

Behind The Lights

by Mira L. Park

ACT ONE: SETUP

Chapter 1

The venue in Brixton smelled like stale beer and decades of dream-chasing. Emma Rothschild kept her camera steady as the lead singer of Velvet Tide threw himself across the tiny stage, all raw energy and questionable vocal technique. Around her, maybe seventy people watched with varying degrees of interest—some genuinely moved, others just killing time before the headline act.

This was the reality of independent music: intimate, unglamorous, and brutally honest. Emma loved it.

She adjusted her aperture to compensate for the terrible stage lighting, catching the moment the bassist's fingers flew across the frets during the bridge. The shot would be gorgeous in the final cut—all motion and shadows and the kind of unfiltered passion that disappeared the moment money entered the equation. “Emma! Emma, you're a legend!”

The shout came from backstage as the set ended. Jamie, the lead singer, bounded over with the manic energy of someone riding an adrenaline high. His eyeliner was smudged, his vintage t-shirt soaked through with sweat. “Did you get the breakdown in the third song? Tell me you got it.” “I got it.” Emma lowered her camera, letting it hang from the strap around her neck. The weight was familiar, comforting—a barrier between her and the world that had served her well for three years. “The whole set looked good. I'll have a rough cut by Thursday.” “You're brilliant. Genuinely.” Jamie dragged a hand through his hair, making it stand up in every direction. “We could never afford anyone half as good as you. You know that, right?” Emma's mouth twitched. “You're paying me in beer and exposure. I'm aware of my market value.” “Yeah, but you make us look like we know what we're doing.” He grinned, then his expression shifted to something more serious. “Hey, I heard about that documentary gig. The K-pop thing. You taking it?” Emma's hand went to her wrist, fingers finding the worn leather of her brother's watch. She'd been trying not to think about the email sitting in her inbox, the one with the eye-watering day rate and the Seoul departure date. “Still deciding,” she said, which was a lie. She'd already run the numbers three times. Her rent was due in two weeks, her equipment insurance was overdue, and she'd been living on meal deals from Tesco for longer than she cared to admit. She needed the money. The question was whether she could stomach the work. “It's a lot of money for pointing a camera at pretty boys,” Jamie said carefully. “No judgment. We all have bills.”

“It's not that simple.” Emma shifted her camera bag higher on her shoulder. “They want me to make them look good. That's not documentary work—that's

propaganda.”

“Every documentary has an angle, Em.”

“There’s an angle, and then there’s lying.” She softened her tone. “But yeah, I’ll probably take it. Singapore won’t pay for itself.”

Jamie knew better than to ask about Singapore. Everyone who knew Emma knew about the small apartment near Little India where her best friend from film school lived, the place she’d been threatening to visit for two years—ever since London started feeling less like home and more like a city full of ghosts.

“When would you leave?”

“Next week. Maybe.” Emma checked her watch—23:47. “I need to pack up. Long day tomorrow.”

“Right, yeah. Well, if you do go, promise you’ll send us photos of you bossing around some idol who makes millions. For our own entertainment.”

“They’re just people, Jamie.”

“People with perfect skin and choreographed lives. Come on, at least admit it’ll be weird for you.”

Emma didn’t answer, just gave him a small wave and headed toward the back exit where she’d stashed the rest of her equipment. The truth was, it would be weird. She’d built her career on intimate projects—musicians who played for love not money, artists who chose authenticity over commercial success.

K-pop was the opposite of everything she believed in. Manufactured perfection. Controlled images. Young people turned into products and sold to the masses.

But the day rate was triple her usual fee, and the contract was for three months with accommodation included. Three months in Seoul, filming a world tour documentary for a group called AURORA5. She’d looked them up after the initial inquiry—five impossibly beautiful Korean men with tens of millions of followers and a level of fame she couldn’t quite comprehend.

The email from their company had been clinical, professional, and very clear about expectations: capture the magic, maintain the mystery, don’t make waves.

Emma loaded her equipment into her battered Toyota, the back seat permanently configured for gear. London stretched out around her—the city where she’d gone to film school, where her brother had played in bands just like Velvet Tide, where she’d learned to see the world through a lens because it was easier than looking at it directly.

Her phone buzzed as she started the engine. A message from her agent, Sarah: They need an answer by tomorrow morning. It’s a yes or no, Em. No more hedging.

Emma stared at the message, thumb hovering over the keyboard. Her practical brain knew the answer. Her artist's heart resisted. But hearts didn't pay rent. She typed quickly before she could overthink it: Tell them yes. I'll take it.

The response came immediately: Thank God. I'll send the contract details in the morning. You're doing the right thing.

Emma dropped the phone into the cup holder and pulled out into the quiet Brixton streets. The right thing. Maybe. Or maybe she was just doing the necessary thing, which wasn't always the same.

Seoul, South Korea Gangnam-gu, AURORA5 Practice Room

23:47 KST (Same moment, 8 hours ahead)

Kang Minho's reflection stared back at him from the mirrored wall, and he hated what he saw. Not the physical image—that was fine, acceptable, exactly what seven years of training and careful management had designed. Dark hair swept back from his forehead, lean frame in black joggers and a fitted t-shirt, posture controlled even in exhaustion. No, he hated the emptiness behind his own eyes.

"Hyung, you're doing it again."

Minho blinked, the spell breaking. Behind him, Park Seojun sat against the wall, knees pulled to his chest, his face still flushed from practice. The other members had left an hour ago, but Seojun always stayed. He worried.

"Doing what?" Minho reached for his water bottle, buying time.

"The thing where you stare at yourself like you're trying to find something that's not there."

Seojun's voice was gentle, careful. He knew better than to push too hard.

"Manager-nim says we're done for the night. We have that morning schedule—"

"I know the schedule."

"I know you know."

Seojun stood, stretching his arms overhead. At 25, he was two years younger than Minho but sometimes seemed older, more settled in his own skin.

"I'm just saying, you running the choreo another twenty times isn't going to make tomorrow easier."

Minho rubbed his left temple where the migraine was starting to build—the same migraine that had been his constant companion for the past three months. Stress-induced, the doctor said. Nothing physically wrong. Just the weight of being the leader of one of Korea's biggest idol groups. Just that.

"Go back to the dorm," Minho said. "I'll be right behind you."

Seojun gave him a look that said he didn't believe that for a second, but he knew better than to argue.

"Don't stay past midnight. You need sleep."

"I'll sleep when the tour's over."

"The tour hasn't even started yet, hyung."

Minho didn't answer, just turned back to the mirror and hit play on the music. Seojun sighed, grabbed his bag, and left.

Silence, except for the opening bars of their title track bleeding through the speakers.

Minho counted himself in—five, six, seven, eight—and moved.

This was the only time he felt real anymore. When his body moved without thought, when muscle memory took over and his mind could go quiet. The choreography was brutal, demanding, technically perfect. He'd practiced it ten thousand times and he'd practice it ten thousand more because that was what leaders did.

Leaders didn't complain. Leaders didn't crack. Leaders carried the weight and made it look effortless.

The routine ended. Minho held the final pose, breathing hard, sweat dripping down his spine.

In the mirror, he looked exactly like what he was supposed to be: the professional, the perfectionist, the one who never wavered.

Empty.

His phone buzzed from where he'd left it by the sound system. He crossed the room, every muscle aching, and checked the message. Manager Bang:

Documentary crew arrives next week. Meeting scheduled for Tuesday. Behave yourself.

Minho almost laughed. Behave yourself. As if he ever did anything else.

Another message, this one from CEO Woo: *This documentary is critical for the international market. The videographer comes highly recommended. Give her what she needs. Within reason.*

Her. So the documentarian was a woman. Minho wondered briefly if that was strategic—less threatening, perhaps, less likely to make the fans jealous. Everything was strategic in this industry. Nothing happened by accident.

He typed back a simple acknowledgment and set the phone down.

The practice room felt too big suddenly, too quiet. Beyond the windows, Seoul glittered—Gangnam's expensive skyline, the city that never quite slept. Some-

where out there, millions of people knew his name, knew his face, knew the version of him that existed on stages and screens.

None of them knew him. Minho caught sight of himself in the mirror again. This time he didn't look away. "Who are you?" he asked the reflection. The reflection had no answer.

London, UK Emma's Flat, Brixton 16:23 GMT (Next day)

Emma's flat was small, efficiently organized, and deeply impersonal. She'd lived here for three years and it still looked like she might leave at any moment. No art on the walls, no trinkets, nothing that couldn't be packed into boxes within an hour. The only permanent fixture was her brother's old record player, sitting on the shelf near the window, vinyl collection intact but gathering dust. She hadn't played anything in eight months. Couldn't bear to, yet couldn't bring herself to pack it away. Her laptop sat open on the kitchen table—the contract from the Korean entertainment company displayed in careful legalese. She'd read it twice, signed it once, and sent it back before her brain could catalog all the ways this job violated her artistic principles.

Three months. Seoul. AURORA5's world tour documentary.

A daily rate that made her slightly nauseous and a non-disclosure agreement longer than some of her university papers. The NDA was the part that bothered her most. She'd signed plenty of contracts in her career, but never one that controlled what she could say, what she could film, what she could show. The company had approval over all footage. They could request reshoots, demand deletions, control the narrative completely.

This wasn't documentary work. This was marketing.

But it was also £15,000 a month plus expenses, and Emma's bank account had exactly £847 in it. She closed the laptop and moved to the window, looking out over Brixton's afternoon chaos. The market was busy, the streets full of people living their lives, everyone with somewhere to be. Emma felt untethered, like she'd felt for three years, since the morning her phone rang and someone told her about the accident. Since the day her little brother's promising music career ended on a rainy M25, and she'd learned that grief didn't fade—it just got quieter, more manageable, more like a weight you learned to carry. She'd started documentary work right after. Started filming other people's lives because looking at her own hurt too much. The camera became her shield, her excuse, her purpose. And now she was taking it to Seoul to film beautiful lies for beautiful boys who probably had everything they'd ever wanted.

Her phone rang. Sarah, her agent."Please tell me you're packing," Sarah said without preamble.

"I'm contemplating packing."

“Emma.”

“I signed the contract, didn’t I? I’ll be ready.”

“You fly out Monday. Four days. Have you even looked at the research materials they sent?”

Emma glanced at the folder icon on her desktop. AURORA5 - Background Materials. She hadn’t opened it yet.

“I’ll review everything on the plane.”

“They’re huge, Em. Like, legitimately huge. Sold-out world tour, millions of albums, endorsement deals with everyone. This isn’t some indie band in Shoreditch.”

“I’m aware.”

“Are you though?” Sarah’s voice gentled. “Because I know this isn’t your usual thing. I know you’re doing it for the money. But it could actually be good for your career if you let it be. One credit on a major K-pop documentary and you could have studios calling.”

“I don’t want studios calling.”

“You say that now, but—”

“Sarah.” Emma cut her off, not unkindly. “I’m taking the job. I’ll do professional work. But let’s not pretend this is anything other than what it is: a paycheck.”

A pause. Then: “Just... try to keep an open mind, okay? You might be surprised.”

Emma doubted that, but she made a noncommittal sound that seemed to satisfy Sarah.

After they hung up, Emma finally opened the research folder.

Five faces looked back at her from the first promotional image. AURORA5, arranged in a carefully composed shot—sophisticated styling, perfect skin, expressions that managed to be both welcoming and untouchable.

She scanned the names: Choi Jaesung (Main Vocalist, Visual, Center), Park Seojun (Main Vocalist), Lee Taeyang (Main Dancer, Lead Rapper), Han Yuwon (Vocalist, Visual, Maknae). And in the center, slightly forward: Kang Minho (Leader, Lead Rapper, Sub-Vocalist).

Emma studied his face. Strong jawline, serious expression, dark eyes that seemed to look through the camera rather than at it. The caption listed him as 27, which made him her age.

The company bio described him as “the heart of AURORA5, known for his thoughtful leadership and dedication to the members.”

Corporate speak for: does what he’s told and doesn’t cause problems.

She clicked through more photos—concert shots, magazine covers, airport fashion, variety show appearances. In every single image, they looked flawless.

Not a hair out of place, not a moment uncontrolled.

Emma felt something harden in her chest. This was everything she hated about commercial entertainment. The polish, the performance, the way real humanity got buffed away until only the marketable parts remained.

But she'd signed the contract. She'd take their money, film their tour, and deliver exactly what they wanted: a glossy, beautiful lie that would make fans around the world fall deeper in love with five men they'd never really know.

Then she'd take her paycheck, go to Singapore, and figure out what came next. Emma closed the laptop and went to pack.

Seoul, South Korea AURORA5 Dormitory, Yongsan-gu

23:15 KST (Four days later)

“She arrives tomorrow,” Jaesung said, sprawled across the dorm’s common room sofa like a cat in a sunbeam. At 26, he was impossibly beautiful in the way that seemed effortless but Emma would soon learn was anything but.

“The documentary woman.”

“Videographer,” Minhø corrected, not looking up from his phone. He was reviewing tomorrow’s schedule for the fifteenth time, as if the timing might have changed in the last ten minutes.

“Same thing.”

“It’s not the same thing.”

“Hyung, you’re being pedantic again.” This from Yuwon, the youngest at 22, who was playing a video game with the kind of intense focus most people reserved for surgery.

“Does it matter what we call her?”

“It matters that we’re respectful,” Minhø said. “She’s a professional. We should treat her like one.”

Taeyang looked up from where he was stretching by the window—the dancer could never quite sit still.

“Manager-nim says she’s British. You think she speaks Korean?”

“Her profile said she’s studied it,” Seojun offered. He was the only one who’d actually read the briefing materials. “She’s worked on international projects before.”

“I hope she’s not one of those people who wants us to be ‘natural’ all the time,” Jaesung made air quotes with his fingers.

“You know the type. ‘Just act normal! Pretend the camera isn’t there!’ Like that’s possible.”

“She’s documenting the tour,” Minho said. “Not our personalities. Just do what you always do.”

“Perform, you mean.” Jaesung’s tone was light, but there was an edge underneath that Minho chose to ignore.

“We’re performers. It’s what we do.”

The room fell quiet for a moment, just the sound of Yuwon’s game and the distant hum of Seoul traffic. The dorm was luxury by most standards—a high-rise in Yongsan with security and privacy and enough space for five grown men to maintain some semblance of personal lives.

But it was still a dorm. Still company-provided. Still a reminder that even their home wasn’t entirely theirs.

“Do you think she’ll be pretty?” Yuwon asked suddenly.

Four pairs of eyes turned to him.

“What?” He didn’t look away from his screen. “I’m just asking.”

“It doesn’t matter if she’s pretty,” Minho said firmly. “She’s here to work. We’re here to work. Everyone stays professional.”

“You’re no fun, hyung.”

“I’m the leader. Fun isn’t my job.”

Jaesung snorted. “Trust me, we’ve noticed.”

Before Minho could respond, his phone buzzed.

Manager Bang: *Early call time tomorrow. 6 AM. Meeting with documentary team at 9. Look presentable. And get some sleep for once.*

Minho showed the message to the others, then stood. “You heard the man. Early morning.”

The members groaned but began the slow process of winding down for the night. As they dispersed to their rooms, Seojun caught Minho’s arm.

“You okay?” he asked quietly.

“Fine. Why?”

“You’re doing the temple thing.” Seojun nodded toward Minho’s hand, which had unconsciously moved to rub his left temple. “Migraine?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Minho-hyung—”

“I’m fine, Seojun-ah. Really.” Minho softened his voice. “Get some rest. Tomorrow’s going to be long.”

Seojun looked like he wanted to argue, but finally nodded and headed to his room.

Minho stood in the empty common room, rubbing his temple, feeling the familiar pressure building behind his eyes. The migraine would get worse before it got better. They always did.

But there was nothing to be done about it except endure.

That was leadership, really. Endurance dressed up as strength.

He thought about the videographer arriving tomorrow—Emma Rothschild, the briefing had said. Twenty-seven years old, based in London, specialized in music documentaries. Her sample reel had been impressive, full of raw, intimate moments that felt startlingly real.

Which was exactly why Minho would make sure she never got those moments from him. The company wanted polished, perfect, promotional. Minho would deliver polished, perfect, promotional. He’d been doing it for seven years. He could do it for three more months. Then the tour would be over, the documentary would be finished, and Emma Rothschild would go back to London having captured exactly what the company paid for: a beautiful lie. Minho turned off the common room lights and headed to bed, his temple throbbing, his mind already running through tomorrow’s schedule.

Neither he nor Emma knew it yet, but in less than twelve hours, they would meet for the first time. And nothing would go according to plan.