.

I let the thought linger for three days and let my insecurities take over again. I always did wonder what she ever saw in me. I wanted to ask her why she ever fell for me in the first place. She was the type of person that chose to see the good in people. What good did she see in me? I wanted to know.

It was at the end of the week that I decided to go see my parents. There was a week left before I would have to leave. I needed to know for sure if there was anything I could come back to.

When I saw them, there was a flicker of hope when my mother greeted me with a bone crushing hug.

“Jiwoong told us you were staying with Yuri,” my father brought up quietly when they had ushered me to sit down in the kitchen.

“I have.”

“She’s an old friend from high school, right? How is she doing?” My mother was always better at making small talk and beating around the bush. Must have been where Jiwoong got it from.

“Good.” She poured the three of us water, and I eyed them warily before continuing. “She has a girlfriend now.”

My father choked on his drink. “Her too?” he mumbled under his breath.

“Well, that’s...good for her.” My mother nervously fidgeted with her cup.

“Yeah,” I nodded, “It’s great for her.”

“Taeyeon-ah, let’s just cut straight to the point,” my father sighed, “We want you to come back.”

My heart swelled and I could feel an agreement itching to come out of my mouth.

“You do realize that if I come back...Tiffany is part of the package.”

They tensed and I knew right then and there that it was too good to be true. “We thought you would say that, and your father and I have talked about it.”

“And?”

“And, I’m sorry Taeyeon, but we still don’t want you with her. If it were just the simple idea of you two being...an item...then it wouldn’t be an issue. As strange as we think that is, we would be able to get over that.”

“Would you really? Because it doesn’t seem like it.”

I stood up abruptly, the chair screeching against the tile of the kitchen floor. I didn’t want to listen to anything else they had to say. I couldn’t even bring myself to look at them at that point.

“Taeyeon, please let me finish.”

“You don’t want me with her. That’s all I need to hear.”

“You have to try and see where we’re coming from, Taeyeon,” he continued anyway, “You two are two *girls*. How do you think people are going to react to that? Can’t you see all the trouble? All the extra hardships you’re going to have to face because of this? We just want what’s best for you, and in this world the best can’t be given to you if you’re with her.”

I had never heard my father speak to me in such a desperate tone.

“What if I think she *is* what’s best for me?”

My mother walked up to me and placed her hands on my shoulders. “We love you so much.”

I wanted her to stop right there.

“Things will be ten times harder for you two, and we just don’t want that—for either of you. Do you see what we’re saying? We want you to be happy.”

“*She* makes me happy.”

“Then,” my father cleared his throat, “it sounds like you’ve already made a decision.”

Her hands slipped off of my shoulders.

One look at them and I realized that I had already made a decision before I walked in.

I left with a heavy heart and I thought about what Mr. Hwang had said to me again.

Was I capable of making good decisions? Were good decisions supposed to make you feel like you couldn’t stand anymore?

All I had were questions, and nobody could seem to answer them for me.

When I got back to the apartment, Yuri wasn’t home. I couldn’t stand the silence; it only made it easier for my unanswered questions to fill the room.

There was an old keyboard sitting in the corner of the room. I remembered Yuri telling me about how she wanted a real piano but couldn’t afford one. It was the last thing I remember thinking before I shoved all other thoughts aside and began to play.

It was so easy to lose myself in music, and the more I lost myself in it, the more I found myself in it.

I asked myself earlier what I deserved.

I was finally starting to get an idea of what that was.

*You shout it out,
But I can't hear a word you say
I'm talking loud not saying much
I'm criticized but all your bullets ricochet
You shoot me down, but I get up*

*I'm bulletproof, nothing to lose
Fire away, fire away
Ricochet, you take your aim
Fire away, fire away
You shoot me down but I won't fall
I am titanium*

Her older brother opened the door. He glared at me, but Mr. Hwang told him to let me in.

Tiffany wasn't home.

They told me her older sister had taken her out and they weren't sure when they'd be back. Leo wanted me to leave, but Mr. Hwang told me I could wait in her room.

"Don't mind Leo. He's just very protective of Stephanie. We all are."

"Mr. Hwang," I called out to him before he could leave the room, "Then why are you so nice to me?"

"I told you already. You are more than just my daughter's girlfriend to me."

When I didn't respond, he turned around to leave again.

"Wait."

He turned back around.

"...Thank you, Mr. Hwang. You've done more for me than you know. I don't think I've ever really said it to you, so thank you—for everything."

"It was my pleasure, Taeyeon," he smiled before leaving me alone in Tiffany's room.

It wasn't until he had left that I really noticed how much everything smelled like her. I breathed in her scent, not realizing how much I had missed it. And it felt like it'd been forever since I saw so much pink in one place. I fell back in her bed and let myself soak in all that I left behind the previous weeks. I knew there was a possibility Tiffany had given up on me, and I prepared myself as much as one could for such a reaction.

Whether she still loved me or not, I needed her to know what I had to say.

"Taeyeon." Her voice was quiet. Tiffany's voice was never quiet. "What are you doing?"

I sat back up.

“Reminding myself how much I love you.”

She tensed before closing the door and avoided eye contact with me.

“Why are you here?”

“I wanted to see you.”

She finally looked up at me, and I could see the bags underneath her eyes. “Are you—are you okay?”

I walked up to her and pulled her into a hug. “Yeah, I think so.”

“Good.”

She pushed me away and before I knew it my cheek was stinging.

I guess I deserved that.

“What the hell have you been doing, Taeyeon?” Her voice had risen a little and for some reason that made me feel more relieved. I couldn’t stand a quiet Tiffany. When I looked back up at her, her expression immediately morphed into one of guilt and she let out a sigh. “I heard about what happened between you and your parents, and I’m sorry you had to go through that...but you didn’t have to go through that alone.”

I shook my head. “No, I did. I needed to be alone to think about things, Fany-ah. I’ve been too dependent on you the past few months, and I didn’t want that anymore. It was like I needed you by my side to be happy. I wanted to be able to be happy on my own, you know what I mean?”

“I think I do.” I smiled and we both moved to sit down on her bed. I could tell by her stiffened movements that she was still hesitant to be around me. “You could’ve at least let me know. I was really scared, all of us were.”

“I know, and I’ve still got a lot of apologizing to do. I just figured you should be the first. So, I’m sorry, Fany-ah, for making you worry about me so much.”

Her voice got quiet again. “Does this mean...I don’t want to be the reason you and your parents don’t get along.”

“Trust me, you’re not.”

“You need your family, Taeyeon-ah.”

“No, I need people that will accept me for who I am.”

“Maybe if you just talk to them then—”

“Fany-ah,” I stood up, frustrated. I didn’t want to be thinking about them. “I’ve talked to them and I’ve already heard all I needed to hear. And I know...I know that they still love me, and there is nothing that will ever change the fact that they *are* my parents. I realize that. But I’ve opened myself up to them for the first time since I can remember, and they...they’ve made decisions that I just don’t agree with. Maybe one day we’ll be able to get along, but not today, and it has absolutely nothing to do with you.”

She grew quiet again and I shifted uncomfortably in my spot, not sure of whether I should reclaim my seat by her side again or not.

“So what now?” she finally asked.

I wasn’t sure if it was the right time to be thinking it, but I thought she was beautiful. Right then and there. Eye bags, smeared make-up, tousled hair and all. I always did—I was too biased to ever think otherwise—but it was always in moments where she looked like she was at her lowest—the moments she looked the most vulnerable—that she looked the most beautiful to me. It was that unshakeable hope that made her shine, it was what willed her to stand up again even when the world had beaten her down. And that, that unwavering faith she had in herself and others, that was what made her beautiful to me.

I wanted to be beautiful to her too.

“I don’t know, Fany-ah.”

She looked up at me, slightly angry. “Then why the hell are you even here, Taeyeon? You run away from me...from everyone, and you just expect me to welcome you back with open arms? I know you’re hurt, but so am I.”

She had every right to be angry with me. “I didn’t come here expecting that. I mean, a part of me was hoping for it, just a little bit, but that’s not why I came here. I needed to tell you something important. And whether you welcome me back with open arms or not, I want you to know this.”

Her gaze was focused on her lap. “What is it?”

“Thank you.”

Her head lifted slowly and she blinked twice. “What?”

“Thank you, Tiffany,” I grinned, “for helping me realize a whole new part of myself, for helping me cope with it, and most of all...thank you for showing me how to patch up that hole at the bottom of my cup. Falling in love with you was just a bonus. I just needed you to know that. No matter what happens to us, you should always know that I am thankful to you. Even if you don’t want me back, even if you hate me, even if you regret every moment you ever spent with me...thank you, Tiffany.”

I was finally starting recognize the colors around me.

“Earlier this week, I asked myself something. What do I deserve?”

“And did you find an answer?”

I nodded. “I think I figured it out while I was talking with my parents. I...I deserve to be happy.”

Her eyes disappeared. “I’m glad you’ve finally realized that. Because you do, you really do. I’ve always thought so. You were always just so...incredible,” her voice cracked. She was crying. “Did you know that when I first started to fall for you, I convinced myself that I could never have you? And then one day...one day you were just...mine.”

“I still am, you know.” I finally found the courage to seat myself next to her. “Earlier, I was thinking about what makes me happy. Music, friends, Jiwoong and Hayeon, Mr. Hwang...and you. I’m still in the process of trying to fill up that cup I managed to fix, and I was kind of hoping you’d help me out with that.”

She sealed her answer with a kiss.

“Excited to go back?”

I laughed bitterly. “And drown myself in homework and studying? Yeah, sure.” I shifted the bag on my shoulder, glancing over at Tiffany saying her goodbyes to her family. “Besides, I think I’ve forgotten all my English.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Sooyoung threw an arm around me, “you’ve got a lovely girlfriend that is more than willing to help you reacquaint yourself with the language.”

I rolled my eyes at her. “Easy for you to say. You’ve always been better at English than I have,” I mumbled before shrugging her arm off me.

“And yet, you’re the one that gets to fly to America to study...”

I shot a sympathetic smile her way. “I’ll miss you too, you giant.” I shifted my attention to the shorter girl. “And you too, Soonkyu.”

“Keep in touch with us this time, okay?”

“Of course.”

Just as I was saying my goodbyes to Jiwoong and Hayeon, a hand on my shoulder turned me around.

“We should get going, Taeyeon.”

I quickly finished up my goodbyes and I didn’t miss the look Mr. Hwang gave me as I walked away.

I felt Tiffany’s hand slip in mine and my steps felt lighter.

“You know,” I broke the silence, “I’m kind of sad to be leaving.”

She didn’t even bother to hide the shock on her face. “Really? I thought you’d be ecstatic.”

“I did too, but,” I looked back one more time, “Seoul is always going to be my home. No amount of bad experiences will change that.”

“Don’t worry,” she squeezed my hand, “we’ll be back for the summer before you know it. My dad wants you to stay with us when we come back, by the way. I swear, sometimes I think he loves you more than me.”

I laughed. “Well, I can see why.

After all, I *am* pretty amazing.”

Epilogue

“I can’t believe you’ve never been to Disneyland before.”

“Sorry, it was a few thousand miles away from me.” I grinned cheekily at her and let out a yawn. “How much longer ‘till we’re there?” One look outside the window told me that I’d slept through most of the night. The sun was just starting to rise.

“About another hour and a half or so. Go back to sleep Taeyeon, you’re still tired.”

“I’ve been awake a total of twenty-two minutes, and you’ve told me to go back to sleep at least five times. I’m starting to think you don’t appreciate me being awake.”

“I appreciate you plenty, Taeyeon.” She took a hand off the steering wheel to pat me on the head. “Just go back to sleep.”

“Fany-ah, you’ve been driving all night. If anything we should switch so *you* can get some sleep.”

“But I’m not tired. I had some Red Bull earlier.”

“... You just don’t want to let me drive, do you?”

“That’s not it.”

“That is it. You don’t trust me driving!”

“I trust you. Just go back to sleep.”

“That’s seven times now.”

“Taeyeon.”

“Just let me drive! I know I almost crashed that one time, but I’m better now, I swear. Besides, there’s barely anyone else on the road anyway.”

“Do you even know which way to go?”

“I never know where I’m going. That’s what a GPS is for.”

“Could you hand me my sunglasses? They’re in my bag.”

She was blatantly ignoring me at that point. I grumbled and listened to her anyway, grabbing her bag and fishing through the clutter to find her sunglasses. The bag slipped out of my hands and I cursed when its contents fell out onto the floor. I picked up her sunglasses and I froze just as I

was about to hand them to her. A small family picture had fallen out and I had recognized everyone in it except for one person. It took me a couple seconds to realize who it had to be.

“You know,” I started, knowing I was treading in deep water, “you look a lot like your mother.”

She glanced at the picture in my hand and smiled—the kind of smile that almost reached her eyes, but not quite. “Daddy used to tell me that a lot. He...he sent me that picture in that care package he sent us the other day just before finals.” She paused, and I knew she was thinking of her. You could always tell when someone was missing a person they loved that wasn't around anymore—a person they never thought they could live without until they had to. They get this look in their eyes that made you wish you could just reach up into the sky and bring them back.

“Did he ever tell you about her?”

“She was beautiful. Mr. Hwang never forgot to mention that to me every time he brought her up.”

“So he talked about her a lot, then.”

I couldn't bring myself to look at her. “All the time. He loved to tell the story of—”

“—how they met,” she finished for me.

“Yeah,” I breathed, starting to feel a heavy weight on my chest and regretting that I had even brought her up in the first place. Mr. Hwang was many things to me. A teacher, a mentor, a father figure, a friend...It wasn't until then had I thought of him differently. Just a man—a man who was very much in love with his wife.

“You know, that day at the airport when he found out we were dating...after we left, we had a long talk in the car about you.”

“A long, good talk, I hope.” I handed over her sunglasses when I realized I was still holding them.

“You should know by now that he only has good things to say about you,” she laughed, putting on the sunglasses.

“He only had good things to say about you too, you know, other than that you were kind of a trouble-maker.”

We laughed and it was a nice break from the sullen mood that overcame us.

“So how is everyone back in Seoul?” I didn't want to stay on the topic of her mother for too long. “I've only talked to Jiwoong oppa and all he can tell me about is Sooyoung.”

She laughed again and it was easy to tell that she was relieved I decided to change the topic.

“Is it weird having your best friend with your brother?”

“You have no idea,” I scoffed. “But, in a way, it’s kind of nice. I’ve always wanted her to be a part of my family...and now she practically is.” The word ‘family’ had become strange to me. My definition of the word was changing, and I was starting to become okay with it. “Then again, I guess...she always was.”

“So, speaking of family,” Tiffany’s voice was soft and that was how I knew she was about to tell me something I wasn’t going to like, “your mom called the other day.”

“Oh?” I tried my best to act nonchalant even though I knew she knew me better than that. I believed that if I could fool her, then maybe I could fool myself. “What’d she say?”

“You haven’t been picking up her phone calls apparently. That’s why she called me.” A frown tugged at the corner of her lips. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I just,” I sighed, feeling very drained again all of a sudden, “I didn’t want to talk about it—with anyone. I’m not so good with the whole confrontation thing. I think you of all people would know that.”

She took a hand off the steering wheel again and reached over and grabbed my hand. “I think you’re better than you think you are,” she told me softly as she interlaced our fingers, “Sometimes you just need a little push.”

“So you think I should talk to my parents again?”

“Personally? Yes, I do, I really want you to, and I think it’d be good for you. But...” the grip on my hand tightened slightly, “what do *you* want, Taeyeon-ah?”

“I want...” I stared at our hands and wondered why I had ever been so afraid of it—of me and her. I remembered how the future had seemed so scary but once I was there I asked myself what I had been so terrified of. Taeyeon and Tiffany...what was so scary about that? About us?

“I want this,” I squeezed her hand, “to not be such a big deal anymore.”

She smiled, her eyes still glued on the road. “Everyone makes a big deal out of it when, really, it shouldn’t be,” she sighed, “The irony in that is that we have to make it a big deal in order to show people that it’s not a big deal.”

I let her words sink in. Ignoring the problem wasn’t going to make it go away—hadn’t I made that mistake before?

“...I’ll call them sometime before our Spring break is over, okay?”

Tiffany nodded, not saying another word, and the music from radio was the only sound that filled the car.

I tried to reassure myself. It wasn't as if I had left without any sign of hope at all. When they talked to me, it wasn't as if they disapproved of me completely. I was sure they still cared for me. They were more afraid of how I'd be treated, which was surprisingly a slightly comforting thought. I told myself they were just being practical.

I looked back at Tiffany and couldn't keep the smile off of my lips.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

When had love ever been practical?

"Taeyeon?"

"I love you."

"I love you too," she said without missing a beat, "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, everything's great," I kissed the back of her hand, "By the way, you haven't answered my question. How's everyone doing?"

I could think about my parents and what I would say to them later.

"They're doing great as far as I can tell. Jessi still hates your guts, by the way."

"Great," I groaned, "your best friend hates me. Just my luck."

"Yeah, my siblings aren't exactly too fond of you either after that little stunt you pulled back in Seoul, but I'm sure they'll warm up to you again soon enough," she tried to reassure me.

"Was that supposed to make me feel better?"

"Sort of, yeah," she laughed. "Relax Taeyeon-ah, my siblings are the last people you have to worry about."

"And Jessica?"

"Well..."

I let out another groan. I wanted anyone that was important to her to like me. "What did I ever do to her?"

"You used Yuri."

“But Yuri forgave me!”

“Well,” Tiffany sighed, “she’s still mad. She just...really cares about Yuri, that’s all.”

I glanced at her for a quick second. “I can see where she’s coming from,” I admitted softly, “If I felt like someone didn’t treat *you* right...I’d be mad too.”

She squeezed my hand again. “Don’t worry, she’ll come around eventually.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah,” she nodded, “Honestly? I think you two are really similar, and I feel like she’ll be a little more forgiving because of that.”

“We’re similar?” I scoffed, “In what way exactly?”

“I didn’t mean in personality. I meant,” she paused and bit the tip of her tongue, something I’d noticed she did a lot whenever she wasn’t sure of the right words to say, “you guys have gone through the same thing.”

“Oh,” I blinked, “*oh*.”

“So don’t worry, Taeyeon. I’m sure on some level, she understands.”

“What do you think I have to do for her to stop being mad at me?”

“Nothing specific really...well, be extra nice to Yuri, for one,” she laughed. “Oh, and treat me right too, of course.”

“Of course,” I grinned.

We let the radio fill the silence again.

I had forgotten about the picture in my hand from earlier. I studied it a little more closely the second time around. Tiffany looked like she had only been four or five when the picture was taken. Mr. Hwang looked considerably younger, but it was still undoubtedly him. Memories of him as my English teacher came back to me. The corners of my lips tugged up into a smile.

I had come a long way, hadn’t I?

“You know, I can’t to go back to Seoul in the summer, so I can show you off properly.”

Because now, I wasn’t afraid.

“Oh yeah?” If she hadn’t been wearing her sunglasses, I was sure I’d be able to see her eyes twinkle. “Why’s that?”

“Because, you’re an amazing person, and people deserve to know that.”

Her cheeks turned the faintest shade of red. “You too, Taeyeon.”

I smiled.

“I know.”