

Seoul Mates

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DEDICATION

This book is for Pamela Van Den Bosch.
The best head teacher, the best *friend* anyone could have.
Thank you for everything. See you in Canada and/ or NZ!

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Brooke closed her eyes and saw it again. Mike's hands, running all over her body. His mouth, licking, nibbling. The swollen length of him, pressing between her thighs. The sighs and moans of pleasure, mixed with his animal-like grunts. Just the memory sent surges of emotion running through her body.

That swine, she thought. How could he have done that to her, after eight years together? After dating since they were seventeen? After she gave him her virginity? How could he have thrown it all away with that tramp?

Emotion surged anew, shooting and roiling through Brooke's body with all the raw, untamed power of a hurricane. She felt her stomach clench, and she bolted up from her seat, frantically clawing at the seatbelt until it released its grip.

"Sorry," she said as she stumbled across the passenger next to her. He grunted in reply, but Brooke didn't hear; she was already walking as quickly as she could towards the lavatories.

Have to hold it, she thought. *Have to -*

"Bluurgh". She couldn't control it; she vomited. It bounced off the hand she'd raised halfway to her mouth, as if it would do

any good, and landed squarely in someone's lap. Brooke doubled over, feeling her intestines spasm again. An airline staff member approached and guided her into the bathroom, while two others began to clean up the mess.

After a torturous half hour spent in the bathroom bent over the toilet with a middle-aged airline employee named June for company, Brooke was beginning to feel better. Slowly, she shuffled out of the cubicle and began the trek back to her seat. The only sign of the mess she'd left on the floor was a faint watery outline. Even the smell had mostly gone. The unfortunate passenger who'd borne the brunt of her first assault, however, had not fared so well. He sat, in what was now an empty row, in what must have been his only change of clothes; he was still vomit-stained and smelled more like fertilizer than roses.

“Hey, I'm really sorry”. Brooke said as she passed. The guy was around her age, with short black hair and a firm jaw line. His green eyes met her grey ones as he looked up, and said, with only a mild trace of sarcasm “no problem.”

An awkward silence followed, as neither was sure what to say next. The moment stretched, becoming increasingly uncomfortable. Finally, the guy looked away, pointedly returning his attention to a magazine. Brooke noticed that it, too had received some of her 'gift'. She mumbled another apology, and resumed the journey back to her assigned seat. She became increasingly aware of the sniffs of other passengers as she passed, and felt her face reddening as she realized she must smell as bad as, if not worse than, the guy she threw up on. Finally arriving at her row, she cracked open the overhead luggage compartment. A medium-sized brown carry bag bounced off her head and landed on the floor.

“Oh well,” she muttered to herself, “at least it's mine.”

Inside the bag was her last item of clean clothing; an old, baggy T-shirt that Mike had given her and she'd been unable to

throw away. Picking up the bag, Brooke turned and re-traced her steps back to the bathroom. As she passed 'Chuck' as she thought of him, he looked up.

“Not planning a repeat performance, I hope”, he said.

She blushed, mumbled “No”, and went in to freshen up.

Seven hours later, the plane finally landed at Incheon airport. Brooke waited until most of the passengers behind her had passed before standing and retrieving her bag. Clutching the bag in one hand, and her completed customs declaration and immigration forms in the other, she joined the queue heading for the exit. The trip to the immigration counter was longer than she would have thought possible for four o'clock on a Saturday morning, but eventually she got there, passed through, and went in search of her bags. Amazingly, she found them without a problem, and also got through customs easily.

Walking through her exit gate, Brooke was assaulted by the sights, sounds and smells of her new home for the next year. The blue sky she was used to had been replaced by a dull gray one, the familiar hum of conversation had become a meaningless babble, and she suddenly felt overwhelmed by an intense urge to run back onto the plane and head home.

“Ah, excuse please.” A man said. “You are Brooke Langford?”

She nodded, and he reached out a hand to help with her suitcase. “I am Mr. Lee. Come with me.” Again, Brooke nodded, and followed along. She felt like a 2-year old must feel about her parents; unable to let Mr. Lee out of her sight because she would be lost, alone and completely helpless if she did so. It was not a feeling she enjoyed.

Instead of exiting the airport, Mr. Lee took her over to a vacant seat, and asked her to sit down.

“I must have one more teacher to collect.” He said. Brooke sat, mentally processing what she'd just heard, and dissecting once again her decision to teach in Korea for a year.

“You're going to do *what?*” Her mother had said. “Why would you do want to do that? Do you know they eat dogs over there? And who knows what else?”

The sun had streamed in through the windows in what her mother termed the “Parlor”. In reality, it was a small porch which had been completely enclosed in glass, resulting in Brooke feeling like she was in a cross between a fishbowl and a glass house. Mrs. Langford had a glass of wine in her hand (as always), and a cigarette was busy burning its way to the filter in the ashtray next to her chair.

“Mom,” Brooke had said, “It's not like that at all. And anyway, after what happened with Mike, I just feel like I need a change, is all.”

Mrs. Langford had sucked noisily on her cigarette before pulling her ultimate trick out of the bag. “And what would your poor father say, God rest his soul, if he were still alive?” She looked over at the framed picture of Harold Charles Langford in his Air Force days. In the picture, he stood in front of a Challenger 601 in his full uniform, cigarette in his mouth and a 'take no crap' expression on his face. Out of all the family pictures that had ever been taken, this was Mrs. Langford's favorite. Brooke had to admit (if only to herself) that it was hers, too.

Brooke sighed. She'd known this was coming.

“I don't know, Mom. Probably something like 'kick him where it hurts and get on with life'. Which,” she continued before her mother could butt in, “is exactly what I'm doing.”

The rest of the conversation was a blur, as conversations with her mother tended to be, but in the end, Mrs. Langford had

agreed to let her only child head off to a 'dirty, smelly, foreign' country for a year.

Brooke was startled out of her remembrances by a hand gently shaking her shoulder. It was Mr. Lee, back from collecting the other teacher. Peering blearily up, Brooke was somewhat surprised to recognize him. It was “Chuck”, still vomit-stained and not smelling the best. He had a battered suitcase in tow, and a slightly bemused expression on his face.

“This is Charles,” Mr. Lee said. “This is Brooke.”

“Um, hi?” Charles offered.

Brooke wasn't sure what to say. After all, she was responsible for his current condition. Finally she settled on “Hi”.

The three exited the airport, and Brooke felt overwhelmed by the differences between what she was used to, and her current conditions. As soon as she walked out of the door, she hit a wall of cigarette smoke, and a wave of heat and humidity the like of which she'd never known. Robotically, she followed Mr. Lee to a ticket booth, where he conducted a conversation she didn't understand, and then to Gate 7B, where she and Charles were told to wait for the bus.

“Your owner will meet you at hotel,” Mr. Lee informed them. Then, without waiting for a 'goodbye', offering any advice or asking if they needed anything, he left.

Brooke and Charles stood, shuffling uncomfortably for a minute, before Brooke finally spoke.

“Hey, about the whole puking thing...”

“Yeah...,” Charles said. “I mean, could you not have held it in? I didn't think they liked people traveling with the flu.”

In that moment, Brooke saw a flash of Mike's face over Charles'. Instantly on the defensive, she replied, “No, it's not the flu, and no, I couldn't have held it in any more. It came over me so suddenly. I did the best I could.”

He continued, almost as if she hadn't spoken. "Well, I suppose it did mean I got a whole row to myself. And at least that annoying brat behind me stopped kicking me in the kidneys." He stopped, and began staring off into the distance.

Hmm. Brooke thought. *He's actually kind of cute.*

The thought brought a rush of color to her cheeks, and she became aware of a slight queasy sensation in her stomach. That feeling brought her quickly back to reality, but after a moment she was sure it was just nerves, and she wasn't going to suffer a repeat of her airplane experience.

The bus arrived, and before she was quite aware of what was happening, a crowd of Koreans appeared almost magically between Brooke and the bus. They crowded the door and luggage spaces, jostling her, Charles and each other in a race to place their luggage and get on to the bus. Eventually, a space opened up, and Brooke slid her suitcase into the last space available. Unfortunately, this meant that Charles couldn't fit his in. Brooke decided that it just wouldn't be fair, after everything else that had happened, for him to have to lug his suitcase on the bus as well, so she began to wiggle hers back out. Charles stopped her by placing his hand on it.

"Don't worry about it." He said.

"You're sure?"

"Yep." He sighed. "It's just one more 'interesting' thing that's happened on this trip."

They turned, and climbed on board the bus. There were only two seats left, right at the back. Brooke felt like everyone was staring at her as she walked to a seat. Behind, she could hear "oops", "sorry" and occasional bumps and grunts as Charles' suitcase collided with some of the other passengers. Finally, they settled into their seats.

As he sat, knees bent almost up to his ears, Charles couldn't help thinking that so far, he'd gotten exactly what he'd been

looking for. Bored of life as retail assistant, he'd woken up one morning and decided that his life wasn't going anywhere. He still lived in the same town he'd grown up in, had the same friends he'd had since kindergarten, and was still working the same job he'd started while at university. A few minutes of contemplation had brought him to the realization that if he wanted a change, he'd have to go and find it himself. With that thought in mind, he'd made a list of the biggest changes he could think of, and then set about finding a way to achieve them. Teaching in Korea had checked all the right boxes; new country, new friends (hopefully), new career, and the opportunity for further travel. And now, here he was. Already, more random, interesting (even if annoying) events had happened to him than on any other day of his life.

Charles looked over at Brooke. She'd begun to fall asleep, her long, raven-dark hair hanging down across her shoulder. As she relaxed, the tension she unconsciously held in her face drained away, and allowed her natural beauty to show.

Wow. Charles thought. *She's pretty hot.*

The bus started moving, and Brooke jerked awake. Charles quickly moved his eyes, so that he appeared to be looking out the window. Brooke smiled dreamily, muttered something, and then went right back to sleep.

Charles spent the rest of the trip looking out the window, reveling in the unfamiliarity of everything, and occasionally glancing over at the sleeping angel next to him. He had to resist the urge to move her hair, which would have allowed him a better view of her face. Instead, as they traveled, he began to daydream about her. He wondered what it would feel like to kiss her, to hold her body close to his, and run his fingers through her hair, down her neck, and...

The bus stopped. Charles instantly shot to wakefulness, and became aware of the fact that he'd been resting his head on Brooke's shoulder, and had left a sizeable patch of drool.

Whoops, he thought.

Brooke was still sleeping. Charles briefly debated the social acceptability of waking her, and then decided to do it anyway. Using just the tip of his index finger, he began to gently shake her by the shoulder.

"We're here," he told her. "Time to wake up."

"Oh, Mike," she mumbled. "Just a couple more minutes."

Mike. Boyfriend.

The bus driver walked up to the back, and began jabbering at them in Korean.

"Sorry," Charles told him, aware that the bus driver probably understood as much English as he, Charles, understood Korean. "She's asleep."

He continued the gentle shaking, finally putting more effort (and his full hand) into it, and after another minute Brooke woke. Charles removed his hand so fast he could almost see a smoke trail.

"We're here. Time to get off the bus and see the wonders on offer."

They managed to get off the bus reasonably quickly. Charles could hear the bus driver muttering something behind them, and he began to question the wisdom of coming to a country where he couldn't understand a word of the language. Pushing the negative thoughts aside, he walked over to a woman holding a sign with his name. On the way, he glanced over his shoulder, and saw Brooke doing the same thing, heading over to a short man with a bad haircut. She smiled shyly at him.

"Guess I'll see you round."

He nodded. Then the two continued on into their new lives.