

## Once Again 111

### Chapter 111

Maru didn't say anything for a long time. No, maybe it was just the awkward air between them that made the passing time feel so slow. Daemyung looked at Maru carefully for a second before leaving to buy himself a drink. He bought a fizzy lemon soda. Perhaps the sour taste of the lemons could help kill his nervousness a little bit. Sadly, all it did was tickle his throat.

Tok tok tok. Maru was tapping on the table, looking out through the window in front of him. What was the boy thinking? Thankfully he didn't seem very mad.

"Hey Daemyung."

"What?"

"What's the most important thing to you right now?"

"Well, I can't really choose. My family's important, my friends, acting..."

"Right? It's ridiculous to choose just one thing in your life, right?"

"....."

"But let's say there was a person who lived just for one thing. What would happen if you took that one thing away from them?"

"He'd become really sad."

Was Maru talking about himself? The boy still hadn't denied anything Daemyung had written in his diary. Maybe Maru was talking in extension to what Daemyung initially wrote. Did that mean Maru could choose "one thing" in his life that was the most important?

Daemyung couldn't imagine it. Everything in his mind, from his family to friends to acting, were pretty much on equal footing. He wouldn't be able to choose one thing that was more important than the others no matter what.

"Han Maru, acting out the role of Han Maru."

"I just wrote that down for no reason. Don't worry about it."

Maru nodded with a smile, but his mood seemed dark. He was probably thinking about what was written in the diary, and Daemyung started feeling bad for making Maru so concerned.

"A lot of these are just dumb predictions, so... Don't keep it in your mind too much."

He put the diary back in his bag. Making judgments and observing his friend had been a pretty fun experience. He thought he knew a lot about Maru, but that immediately turned out to be untrue. Learning several new things about his precious friend was definitely a great experience, but he didn't realize that showing his observations to his friends would be so burdensome on his mind. Reviewing a person... The act of doing so was simple, but the results were incredibly stressful. Perhaps instructor Miso had all of this in mind when she gave them this homework.

At this point, Daemyung could only hope that his words wouldn't hurt Maru. Hopefully this wouldn't make Maru develop negative thoughts about him. After a few more seconds, Maru sighed, the dark shadow on his face starting to go away. He cracked his neck a few times, smiling a bit mysteriously.

"Thanks."

Thanks? Daemyung was confused. He'd written a very negative impression of Maru on that paper. He wasn't mad about this? Was he being sarcastic? That didn't seem to be the case. Maru seemed honestly thankful for what Daemyung had done.

"Can you do something for me?"

"Something?"

"Yeah."

"What is it? I'll do anything if I can."

"It's a bit difficult, but I hope you can do it. I think you'd do a really good job."

"Me?"

What did Maru plan on asking? Looking into the boy's eyes, Daemyung got an inkling of what Maru might want from him. Indeed, his prediction turned out to be correct.

"About that one-man play... Can you act out your second impression of me? I want to see it."

It really sounded more like a command than a simple request. Daemyung could only say 'yes' to Maru's words.

"Observation is an amazing thing, isn't it? I honestly had no idea that Daemyung was so good at seeing through people."

"...Really?"

"They say everyone has a talent, right? Maybe yours is observing people. Why don't you try going into criminal psychology instead of acting?"

Maru stood up with a slight smile.

"I'll tell you what I get after observing you as well in the near future. You observed the hell out of me, so I have to reciprocate. Get ready, you bastard."

"Y-you don't have to go that far, Maru."

Daemyung quickly waved his hand. He had a feeling that Maru might even chase him into the bathroom for observation.

"I'll get going first."

"Ah, yeah."

Daemyung watched Maru walk out of the convenience store. Thankfully, the boy didn't seem in as dark a mood as he did a few minutes ago.

“That’s good, I guess?”

Daemyung scratched the back of his neck nervously.

\* \* \*

Eleven o’clock. She was lying down dumbly on her bed. It felt like she could’ve just collapsed and drifted away into sleep when she arrived home, but once she took a shower, she felt wide-awake again. After rolling around on her bed with her worn script in hand, she stood up. Her phone was ringing. For some reason, just looking at the phone gave her an idea of who was calling. She took a look at the screen just to make sure. As she thought.

‘What kind of a dumb sixth sense thing is this?’

It was Maru. Should she be happy for being right? She took the call with a small smile. What did that weird kid want to talk about today?

“It’s not polite to call someone so late, you know.”

- Sorry, were you sleeping?

The boy would usually counter her with a very witty joke. Oddly, this time he apologized immediately. That surprised her quite a bit.

“Why are you apologizing all of the sudden? Just be normal.”

- I really don’t think I should, not today.

“What do you mean?”

She dropped back down onto her bed, her old mattress giving in with a little creak. She started listening a lot more carefully, feeling the blanket below her. No matter who it was, a call from a boy who had attention on her made her heart flutter just a little bit.

- I’m going to say something that I’m going to be even more sorry for, that’s why.

“Sorry for?”

- Yeah.

“What is it?”

- Can you come out right now?

“...What?”

She looked at the clock in her room. It was five minutes before eleven. The sun had set a very, very long time ago. He wanted her to go outside at a time like this?

“Are you crazy?”

- I know, I’m sorry. But can I see you?

“Hey, it’s eleven o’clock. What the hell’s going on?”

- I wanted to tell you something.

“Just tell me over the phone.”

- I don't think I can.

“...What the heck?”

She found herself being surprised by her own actions because, even as she answered, she realized she was starting to consider if her mom was in her room or not. Not only that, she was already getting dressed to go outside.

‘Crazy, this is all crazy.’

She got back on her bed again. It was 11. Her mom wasn't very strict, but she was sure to say something if she went out now.

“No way, tell me over the phone. If you can't just tell me tomorrow. We'll see each other again anyway.”

- Well, that's true. But I really think it needs to be now.

“You're really stubborn.”

- Because I know.

“What?”

- That you don't really hate stubborn people.

Right then, she heard a bus announcement through Maru's side. The typical boring music along with a ‘Sky Dentist is located on the other side of the station’. It was an ad she was all too familiar with. She flinched, knowing that the station in question was right in front of her apartment complex.

“Are you actually?!”

She stood right back up and looked outside. She could see the entrance of the apartment and, past it, a bus station. She could see a bus moving right away from the station. Where the bus had been was a single boy. How strange. There were so many other people on the street, and she couldn't even make out their faces. But why was it that she could recognize him so clearly regardless?

“There's no way, right? Yeah, no way.”

As soon as she said that, the boy on the street started waving his hand. She felt the blood start to drain from her face. What was he doing?!

“Are you crazy?! What are you doing?!”

- Oh, so you can see me. I don't even know where you might be, so many apartment buildings here.

“Hah.”

Absolutely ridiculous. To think he was coming here all this time... Cold wind began blowing in through the open window. It was cold. She crossed her arms as she continued looking out. She could see Maru standing around dumbly on the street.

“You’re not leaving?”

- It’s cold.

“You ass!”

- Yeah, I know I’m an ass today. I came to a girl’s place without even telling her about it. I can’t say anything back even if you call me names.

“You came knowing that?”

- Because I wanted to talk to you.

She hung up as she bit her lip. The boy was too headstrong. She wasn’t even ready! Her hair was still wet, she had a little acne she didn’t take care of yet as well. She didn’t have any nice clothes to wear right now, either.

“Wait, what am I...”

She got angrier when she realized she kept thinking about going outside. Even more ridiculous was the fact that she was grabbing that 50,000 won she owed him, as well as a scarf just in case he was cold.

Damn it, whatever!

She changed as fast as she could and stepped outside her room.

“Are you going somewhere?” Mom asked, raising her glasses.

Her mom was sitting in front of the notebook. Clearly still at work. She stuttered out some excuse about leaving to meet a friend, thankful that she was better than normal people when it came to controlling her breathing. Acting really was something that was useful in casual life as well. But...

“A boy?”

“N-no it’s not.”

“Stop lying. I was a girl too back in the day, you know. You look exactly like I did when I went to meet your father.”

“.....”

It felt like her face was about to explode, but she couldn’t do anything.

“Can I go out?”

“You’re a grown girl now, you don’t need permission. Try to come back before midnight, though. Don’t make your mother worry, you hear?”

“Yeah!”

Mom was the best! Though... upon realizing that she got this nervous for just meeting that guy, she got a little depressed again. Plus...

“Boyfriend?”

“No!”

“Oh, so a soon-to-be?”

“...Stop turning everything into a romance novel, mom.”

“Oh my, sorry. Force of habit, you know. It’s my job, after all.”

Her mom pointed to her notebook with a light smile. She shook her head as she stepped outside. She pressed the elevator button. Unfortunately, it was stuck on the 17th floor. It’d take too long for it to come down, so she headed to the staircase with a frown.

“Why am I...”

She muttered to herself in annoyance as she walked down.

“Even though it’s this annoying...”

Despite her complaints, she was moving faster and faster. On the way down, she started thinking of her memories with him. She met him for the first time at HyeHwa station and learned his name at the festival. The boy had said something like a confession back then. She’d thought he was just weird back then, but she really didn’t think she’d keep meeting him after that. They went on a date, by chance, some time ago. Honestly, she didn’t hate that date at all. After that date, Maru had kept asking her if she was free, and she turned him down a few times before finally saying yes.

To begin with, if she really hated him, she wouldn’t have even taken the call. No, she wouldn’t have told him her phone number at all. In any case, they continued to meet, and now they were meeting each other more than four times a week despite going to different schools. Maru always smiled, was considerate, and always worried for her. He was an odd kid who always asked to go on a date during the weekend. Before she knew it, she realized she’d stopped meeting other people during the weekend. Despite the fact that she was always annoyed when taking his calls, she still took them anyway.

She knew what all of this meant, but she didn’t want to accept it as fact. Because...

“He’s like an old man.”

He talked like a very mature person. Enough to make him almost seem a little cold compared to other people his age. But, whenever he looked at her, he smiled like an idiot. He might even give her his kidney if she said she needed it. She... really couldn’t hate someone like that. No, she couldn’t help but like him.

“Even so.”

She stepped out of the apartment entrance. She could see Maru standing on the other side of the street.

“There’s no way I’m going to be saying that first.”

She stepped towards Maru, tightly gripping the scarf in her hand.

**Chapter 112**

A bright neon light was flickering through a hole in an old sign for a jewelry shop that had one of its letters missing. Right next to the sign was the ever-familiar spinning pole of a barber shop. Maru really was standing next to a series of very old buildings. Based on how they looked very unnatural next to the other apartments, these buildings would probably get cleared out for renovation in the near future.

“Hah.”

Maru gathered his hands and blew a puff of air into it. He was being way too irresponsible. Calling a girl out at 11pm at night... That didn't look good, no matter how he thought about it.

“But...”

He couldn't help it today. He knew she wouldn't be happy, but he had to do it. He needed to hear from her. And he wanted to convey this feeling he had to her as well. It was starting to snow a little harder now, the snow was starting to stack on the floor below him.

‘First snow, huh.’

He'd seen news a while ago about the first snow, but to him, this was what first snow was. He tried catching a piece of snow, just like he did when he was a child, and the snow maintained its shape for a second before melting in his hand. He watched the snow melt for a second before trying to catch some more. Right then.

“Are you a kid or something, getting excited over snow like that?”

She was standing next to him already, holding a scarf in her hand. She wore pink pajama pants with a blue padded jacket over her, and Maru's eyes drifted over to her feet. The ankles that were exposed to the open air seemed pretty cold. Maru grabbed her hand.

“W-what the.”

“It's cold. Let's go somewhere first.”

“You said you wanted to say something though.”

“What?”

She started slowly moving along with him, and the two of them went into a nearby fast food store. It was a 24 hour restaurant, which probably explained why there were so many people there.

“You want anything to eat?”

“You're gonna get fat if you eat at night.”

“What about hot chocolate? Drinks are fine, right?”

“They're basically the same thing...”

She didn't say no, though, so Maru ordered it. A bulgogi burger, a nugget set, and a hot chocolate. He had a piece of bread as he talked with Daemyung, but that had turned out to be way too little. Just as he finished ordering and decided to turn around, he felt someone poke at his back. She was looking at the menu with a slightly bitter look.

“That.”

She was pointing at the burger the franchise released a while ago. Maru ordered the burger for her with a smile.

“It’s okay, as long as you eat before midnight, it might as well be zero calories.”

“Who says that kind of stuff?”

“Mm... someone I know really well.”

You.

She used to say this almost every time she had a night snack. After they got married, she even went so far as to say that it was fine to eat as long as she ate before 1am.

“Well, that’s very irresponsible,” she said, trembling a little bit from the cold.

Maru had to wonder what kind of a face she would make if she realized she was the one who used to say that line.

“Go up first, I’ll bring the food later.”

He sent her upstairs first, waiting for the food before going up himself. There were a bunch of college students upstairs. They were probably taking a break after studying all day. Some of them still had their textbooks open.

“Over here.”

“It’s your fault if I get fat.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll exercise with you.”

She was sniffing a little bit, so Maru took off his jacket to cover up her legs.

“It’s cold, you should’ve worn thicker clothes.”

“I didn’t have time because someone decided to call me out right away. That person has no manners, seriously.”

“Yeah, sounds like an asshole.”

“Oh, so you know?”

“That’s why I’m thankful that you came out.”

She took a sip of the hot chocolate with a frown, as the college students behind them began leaving together. A minute or two later after they left, an employee came up to clean up after their mess with a sigh.

“So, what did you want to say?”

She took her lips off of the cup as she asked. Even now, Maru was just messing with the burger in his hands.



“If you don’t have anything to say, I’m leaving.”

For a person saying that, she looked like she’d really settled in. Maru rested his chin on his hands and looked at her.

“Why did you start acting?”

“...Did you call me out on a cold winter night just to ask this question?”

When Maru simply shrugged, she pouted angrily as she looked at him. Maru looked back without saying anything, and their eyes met. To Maru, she almost seemed like the only person colored in in this gray world around him. The second floor had been very loud the entire time, but he couldn’t hear anything anymore. He probably wouldn’t be able to hear anything until she decided to speak.

She didn’t talk, though that pout of hers started disappearing after a few seconds. Her frown had disappeared as well. Now, she was looking at him quietly. Again, a word bubble popped up above his head. Again, Maru decided not to read it. He simply waited until she decided to open her mouth.

“...I’m gonna say this now, but don’t do this ever again. I’m not going to come out the next time you do this.”

“I promise.”

“Hah. I don’t know what’s going on, but I get you’re not just playing around. What happened?”

“It’s just...”

“...Will my answer help?”

“Maybe.”

She squinted a little bit before looking outside. Maru followed her gaze outside as well. It was snowing outside. Snowing so much that it almost looked like a massive white curtain was being draped over the earth.

“I made up my mind when I first went to a theater with my dad. I wanted to stand on stage.”

Her eyes seemed to be searching the skies as she put the word “dad” in her mouth. Maru knew, of course. He’d never met her father even in his previous life, her father passed away when she was in her first year of middle school. Even in his fading memories, this he remembered clearly. The day when he proposed to her, she had cried and told him there was somewhere she needed to go.

That place was the mountain where her dad was buried. That was the first time Maru managed to meet her father.

[Dad, this is him. He said he would make me happy. He’s said it with such stubbornness in his voice... It’s him.]

Maru looked at her hands. They were trembling ever so lightly as they rested on the table. He couldn’t just leave them to keep trembling like that, so he put his hands lightly over hers. She looked at him with surprise in her eyes, but Maru didn’t retract his hands, and the trembling stopped.

“My dad... worked at a publisher. He wanted to be an author, but he gave up after a few slips. He still liked literature though, which is why he went to a publisher. That’s where he met my mom.”

She was speaking almost as if she was recalling something she had read a long time ago. Maru nodded along, silently.

“Both of them were really into art. In fact, I used to go to art exhibits more often than anything else when I was young. It was boring, obviously. I couldn’t say anything, I couldn’t run, and I couldn’t brag about it to my friends.”

She smiled lightly, seemingly remembering that exact moment in her life.

“When I told my dad I was bored, he said we might as well go somewhere else.”

“That must have been the theater.”

“Yeah, I still remember it. The lady who was giving out tickets, the small path into the theater, the seats that were stuck very closely together. The purple lights above, and the actual play itself. My dad really was something else. He took me to small theaters, big theaters, you name it. After a certain point, plays ended up becoming my dream. I started wanting to be on stage myself and speak to the audience, so I joined a children’s theater when I was in middle school. We practiced a lot together, despite the fact that there wasn’t a proper teacher.”

“Was it fun?”

“Very. I still talk with those kids. The ones who found an acting club at their schools all joined, as well.”

She kept talking with a bit of sadness left on her face.

“There’s no amazing reason why I took up acting; it just kind of happened. But I’m grateful that it did. Grateful that my dad introduced me to acting.”

“Acting... must be precious to you.”

She closed her mouth for a second, before replying ‘it has to be’ very quietly. Her face seemed like it could explode into tears at any moment.

“It’s one of the few memories I have left with my dad. Of course... It’s very precious to me now.”

She squinted to prevent her tears from falling. Be it now or in the future, the fact that she cried whenever she talked about her dad didn’t seem to have changed. Maru couldn’t just keep watching her crying, so he raised his hand to wipe away a single tear running down her face. She watched him dumbly for a second, another tear running down her face.

“Sorry for asking you a question like that.”

“.....”

They didn’t talk for a moment, and Maru took the time to organize his thoughts while she calmed herself down. Before he came here, there were a lot of things he wanted to say in his mind, the number only increasing after they met. But right now, there was only one thing he wanted to say.

He knew saying it would make him seem incredibly rude and ridiculous; however, Maru was unable to think of anything else he could say. After all, this was the one thing that was the most perfect thing he could say in this moment.

“This is why guys carry a handkerchief around. Too bad I don’t have one.”

“Take one around with you next time.”

She smiled again. After that, they continued eating their food making some small talk. At some point, the burgers had cooled, and the nuggets were cold, but the meal was still delicious. Maru smiled as he watched her finish her burger and begin eyeing some of his nuggets and fries.

“So why did you start acting?”

She was asking a question with ketchup stuck next to her mouth. Maru pointed at it to draw her attention to it, but she didn’t understand. In the end, Maru took out a tissue to wipe her mouth with it himself.

“...I’m not a kid.”

“I know.”

Maru gathered the trash onto the tray in front of them as he spoke.

“I didn’t start acting naturally like you did. I started with something very specific in mind.”

“Specific? Are you planning on becoming an actor, too?”

“Not really.”

“Then what?”

“I just decided to use it as a stepping stone. A meaningless stepping stone. I could’ve used anything other than acting to use as a stepping stone, but I picked acting because it seemed appropriate.”

“What do you mean? I don’t get it.”

“Obviously. That’s because I don’t get what I’m saying either.”

“What?”

To explain this, they would have to talk about his memories and his past life. But he would get sent to a mental asylum the moment he said he’s her future husband. That’s why he could only pass it off like this.

“Hold on. I don’t get it, but you don’t really care about acting, is that it?”

“Kind of.”

“Then why are you acting?”

“Because I need it.”

“Why do you need it?”

“Because a person very important to me is doing it.”

He was both the high schooler Maru and the middle-aged Maru. Maru’s memories were that of his high school self, but his personality was closer to his middle-aged self. When Maru paid careful attention, he realized at some point that his self was split into two. He probably didn’t notice because he hadn’t paid too much attention to it. Then again, how many people would be suspicious of themselves in this life to begin with?

‘If it wasn’t for Daemyung, I wouldn’t even have thought about it.’

In the beginning of the school year, he’d thought about how to achieve his dream. But at some point, he’d given up on his dream altogether. He’d decided that he would need to find a way to survive the coming future. But in his heart, his young self was still screaming. His young self wanted to help others and act mature to look good in front of others. His young self who wanted to chase a dream was still there. On the other hand, his adult self was there as well. His self that sought safety more than anything.

Perhaps acting was a result of his younger self conflicting with his older self. On the surface, he thought of acting as just a method of being able to meet her. But inside, Han Maru was excited about being on the stage. Daemyung had told him before that he was like a Han Maru that acted the role of Han Maru. A middle-aged man who was in a shell that was his high school self. But after a certain point, that shell that was himself was starting to disappear. Han Maru was starting to become Han Maru.

Maybe all this time, Maru was afraid of how he was starting to like acting. Because on the inside, he just wanted to keep his family safe. But recently, that mindset was starting to break. He was caring more about acting. He started because of money, but now he’s realized what it felt like to be on stage. He realized that his desire to be on stage was only growing even more over time.

What started off as a simple stepping stone to his goal was starting to grow into something even more. It was a dangerous sign. He’d realized that the stories of the ghosts of Hyeonwa station didn’t even sound bad to him. Was this okay? Maybe he should give up acting right now and do something else altogether. That would be better for her, wouldn’t it?

He was scared.

Daemyung’s words cut into his heart deeply. She was starting to become a stranger, someone who didn’t matter in his life at all. That scared him a lot. He didn’t even think about it because he was scared. Because it was easier to simply think that she would be his no matter what happened. He needed to face reality now, though. Maybe it was too early. He didn’t even know what kind of a change this would bring. But he needed to say it now. He needed to bring about a change in his life.

“I like you. I really... like you.”

Among all the words in the dictionary, that was the only thing he could use to convey his feelings.

## **Chapter 113**

Maru got on the bus. She watched as Maru waved at her and didn’t even think about waving back. She was just dazed. Dazed enough to keep standing in the same place even ten minutes after Maru had left.

She only managed to come back to her senses when the snow piled on her head melted onto her face. She shook her head, dislodging the snow that had piled up.

“Crazy, crazy.”

She waited until the signal changed before crossing the road. As she waited, a car passed by next to her, the resulting wind making her squint a little bit. As she squinted, her mind returned to Maru waving at her again.

“Crazy.”

She walked across the road with a shake of her head. Her home was around five minutes out. The chill returned to her arms and legs as she walked, causing her to speed up a little bit more. Shaking off the snow on her shoulders, she entered the apartment building. Inside, she could see rows of postboxes, several advertisements, and a little square mirror hanging on the walls. When she walked past the mirror, she took a step back in surprise. Her face was as red as a beet, even with all the cold she experienced outside.

She tried putting her hands on her cheeks. They were hot, like the time she accidentally drank soju at a wedding hall.

“If mom sees this...”

Mom wouldn't let this pass easily. Her mom would try to get a story out of her, and she would inevitably give in. That wouldn't be good at all. She stood outside for a few minutes to cool down, but the heat wouldn't leave her face at all. It felt like they actually got hotter, even.

“Are you waiting for someone?” The security guard asked, worriedly.

She replied saying, ‘it's nothing, I'm just hot’, making the guard look at her a little oddly. Then again, it was a very cold night in early December. Even so, she really did feel very hot right now. She looked at the clock inside the security office. It was 20 minutes before midnight. She would need to go back within twenty minutes.

It was an odd feeling. Her face was hot, but her feet were freezing. As she stood next to the entrance, she could see a couple pass by next to her.

“That place should be good for the wedding, right?”

“Yeah, I think that'd be good. I still want to see a few more places though.”

“Of course. How many people are we sending invitations to in the company, by the way?”

“Just a few friends. I don't want to invite everyone.”

They seemed to be getting married soon. The woman especially seemed to be emanating some warmth of joy from her. Do all people become like that when they experience love?

Love.

“Gaaah! This is crazy!”

She glared at the clock. 15 minutes till midnight. She touched her cheeks again.

'It might as well be a heater.'

She kept thinking about it because she kept telling herself not to think about it. In the end, she decided to give up. She was still red, but she couldn't stand the cold anymore. As she was about to get on to the elevator, she noticed the staircase next to her. She smiled lightly before taking her first steps. Then, she immediately sprinted up as fast as she could. Two at a time.

By the time she reached the tenth floor, she was sweating a little bit. Opening the door, she entered her home immediately.

"I'm home."

Mom was still typing away in the living room. The only thing that changed about her was the fact that she had a little glass of water next to her now.

"Did you run up?"

"Ah, yeah. The elevator was slow, so I just decided to take the stairs."

"You must be tired."

"Not at all."

Alright, a success. She took off her shoes and came inside, but just as she was about to enter her room...

"So, did your conversation with your boyfriend end up going well?"

"He's not my boyfriend!"

"If he isn't, then he isn't. Why are you getting so agitated over it?"

Mom was smiling like a devil. She really couldn't win against her mom with things like this, so she quickly retreated into her room. Behind her she could hear her mom go, 'my little girl's all grown up now'.

"Hah."

She collapsed on the bed as she touched her cheeks. Still hot. Would this even go away by tonight?

'What the heck.'

Her face wasn't the only thing that was boiling hot. The hand that Maru grabbed was almost throbbing with heat as well. It was... a good-feeling kind of pain? She didn't know how else to describe it.

"If he just comes at me like that..."

She had had a feeling that he would ask her out at some point. She wasn't that much of an idiot. She just didn't think it would be today.

I like you.

The words were still spinning around in her head. Her face reddened again. She could only stare at Maru dazedly when he said those words. They were simple words that weren't decorated with anything

special, but for some reason they shook her deeply. She plopped her face down onto her pillow. The boy had just left without even listening to her reply.

'What the, he left thinking I'd just allow it?'

"Wait a second, is that really how it is?"

She jumped straight up from her bed. This was actually pissing her off. He just left without even listening to her reply? Just like that? She took out her phone in anger. But just as she was about to press Maru's phone number... she realized she couldn't do it. Why? Why? She didn't have the courage to make the call.

Just as she felt like she finally gathered the courage to press it, Maru called. Almost as if he knew exactly what she was feeling right now.

- Hello?

"Why did you call?"

She made herself sound much colder than she intended. She even covered up her mouth in surprise, but Maru didn't seem all that surprised.

- Come to think of it, I didn't even hear your reply.

"Are you s..."

- I was nervous. I don't think I had the courage to hear your reply on the spot.

"....."

Scared? That Han Maru? That Han Maru, who never got nervous about anything?

- I'm even more nervous now that I said it. I'm scared, even.

"...Hey, being scared is a little too far."

She wasn't kidding when she said that. She could feel a bit of fear apparent in Maru's voice. Why? Just because of her reply? Just because of that?

'Well, maybe it's not so insignificant...'

She might be overexaggerating things in her head a bit, but maybe she was someone very precious to Maru? She immediately wiped that thought from her head. She was thinking way too much.

- Thanks for listening to me. And, I'm sorry.

"Sorry for what?"

- You know, visiting you suddenly and confessing out of nowhere. Just... everything.

"A lot of things you need to be sorry for, huh?"

She calmed down once she heard his voice. The heat on her face was fading as well. Her heartbeats were returning to normal, too. She was getting calmer. Phew.

“Oh, now that I think about it, that was weird. Did you really have to confess like that?”

- I guess I didn't set the mood at all, did I.

“Right. Confessing in a fast food store? It would've been better if you did it in a classroom.”

- Sorry.

“...Now you're making *me* feel sorry. Just be normal. Wow you're awkward to talk to right now.”

She smiled a little. It felt like she was leading the conversation for once.

Grin.

Thinking of Maru being nervous on the other side made her want to tease him as well. Yes, she might as well do it.

“I like you.”

She became numb for about three seconds. She was planning on teasing him, but something entirely different ended up coming out of her mouth. Her face grew warm again, her heart pumping incredibly quickly. Putting a hand over her mouth as she looked up at the ceiling, she hung up. She didn't know what to do. In the end, she just jumped on the bed, unable to make up her mind.

Ding. A phone alarm rang. It was a message.

[Thanks.]

She ended up smiling after reading that one word, her nervousness melting away immediately. She smiled for a few seconds by herself, before biting the corner of her pillow and gleefully rolling around. The heat in her face going away.

\* \* \*

Maru looked out of the bus with a dazed grin. He's finally made that step forward. This day felt especially valuable to him compared to all of the past year. This was simply the beginning, but he was still happy.

Of course, he was also confused. The fact that Han Maru, himself, didn't exist in Han Maru's life was a problem. This was probably because she was taking up such a large part of his life. He needed to find a balance.

'Can I be greedy?'

He was afraid of failure. He only tried something new if he knew he had a backup plan. Could he... get rid of a backup plan just like that? Could he throw his life into it, knowing that it could potentially make her suffer?

The yellow neon lights passed above him. Seeing them flicker out of sight so quickly almost reminded him of his current life. Just as he was watching the lights pass by... a message came. It must be from her.

[It's cold, so you better wear that scarf well.]



He smiled, his worries disappearing for a brief moment.

“For now, I should just be happy.”

Maru fidgeted with the scarf around his neck. It smelled very faintly of her.

## **Chapter 114**

Yoon Moonjoong opened his eyes before the alarm clock even sounded. He looked at the digital clock after slowly waking up. 05:59:57. Moonjoong started his day by gently pressing on the button on the beeping clock.

Moonjoong had started to wake up before the alarm clock rang when he hit the age of 60. He felt that the saying, ‘You sleep less as you grow older’ should instead be, ‘You get a clock built inside you as you grow older’. It is only natural that a body thrown into the flow of time for a long time will remember that flow.

Moonjoong relaxed his slightly cold waist as he came out to the kitchen and yawned while boiling some egg soup. Putting water in a pot and cracking in two eggs around the time the water boils completed half the steps to making the soup. He took out the side dishes that were sent by his children and prepared a table for a simple meal.

It was a table for four, but he always sat alone. His eyes unconsciously swept the empty seats next to him and then went towards a frame hung next to the dining table.

The smiling face of his wife could be seen under an origami flower. She was probably around 50 years old then.

“Are you eating breakfast there?”

Moonjoong muttered a few idle words before picking up the utensils. His wife, who had promised to grow old together with him, must have had no more regrets, because she passed away after seeing their two daughters get married. It was due to heart disease but she left indifferently without giving him time to attempt anything. Even when she was alive, she was usually so impatient that she didn’t even say her goodbyes as she left. On the day of the funeral, Moonjoong tilted a glass of alcohol to himself while staring at the portrait of his smiling wife. He’d repeatedly muttered that she had no affection.

Moonjoong went to the living room and turned on the TV after finishing a plain meal with egg soup and pickled vegetables. It was the TV that his first daughter gifted him, a bulging 30 inch CRT TV. An acquaintance had once offered to buy him a 40 inch LCD TV, but he had refused, saying that he had a better one at home.

He changed the channel to the morning news and picked up the newspaper. The empty house was turned into a somewhat lively place as Dalgu came over panting and turned over in front of the sofa.

Moonjoong patted Dalgu’s head. Dalgu had been gifted to him by Junmin and was the child of a Shiba Inu. Moonjoong especially favored him because of how loving and joyful he was. Dalgu’s mother passed away three years ago.

“Recently, a woman in her 30s was arrested for fraud against a nursery school. Detailed news will...”

After briefly reading the newspaper, the hour hand on the clock pointed towards 9. It was a day like any other. Moonjoong attached a leash to Dalgu's neck and went outside.

A chilly breeze hit his face. Moonjoong adjusted his collars and slowly left on a walk to a street where only churchgoers could occasionally be seen. Moonjoong liked this street because it was filled with a tranquil atmosphere.

"Good morning." Mr. Park from the convenience store greeted him. It'd been 10 years since he had set foot in this neighborhood. There were people who he could start calling neighbors and Mr. Park was one of them.

"Hope you sell a lot today, too!"

"Yes. I should sell a lot."

Mr. Park had good manners. At some point, Moonjoong became able to tell the difference between heartfelt laughter and feigned laughter. His own eyes had been trained with false laughter, which perhaps made it natural that he could distinguish between the two.

He started to swing his arms while walking with the panting Dalgu. Moonjoong let out a pleased laugh as he looked at the unchanged streets. Changes become increasingly frightening as one ages and the same applied to the environment. Moonjoong knew how to appreciate the things that were supposed to be there, being there.

Moonjoong walked past a busy elementary school and began climbing a hill. He didn't skip out on exercising since youth, so he was physically fit. He had a slightly herniated disc, but the chilling sensation disappeared after he worked out. His primary physician had told him that daily exercise was more important than physical therapy as well.

"Let's go, Dalgu."

Dalgu was excited as he ran up the incline. Moonjoong mustered up a bit of energy and ran after it towards a poor hillside village some distance off the pretty residential district and apartment complex. Moonjoong walked past a shack that was undergoing demolition. This place will also be turned into a box of matches soon.

After a gradual descent with Dalgu, Moonjoong arrived at today's destination - the Dalgureum Nursery Center. Dalgu started to run around wagging its tail upon seeing the nursery building.

"Are you happy, little fellow?"

He took Dalgu and went inside. The director came out to greet him in a slightly high pitched voice.

"Teacher!"

"You're here."

Moonjoong nodded with a smile on his face. The director went inside to call the other teachers right away. Moonjoong took Dalgu to the living room where the children were. The children were moving about carrying their own bowls after having finished breakfast.

"Ah! It's Dalgu!"

“Dalgu!”

The children who found Dalgu ran over in packs. Moonjoong unfastened the leash and released Dalgu in between the children. It'd been 3 years since they started playing together like this. It was Dalgu's mother who visited before, and after her death, it was now Dalgu who became the friend of these children.

“Hello, grandpa.”

“Hello!”

The children bowed, led by their eldest brother who was now in 2nd year of high school. Moonjoong made a satisfied smile and nodded.

“Teacher, you like ginger tea right?”

“I'll drink it if it's given to me.”

Moonjoong went inside the director's office after leaving Dalgu to play with the children.

“The children like it whenever you visit.”

“They like Dalgu more than me.”

He drank a sip of the tea that was giving off a sweet fragrance. 16 years had passed unknowingly since his relationship with this place began.

“I'm really grateful for the money you sent to us for the children's tuition.”

“Let me know if there's anything you need.”

“How could there be anything when you're taking such good care of us?”

A substantial amount of money was flowing into this nursery. However, Moonjoong never once thought of it as being wasteful. It was the money he earned with the attention given by the public. Moonjoong thought it was logical to give the money back to the public.

Right as he was talking about this and that with the director, “Ah right.” The director excused himself and stood up from his seat. Moonjoong asked what was going on.

“A person that I'm grateful towards will be coming today. She started volunteering for us since last time, but, ah. Now that I think about it, she's never met with you before.”

“Volunteer?”

“Yes. She does puppet plays and the children like it. On top of that she's good with her hands so she personally makes pretty dolls and gives them to the children as gifts.”

“So there's a person like that.”

“She's a young lady. She has a nice heart and a pretty face. If I had a son who didn't marry yet I would immediately introduce him to her.”

If the meticulous director was saying such good things about her, the person who scheduled to come today definitely had to be a great person.

It felt lonely being in the room by himself, so he snuck out. A red sedan could be seen coming towards this direction from far away. She must be riding in that.

The car parked in front of the building. The driver and the passenger both opened the door at the same time and a tall lady along with a boy of similar height appeared. The lady looked as if she was in her late twenties, and the boy looked like he was a high school student but gave off the feeling of being older than he appeared.

Moonjoong observed the two while the director smiled and invited them inside.

“This person here is our nursery’s largest shareholder, Yoon Moonjoong.”

The director laughed out loud giving the introduction. Moonjoong was unaffected by it as it was an introduction that the director frequently made towards customers.

“Hello, I’m Kang Soojin.”

“I’m Han Maru.”

They might’ve been flustered at first, but the lady smiled right away and introduced herself with the calm boy. Maru. It may have been due to the unusual name, but the boy was quickly ingrained in Moonjoong’s mind.

“Nice to meet you. The director said that you do entertaining puppet plays, would it be okay if this old man spectates from the side?”

“Of course.”

Moonjoong nodded and turned his body. The sound of the director chatting could be heard from behind.

“Ms. Soojin, you don’t recognize that person?”

“Hrm?”

“Ah, what should we do with our Teacher. I suppose the current generation doesn’t know too much about him.”

Moonjoong chuckled at the director, who was speaking as if it was too bad. When he was young and naive, he felt inferior when people didn’t recognize him, but nowadays he was rather grateful when it happened. It just meant that there were that many more outstanding actors who came out to take the spotlight from the retired old man.

“Director. Stop with the ridiculing and come in.”

“Yes yes, Teacher.”

The director who said that he’d come in kept going on for a short while after. He heard with his ears that stayed sharp despite his age, “He was an amazing actor.” Like everybody, he couldn’t help but be

pleased when he heard his praises. He went to the director's office to grab the ginger tea that the director had brewed for him and went back to the living room. The children who were playing with Dalgu shifted their attention to Soojin and Maru upon seeing them. Thanks to that, Dalgu became lonely.

"Tsk tsk, this kid."

Moonjoong did a hand gesture to call Dalgu over. Popularity has always been something that's short-lived, my child. He waited a bit, touching Dalgu's cheeks. They felt like steamed bun cakes.

Soojin came back holding gifts and costumes after making a few roundtrips to the car. An exquisite costume and dolls that were worthy of deserving the director's praises were soon settled in the living room. Toys for little boys could be seen as well. It must have been quite expensive. Moonjoong looked at Soojin and Maru with a warm gaze.

"There aren't many people like that lady these days."

"It appears to be so."

The director left to answer a phone call and the puppet play started once all preparations were complete. It didn't have much structure, but Moonjoong thought it was an amazing play that brought joy to the children.

"Can you give me a hand?"

The children wore puppets on their hands when Soojin requested for help and began to play together. Moonjoong had a comfortable feeling as he looked at the children. He was grateful that a young lady was willing to come to a place like this to play with the children.

I should properly greet her. When he was waiting for the play to end with a satisfied expression, Moonjoong's eyes twitched. He wondered if he mistook it and looked at Soojin once more.

'.....'

Her laughter was dull. It was clear that the laughter was coming from her heart, but it looked like she herself wasn't enjoying it. Moonjoong let out a weak grunt as he carefully observed her. Soojin's laughter was something that could only be made by people making excuses.

'Have I gotten old?'

There was no way a person doing praiseworthy work like this would have different intentions. However, even after checking multiple times, it was a smile that bothered him. There were no problems when she was doing the puppet show, but her smile seemed very uncomfortable when she made eye contact with the children. Although it seemed like a normal smile filled with benevolence, the subtle differences were caught by Moonjoong.

She probably didn't approach us with impure intentions, right?.

He was reminded of the news that he watched in the morning about a nursery fraud. The scary thing about black-hearted animals is that they take apart and eat from the people who have nothing. He felt bad for judging people who came to look after the children, but he decided to keep watch just in case.

Soojin and Maru spent around 30 minutes playing together with the children. Other than the ambiguous smile that she showed every once a while, it was perfect. Come to think of it, they probably would be dealing with the director rather than the children if their aim was to commit fraud. It seemed like they were more than close enough already.

“Here, a present.”

Soojin shared the presents amongst the children and stood up. Moonjoong approached the two who were cleaning up their areas.

“You’re already leaving?”

“Ah, yes. We have more places to go to.”

“It looks like you’ve been doing this type of work for a while.”

“Yes. It’s been around 10 years.”

“Huh, 10 years.”

It really appeared that there was a misunderstanding. Then, what could be the reason for that uncomfortable smile? The director finished his phone call just in time and came inside.

“You’re leaving now?”

“Yes.”

“You should have a meal before leaving.”

“We have other appointments.”

“You’re so busy that you can’t eat?”

Soojin considered for a short moment before replying. “I’ll eat before leaving.”

“You’ll be eating with us, right Teacher?”

“Let’s do that, will it be fine for me to join?”

He asked looking at Soojin and she nodded without hesitation.

“Of course.”

## **Chapter 115**

The place that the director brought them to was a traditional Korean cuisine restaurant, this was a place that Moonjoong frequented as well. Due to the fact that he lived alone, he ended up eating most of his meals outside, with the exception of breakfast. Moonjoong liked this restaurant, as it had the scent of a regular household home.

The four people sat by a table after being greeted by the owner. A well-cooked mackerel, a savory bean sprout dish, and a steaming soybean paste stew arrived. Bland seasoning was one of this restaurant’s qualities.

“It might not taste as good to young people.”

“I like it bland. It’s delicious.”

The way Maru spoke was quite mature. Moonjoong looked at Maru and thought of him as a dignified child. Most children his age would probably find a similar occasion uncomfortable, but Maru seemed like he was used to it as he sat on his seat, relaxed.

The director, who was good at socializing, got the owner of the restaurant to join them at the same table as they all started chatting. The topics ranged from the area being noisy due to reconstruction, to there being a fight at somebody’s house, to their son being discharged this year... By the time the meal was over, Moonjoong had heard all sorts of matters both big and small about this neighborhood.

“Ah, director. Come over here. I made some plum extract, bring some and give it to the children.”

The director had a wide smile on his face as he stood up at the gestures of the owner. “You guys keep talking.” The director left his seat after leaving those words. Three people remained at the table.

Moonjoong let out a hollow laugh as he started talking. “I wonder if we spent too much of your time. I heard you had an appointment; will it be fine?”

“I just gave them a call saying that I’ll be a bit late. To be honest, the director asks us to a meal every time and I didn’t think it would be polite to keep refusing.”

She was a person whose pretty eyes crinkled when she smiled. Moonjoong looked deep into Soojin’s smile, her current smile had no uncertainties within them. A literal expression of emotion. It was questionable how someone smiling like this would make such forced smiles in front of the children.

It was a matter that he couldn’t understand.

Moonjoong continued on with the conversation. He usually didn’t stick his nose into other people’s businesses, but he wanted to make sure as this was related to the children.

“I can’t believe you’ve been looking over the children for 10 years, it must’ve been hard.”

“..... It’s fun meeting the children and it’s worth it. There wasn’t a single time when I thought it was hard.”

A bit of hesitation. Moonjoong clicked his tongue at the sadness hidden within the brief pause, she was definitely somebody with a backstory. It didn’t seem like she approached the children with impure intentions, but he was worried that the children would be hurt by the mixed intentions behind kindness that she was showing.

Moonjoong believed that people have two kinds of noses: A nose that smells literal scents and a nose that smells emotions. No matter how well packaged this kindness was, some of the sharper children were bound to notice that there was some sort of darkness hidden deep within the kindness.

Children were more sensitive to these things. This was because children, who lack the ability to protect themselves, would more keenly observe the adults. Changes in their facial expression, how much their speech is stressed, the pitch of their voice... they would pick up subconsciously on changes in body language and speech.

The problem was that they couldn't logically process these changes. The malicious and negative emotions that adults secretly exude could be psychologically harmful to these children. Rotten food emits foul odors no matter how well you package it.

Moonjoong knew that it could be inappropriate but asked anyway. "Can we chat in private for a bit?"

Moonjoong asked leisurely. If he seemed offensive, it would be obvious that she would start protecting herself, so he spoke in a casual manner. Interestingly enough, Maru, who was sitting next to Soojin, pushed his chair back and stood up.

"I'll excuse myself for a bit."

The boy's ability to catch onto things was amazing, his sense of intuition is uncanny; he stood up after reading our expressions. This was the power of observation rather than coincidence. Moonjoong narrowed his eyes and watched Maru leave the restaurant. This was a child with a strict set of principles. He'd only known the boy for a short time, but it was easy to tell.

"Um, what did you need to speak about..." Soojin asked.

Moonjoong shifted his sights from the entrance back to Soojin. It was time to push back his interests and ask the questions he had. "I'll start off by apologizing."

"Yes?"

"I don't have any ill feelings towards you. I'm grateful actually. I'm only asking because there's something bothering me, so if you don't want to discuss it you can just say no."

"Ah, okay." Her face showed that she was flustered. Moonjoong waited a moment before bringing up the main topic.

"The children at the nursery, they're like my own sons and daughters. That's why I carefully observe the people who approach them, and you caught my eyes."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I'll get straight to the point. Are you really doing this for the children? Or do you have a different aim? I hope you can be honest with me. If my eyes were mistaken, tell me. If not... I'm going to have to hear whatever you're hiding."

He emphasized the last part in an intentionally overbearing manner. It could be that he was being excessively wary, but the sixty-five years he experienced showed him that it didn't hurt being on guard. Moonjoong believed that people were born good and that it was the environment which made them evil. In addition, the current world was more than enough to turn somebody into a villain. He didn't necessarily believe that this woman was a bad person, but was just worried that her feelings towards the children weren't innocent.

He hoped that it was a mistake, just some nonsense from an old man.

However, Soojin stared at him with a frozen expression, her pupils were shaking. She tightened her lower lips and her shoulders that were relaxed until just a second ago shrank. A clear sign of defense, as well as proof that she had lied.



"I can tell even with my ignorant eyes that you're not a bad person, but I can't let go of the fact that you're not being benevolent towards the children because of purely positive intentions."

"That...."

"10 years. A very long time. You must have taken care of numerous children during that period. I'm not judging those actions. However, have you ever thought about this? There might come a day when you're playing with the children and one sensitive child picks up your dark side and becomes hurt. Of course, it's just a possibility. The children might not realize these things and ignore them."

"....."

"But a parent is someone who worries about even the smallest things. Could you tell me about your situation? Why would somebody who's looked over children for 10 years appear so guilt-ridden? Why does it feel like there's a mask on?"

The young lady in front dropped her head, she placed her hands that were tightened into a fist on top of her legs. Moonjoong felt pity for her. She looked like a little child who didn't know what to do after being caught lying.

Moonjoong could tell that she was someone who had a lot of affection from her posture and at the same time knew that there was something binding her for 10 years.

He relaxed his pressing demeanor and gave her a pat on the shoulders. She was a kindhearted child. She could've continued her lies and denied everything, but instead she had fallen silent.

"I'm.... sorry. I'll be right back." Soojin stood up. Moonjoong saw tears gathering in the corners of her eyes and sighed deeply.

Maru came in as soon as Soojin left, as if he was waiting for it. It seemed like he saw her leaving while covering her mouth. "Can I ask what happened?"

"It would appear I touched on a painful topic."

"By painful topic you mean..."

"It looked like she had a story so I asked about it, but it seems quite complicated. How can a gentle lady like her make those kinds of smiles in front of the children?"

Maru lowered his head as he heard those words, then left the restaurant as well. A short while later, he came back by himself.

"First of all, I'd like to apologize for speaking as I please. I don't think she's in a condition to talk."

"Is that so?"

"Actually, I too had something to speak to her about today. I'm telling you this after having already received her permission. She has a little brother."

"Little brother?"

“Yes. A little brother with a rather big age gap, but I heard he was in an accident when he was young because of her.”

“Oh my, it must have been a big accident.”

“It was, to the extent that he had to live his daily life while undergoing rehabilitation before he was ten years old. There are no problems now because he received the treatment persistently and exercised regularly, but the relationship between the two became distant after that incident.”

“Don’t tell me that she’s avoiding that little brother....”

“You guessed correctly. She hasn’t spoken to him for the past 10 years, because of her guilt. The little brother’s school life was a mess because he had to receive treatment and couldn’t adapt. Children are innocent, but despite that, they can also have a scary side to them.”

Moonjoong nodded his head at those words. It was obvious that bringing together 40 to 50 children in a single class would cause problems if they spoke in an intolerant way. If within their ranks was a child whose body was uncomfortable due to receiving treatment... he probably would’ve been made fun of. This bullying sometimes could become horrible to an extent that adults couldn’t possibly imagine. Because children are so simple minded, they often don’t respect any boundaries. Children can easily cross lines that shouldn’t be crossed.

“It could be because of the way he was treated by the other children, but as he graduated elementary school and became healthy, he went astray. He might have come to learn that you need to be rough to be treated like a human. Fortunately, he’s corrected himself now.”

“He experienced a nasty society when he was small, but it looks like you’re an acquaintance of that little brother.”

“I’m in the same class as him, he’s my friend.”

So that’s why he knows the details. Moonjoong kept watching Maru, who spoke the truth in a composed manner.

“I learned the truth through my friend not too long ago and I also heard about how he felt. It’s true that he hates his sister, who was the cause of the accident then, but what he despises even more is that she had nothing to say to him for the past 10 years. It seems like there was a time when they spoke to each other, but the way they met was also something he didn’t like.”

“That lady probably said that she didn’t want to meet in person.”

“How did you....”

“If you put together what you can see, you’re also able to understand other things. Right, so that’s what it was. The cause for the guilt was this.”

So this was why she had eyes like those while looking at children. Why she went around volunteering despite having such eyes. Moonjoong understood Soojin. Going around nurseries for her might have been a form of repenting. She could receive consolation by looking after the children and doing things that she couldn’t do for her little brother.

“It’s not as good as it sounds.” It was something that started from avoidance. The results were initially nice, but it was bound to break down sooner or later. These emotions that deepen will eventually spiral out of control negatively.

“I want to offer help, but because the situation isn’t simple, I’m honestly not sure what I should do. On top of that, it’s been a long time since I’ve last met her so it’s not easy for me to bring it up either. I can’t recklessly trespass on her feelings, they have been building up for the past 10 years, afterall.”

Deep consideration could be felt across every word spoken. Although the emotional side was unknown, it was clear that he was a very logical child. Moonjoong nodded. It was an unfortunate situation. But, it wasn’t a problem that could just be left aside like this. It wouldn’t be good for either the children or the young lady to carry on this relationship with such warped feelings.

“Did it look like your friend felt disgusted by that lady?”

“No. It wasn’t like that. When my friend was spilling everything to me, he also told me that he himself wasn’t sure of what to do. I’m not sure if he wants to reconcile with his sister or remain angry at her.”

“It became a problem because the two have yet to talk properly. In a situation like this, the best solution is to have a conversation.”

“But one is scared of meeting, and the other is avoiding it...”

“Well, people’s intentions can be expressed through more than just their voices.”

Soojin came in just in time. Her eyelids were red. Moonjoong felt bad and quickly apologized.

“It’s okay. I knew that what I was doing was wrong, but I couldn’t stop despite knowing that. My heart wouldn’t be at ease if I didn’t do this.”

“I understand. But it’s not something that can be kept pushing back.” Moonjoong looked at Soojin’s face as he spoke. “Will you try following the advice of a nosy old man?”

\* \* \*

“I’m sorry for asking you.”

“Don’t be. Rather, will you really be fine?”

“Like that grandpa said, it’s not something I can keep avoiding.”

Maru nodded as he closed the car door. The red sedan skid as it disappeared.

“A letter.”

Maru looked at the letter held in his hands. The advice of the elder was simple. It was to write down everything she wanted to say. But, he had emphasized that she should never censor her words. Soojin heard those words and wrote for a long period of time. A letter containing 11 pages was inside this envelope. Even this wasn’t enough, as Soojin went home saying that she would prepare more.

“I hope this will help.”

Dowook definitely felt hate for his sister. And yet, it also didn't seem like he never wanted to see her again. If he really despised her, he wouldn't have held himself and lamented that day at Myeongdong.

It is possible that he is also looking for a solution. Hopefully this letter will turn the tide of the blocked emotions, Maru mused while taking out his phone.

He looked at the new contact that was registered today. Yoon Moonjoong. The elder had given his personal number, asking to be told the results.

"Yoon Moonjoong..." It was a name that felt familiar. Maru scratched his eyebrows as he went home.

## **Chapter 116**

Snow was pouring down and the road turned frighteningly white.

"Trash is falling."

He walked away from the muddy snow and ended up in front of the school. The snow was falling so heavily that nobody was standing at the gate.

"Do you want to build a snowman during lunchtime?"

"Are you a kid?"

A smile blossomed on the faces of the children who were walking to school. It was understandable because they were at an age where snow was still welcoming to them. He shook off the dirt that was on his sneakers and changed to indoor slippers. After shaking his umbrella to get rid of the snow, he entered the hallway. He arrived at his class, together with classmates that were talking with him. Dojin was sitting in front of the back door. For some reason he arrived early.

"You're here? It's snowing a lot right?"

He made a refreshing yawn as he asked.

"You're here early."

"There needs to be days like this too. Here's a morning candy."

He caught the candy that was thrown and popped it in his mouth. The candies became a habit unknowingly. If Dojin didn't give him a candy in the morning, he might even be sad.

Maru hung his backpack and looked at the last seat of the first row. Dowook was bent over, sleeping. Maru gestured at Dojin, who was saying something next to him, and walked towards Dowook.

Dowook opened his eyes as Maru touched him.

"What?"

"Relax your face. You'll regret it after aging."

"...Why did you wake me?"

"Let's talk for a bit. There's still some time left until homeroom."

He brought Dowook to the convenience store. The kids who skipped breakfast were gathered at a corner, eating bread.

“Do you want coffee?”

Dowook nodded without saying anything. Maru picked out two canned coffees from the vending machine and handed one to Dowook.

“What did you want to talk about?”

“It’s related to sister Soojin.”

Chik, the conversation stopped with the sound of the can opening. Dowook looked down at his canned coffee without speaking. The conversations of the people next to them were flowing over. Something about it being tedious eating bread for breakfast.

“What about her?”

Dowook who had been staying quiet spoke up while drinking his coffee. It could be seen at a glance that he was trying to act composed. His eyes weren’t sharp like they usually were.

“I didn’t tell you before, but I’m familiar with your sister.”

“You?”

“Yeah.”

“How?”

“It’s a bit too long to explain. I don’t think you need to know either. In short, we just go volunteering together.”

Maybe Dowook understood, because he didn’t complain.

“I met her yesterday and we talked for a bit.”

“What talk?”

“About you and your sister, and this is what your sister wants to tell you.”

Maru handed over Soojin’s letter, the letter that was written with tears.

“.....It’s like this again. If she has something to say, tell her to say it herself.”

Dowook returned the letter, Maru shook his head and refused to take it.

“She wrote it with difficulty because it was hard to convey her feelings by talking. I don’t think it would hurt to give it a read at least once.”

Dowook’s hands stiffened at his words.

“How about you listen for once. It’s said that conversations start by listening.”

The wound that's festered for 10 years. If everything's brought up at once, their feelings will just burn hotter. This was what Moonjoong had been worried about as he told them to first try writing a letter. I wonder how effective it'll be. Maru gave Dowook's shoulders a pat as he walked past him.

"You gave him the letter?"

-Yes. I don't know if he read it or threw it away, but I gave it to him.

"It must have been hard, good work. It's fortunate that her little brother has a good friend."

Moonjoong gave his thanks for telling him and hung up the call. How nice would it be if the kind lady could use this opportunity to let go of some of her burdens? If that happens, then he could entrust the children with her without being worried.

"This child, it looks like you're hungry."

Dalgu came up to his feet and rolled over to expose his stomach. Moonjoong poured some food in a concave bowl. Maybe it was because it was winter, but Dalgu had gained some weight.

Dalgu started to munch on the food while wagging his tail. Moonjoong looked at Dalgu for a while before turning his head towards the dining table. There was a phone call.

"Hello."

-Ah, Teacher.

"Is it Junmin?"

-Yes.

"What is it at this time?"

-The thing that you spoke to me about previously. About wanting to have someone be recommended to you to grow as a student.

"I remember."

-I sent you an email after narrowing the list to a few people between middle and high school. I attached a picture as well as how I felt about them next to it. I would appreciate it if you could help grow three, no, four people.

"I'm just going to listen to the kids talk to kill some time. One person is enough."

-You're too much. Please give me some face, and consider two people.

"If there's a kid that I like. Ah, was it amateur class? I need to give that place a visit too."

-Weren't you planning on coming during a performance?

"That's what I was planning, but I think I'll have to see the preparation process to understand their personalities."

-Then please come on either Monday, Wednesday, Friday, or the weekends, whenever you're free. I'll let the teacher in charge know. About meeting the children...

“I’m just going to quietly observe.”

-Understood. That’s how I’ll tell them. Ah, speaking of which, Teacher. I received some good pine mushrooms as a gift, is it okay to visit you sometime soon?

Pine mushrooms. His mouth started to water. He didn’t know about anything else, but the pine mushrooms that Junmin brought was something that couldn’t be denied.

“Bring Andong soju as well.”

-Of course. I’ll go during the night.

This busy friend was hardworking as well. Moonjoong smirked and opened up his laptop. The laptop had been gifted to him by his second daughter. At first, he thought that he would never be able to handle things like this, but as he fiddled with it, he was able to check things like his email. He blinked his tight eyes as he opened the inbox. He only told a few close people about his email so it was usually empty, but a new email had arrived.

He clicked it and received the files inside.

“Let’s see.”

It might be because he was getting old, but when he looked at things nearby, his eyes became blurry. He put on the glasses hanging around his neck and checked the screen, the left side had a picture and the right side had information written by Junmin. It was similar to the personal information you received when taking an audition, it was clear that he was involved in this area of work as the organization was very clean.

Moonjoong took the time to read them one by one. He realized while preparing for the play that would be held at Myeongdong Art Theater, that he still had a passion for plays. The seed of passion differed from his earlier days, however, and it grew by raising students rather than personally performing. Moonjoong remembered the theater that no longer existed, as he stopped scrolling.

“This child...”

He took his hands off the mouse and observed the screen. Han Maru, the friend that he saw yesterday, and spoke on the phone just earlier was inside the monitor.

So he was a child who performed in plays.

“Then his observational skills are quite...”

The core of acting was imitation. Because the foundation of imitation was observation, the fact that somebody’s observation was good meant that they had a solid groundwork for acting.

“Is it fate?”

Now that he looked back, when Maru was performing the puppet show for the children, his acting wasn’t sloppy. The principle of being serious no matter where the stage was set, it would seem that he already had the virtue that actors worked to preserve.

“His actions of being considerate are good too.”

It was a work involving people in the end. No matter how scum-like people were good at acting, he didn't have the intention of teaching them. In that sense, Maru deserved high points. He read the details that Junmin wrote.

"Hoh-oh."

Junmin as a person was gentle. Despite being 50 years old, he had a broad smile on his face whenever he looked at dogs. However, when it came to work, he was a professional unlike any other. To become a casting director, you needed the ability to look through a person. It's because whether it be plays, dramas, or movies; no matter how outstanding the scenario, staff, and acoustics were, if the actor who had the role of telling the story was bad, the whole thing was thrown down the drain.

Whether the product will end up rising or falling is first and foremost determined by the casting, Junmin was especially strict when he looked at people because he did this type of work. It was to the point that even Moonjoong, as an actor, would avoid meeting Junmin.

"A person like that has this much expectations for him."

Expectations. The weight that this one word carries is more than what it seems.

Moonjoong crossed his arms.

"Let's try seeing him in advance."

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"Hi."

"....."

"At least take my greeting."

"Yeah, hi."

She received his greeting as if it were her first time seeing him. Maru scratched his eyebrows and took a step to her side.

"What, what is it?"

She jumped in surprise and widened the gap. She has a cute side to her too, Maru awakened his mischievous personality for the first time in a while and kept inching closer. She didn't know what to do and ran up the stage before stopping and sighed.

"Is it fun?!"

"Yeah."

"Seriously, I can't live."

"We're a couple, let's stick together."

"C-Couple? Who? Me? With you?"

"Are you not?"



“.....”

She didn't deny it. Maru's mood brightened and he tightly grabbed her hand to pull her to a side of the stage. The other students had yet to arrive, they were the only people on the open stage.

“I like you.”

“What, what, what?!”

“Why are you so surprised? It's what you said.”

Her face immediately blushed. So she was someone who reacted this simply when she was younger. In his past life, they had met when they were both adults. One was an actress who had lived her life in theaters while acting as cameo for dramas; the other was a road manager for such schedules. When she was old enough to know everything there was to know, she only snorted when he made these jokes. Rather, she had been the one to play pranks with Maru not knowing what to do.

“Hi!”

“You're here early.”

The entrance on the first floor opened and other students appeared. Maru slowly let go of the hand that he held. She took notice of that and pulled her hand back.

“Aren't you blushing too easily?”

“What can I do when it's genetic.”

“Ah, mother-in-law also.....”

“Mother-in-law?”

“Nevermind, it's nothing.”

Maru faked a cough and ignored her glare. He vaguely remembered his mother-in-law who wrote romance novels. As she said, she had been someone who's face easily turned red.

“Don't space out and warm up your throat and bodies.”

Ganghwan stepped forward, behind him were five students who dreamed of becoming actors.

“We're going into practice in 20 minutes. Like we discussed before, we'll be choosing roles and taking auditions starting tomorrow so be prepared.”

“Yes.”

“Then warm up your bodies and voice accordingly. I'm going to lie down for a bit.”

Ganghwan spoke as he laid down on the floor. It wasn't once or twice so the students shrugged and relaxed their bodies.

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“Try to express more emotion, as if you’re screaming. You need to pay attention to your voice because it’s a play without mics. Even if it’s an amateur play, you can’t make the audience who took the time to come here feel a sense of loss. Again!”

Ganghwan threw the cue sign and spun around. He spoke like that, but the overall atmosphere was good. Everybody grew basic knowledge while staying in the acting club. They were like chicks, but it had been satisfying teaching them because they knew what to do.

“Uh, Senior.”

“Are you busy?”

It was Senior Junmin. He must be busy because of the main play that’s opening at this theater, Ganghwan wondered why he’s here. Ganghwan told the students to continue and walked towards the entrance.

“What is it?”

“There’s a friend that I need to take.”

“From there? Is it Maru?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you going to treat him to meat?”

“Not meat, pine mushrooms.”

“Ah! I’ll go too. Please show me some favoritism too.”

“Stop being so cringy. I’m not the host today, so it’ll be difficult.”

“Then who...”

“Teacher Yoon Moonjoong.”

“.....I really want to go.”

Ganghwan had two actors who were his idols, and one of them was Moonjoong.

“I met him a year ago and haven’t been able to see him since.”

“You should come to the practice room at Hyehwa station.”

“How can I go to a place where the seniors are practicing. There are other senior actors there too.”

“Hmm, then shall we try giving him a call?”

“Senior! I love you!”

Ganghwan waited patiently while hugging Junmin’s arms. After the short call ended, Junmin said, “Come with us.”

“There’s still 2 hours left until practice ends, so please wait until then.”

“You’re not going to end it early?”

“Is that what you want?”

“No. If you did that I would have cursed at you.”

“Right?”

“The kids, how are they?”

“Should I say it’s to be expected? They’re definitely different from the usual pack because they’re all kids who have been recommended. If they’re polished just a little bit, you could probably let them out without being embarrassed.”

“Do your best. You know that teacher Yoon will be coming to the practice play right?”

“Of course, it’s making me nervous too.”

“Somebody who’s nervous was laying down on the stage?”

“Hm hm.”

He laughed while avoiding Ganghwan’s gaze.

## **Chapter 117**

“Stop.”

The children let out deep sighs as they relaxed; the last run through had ended. Ganghwan gestured for everybody to gather in one place. Like always, the practice would be concluded by everybody reflecting back on their own performance.

“I wanted to use stronger intonations to speak louder, but it didn’t go as I wanted. It was hard to control my breathing as the pronunciation became stronger. Anyway, it was hard.”

“Even if you gather strength in your stomach to voice out the sounds, in the end, the voice is formed by your mouth. If the form of the vibration is changed, then the balance will break. It would be nice if you could overcome it by controlling your breath, but if it’s hard, it should be better to give a point to one word, rather than emphasizing the entire speech. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I’ll try it once.”

“Good, next.”

Ganghwan looked at a girl standing next to them. Lee Yoojin, she attended Bosung Girls High. She received an Excellent Acting Award at the Youth Theater Festival that was held this year. Her team performance resulted in the Best Acting Award just short of the grand prize, but individually, her acting was superior to everybody else here. She’s already made her debut through the TV as well. Despite being a minor role, the experience she gained from working together with professionals couldn’t be ignored.

“It felt good because a lot of my nervousness disappeared. I could see more of the stage too. I was only able to see the center of the auditorium yesterday, but today, I was able to see the sides too.”

“Good. The fact that your field of view widened means that you’re more relaxed. Was there anything you didn’t like about your performance today?”

“Nothing in particular.”

“You’re confident, I like it.”

In the end, they were the first ones to see their own acting. It wasn’t possible to please others if they themselves weren’t pleased with their own performance, actors had to carry a bit of arrogance that came from believing that their acting was the best. It was a world that they couldn’t survive in by just being flung around.

“Is there a role that you’re aiming for?”

“I would like Seulmi.”

“Hm, the female lead. The competition will be fierce.”

She could be called the protagonist of the scenario, ‘Year 3 Class 3’, that had been chosen for the practice performance this time around. In addition to Seulmi, there was the class president, teacher, and Chuljin. These four characters made an appearance in all the scenes. Ganghwan went a step further and extended the script for these four characters while creating a point of conflict amongst them.

Twelve students were participating in the play and there were four major roles, the auditions starting tomorrow would be competitive. The students that were here were all greedy for acting, nobody was doing it half-heartedly. On top of that, Yoojin, who already starred in a TV program, had been gunning for the main role.

Look at their eyes.

There were five girls out of the twelve students. The five of them had to fight for two main roles, Seulmi and the teacher that could be played regardless of gender. It was obvious that they all wanted one of the two.

It’s going to be fun.

Ganghwan went across the four remaining girls and asked.

“Is there anybody else who wants to play Seulmi?”

Three people immediately raised their hands. The one person who didn’t raise her hand said that she wanted to play the teacher.

“4 people. Are all of you confident?”

“Yes.”

Nobody backed off. Everybody had an expression that showed the role was theirs. As I thought, kids these days are scary.

“Good, then Seulmi will be the first role that we’ll be auditioning tomorrow. Everybody should come prepared. Let’s see who best fits the role of Seulmi. Ah, I won’t be doing this evaluation by myself. You’ll be doing it as well. However, my evaluation will carry the most weight.”

“How will the evaluation process be done?”

The one who asked the question was Maru. Ganghwan spoke as he stroked his chin.

“It won’t be split into detailed categories. You’ll be stating your impressions, while I’ll be giving the overall score. It’ll probably be fun. You’ll get to be the judge while also being judged.”

Ganghwan took out his phone and checked the time. It was almost time to wrap up.

“Good work today too. Pack your stuff and let’s leave.”

“Thank you for your hard work!”

The children stretched after giving a short bow.

“Han Maru.”

Maru was preparing to go back with her, but looked back after being called. Ganghwan made a hand gesture. I wonder what it is.

“You have time today right?”

“Huh? Why are you asking?”

“Don’t ask. Do you have an appointment?”

“No, I don’t have any appointments.”

“That’s good.”

Ganghwan took out his phone and made a call somewhere. He had a bright expression as he took the call. His first words were, “Senior Junmin.”

“Teacher?”

“Senior, I’ll be leaving with Maru right now. Yes, yes. I’ll see you in front of Teacher’s house. I’ll be there soon!”

Ganghwan ended the call and walked towards the door.

“What is it?”

“We’re going to have to go somewhere together.”

“Where?”

“To the house of a teacher who I respect.”

“Huh?”

“That teacher wants to meet you. Bastard, you’re pretty popular. You probably don’t know because you’re young, but he’s called Yoon Moonjoong...”

“Ah, it’s that elder?”

“You know him?”

“Yes, I met him by chance when I went volunteering at a nursery.”

“I see, so that’s how he knows you. Anyway, let’s go.”

“Right now?”

“Yeah, right now. Stop talking and follow me.”

Maru scratched his eyebrows. It wasn’t that he had other plans, but going to the house of somebody he’s only met a single time bothered him. On top of that, it was somebody who Ganghwan addressed as teacher. It looks like Teacher Junmin will be joining too.

-He was a super popular actor back in the days.

Maru remembered the words of the director from yesterday. It appeared to be true.

“Can you give me a moment?”

Maru went out the exit and looked towards the bus station. She was standing there while looking around, she didn’t get on even when a bus that headed towards her house had arrived.

I forgot.

He had made a promise to go back together. Maru felt sorry while running towards her.

“Where were you? The bus already left.”

“Sorry, I have an appointment.”

“An appointment?”

Maru pointed at Ganghwan who was walking towards a black car.

“With the teacher?”

“Yeah, he suddenly wanted to take me somewhere.”

“Ah, you should’ve told me earlier if that was the case.”

She pouted.

“Sorry.”

“You were the one that wanted to go back together. Whatever, it’s fine. It’s not like we went back together before anyway. You can go.”

It was extremely uncomfortable. If he turned around like this, it was clear she would nag at him later. He knew from his numerous experiences. What should I do?

“Follow me.”

“Huh?”

Maru grabbed her hand and walked towards Ganghwan’s car. Ganghwan opened his eyes wide as he looked back.

“Huh?”

“Coach.”

“Uh, yeah.”

“I have a request.”

“People without girlfriends are going to be too lonely to live.”

“Don’t be like that, it’s too late to send a girl back by herself. I planned to take her back home but I can’t do anything about it because of the appointment.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re the best.”

They were on their way back to Seoul after going to Suwon from Myeongdong. It was almost 10 pm. Ganghwan stepped on the gas after getting on the Gyeongbu Highway.

“I can’t believe I’m acting like a chauffeur for a kid at this age. It’s sad.”

“I’ll introduce a girl to you next time.”

“What, really?”

“If possible.”

“I have faith in you.”

Ganghwan’s mood did a 180. Maru knew that Ganghwan wasn’t behaving like that because he was lonely, it was just a habit. He never once saw Ganghwan go out of his way to attempt to be in a relationship, acting always came first. That’s why Maru was curious how Ganghwan would react if he really did introduce a girl to him.

“Anyway it’s getting pretty late, will you be ok? Teacher said it’s fine if we meet at a later date.”

“They say to take the iron out while it’s hot. We might as well go since the situation is already like this.”

“What about school?”

“Please take care of me.”

“....”

“I already let my mother know that I won’t be able to go back home tonight.”

“You need to respect your coach a bit more. I’m going to tell you right now, but I’m not your chauffeur.”

"I know, but I believe that you'll take me to school. You know Suwon's a bit too far from Seoul. I'll spend a night at the elder's house before going back down."

"You're really shameless, asking to sleepover at a person's house you're visiting for the first time."

"The situation calls for it, and I already received permission."

"What? When?"

"Earlier through the phone. I asked if I could spend a night because the distance was too far."

"Meticulous kid."

"I'll take it as a compliment."

Ganghwan clicked his tongue and turned the steering wheel.

Ganghwan turned off the engine of the car that was parked in front of a house. There was a pine tree in the courtyard that looked over the house, with an old chair in front of it. A pathway built out of pebbles led to the residence. It felt more cozy than elegant. The steel door attached to the wall was slightly open. Ganghwan couldn't find a doorbell no matter how much he looked, so he ended up making a phone call outside the door.

"Yes, senior. I'm here. Ah, you want us to just come in? Yes, okay."

It appeared that permission had been granted, Maru took a step inside the door. The sound of pebbles being stepped on could be heard, followed by faint barking from inside the house. A savory fragrance wafted over.

"It's meat and pine mushrooms. As expected, beef goes the best with pine mushrooms."

Ganghwan hummed as he opened the door to the house. Maru took another look at the old chair that was left by itself in the courtyard before going in. As soon as he was inside, the strong scent of beef filled the air along with the smell of the pine mushrooms.

"Teacher!"

"A pleasant guest is here."

Moonjoong and Jumin were sitting on the floor. He wondered why they left the perfectly fine sofa to sit on the floor, but it was because they were lighting up the stove in front of them. The beef and mushrooms were being cooked on top of the small stove.

"Hello."

Maru bowed in the direction of the two teachers.

"Welcome, it was an unreasonable request, but thank you for agreeing to it. Come sit, let's talk after eating."

"Yeah, yeah, let's listen to the teacher and eat first."

Maru placed down a drink set that he brought as a gift by the entrance.



“You’re empty handed?”

“Haha, teacher. I’m the gift, you’re being too stingy when we haven’t met for a year.”

“Tsk tsk, you can’t help but hate him.”

It looked like Moonjoong and Ganghwan had a good relationship from the level of friendliness they showed. Maru grinned and took a seat.

“Maru.”

“Yes.”

“Do you like pine mushrooms?”

“Of course, but I can’t eat it because I don’t have any.”

“Haha, that’s good.” Moonjoong laughed out loud. Judging from his face that had a red tint, it appeared that they already had a drink or two. As if to prove this, there was a ceramic bottle next to the box of mushrooms, with the words Andong Soju engraved.

“Hey, come here and flip over the meat.”

“Yes, Teacher!” Ganghwan answered merrily.

“We’re going to go out for some fresh air.” Junmin took the drunk Ganghwan out with him. Ganghwan wanted to stay inside because it was cold, but Junmin brought him out.

“Who did you learn how to drink from?”

“My father taught me.”

“Good job, it’s good practice to have your first drink with an adult. If you make a mistake with the first drink, you won’t know the true taste of alcohol.”

Maru kneeled and held out his cup. It was already the third cup.

“This is the last cup.”

“Thank you.”

The soju flowed out and made a circle in the cup. It was Maru’s turn to take the ceramic bottle and fill Moonjoong’s cup.

“You don’t need to force yourself to drink it.”

“It’s a precious drink, I can’t waste it.”

“Hut hut, this child.”

The two people quietly emptied their cups. Maru placed some meat and mushrooms on top of the empty grill.

“What made you start acting?”

Maru took a moment to think, and spoke truthfully.

“I’m not acting because I like it. I’m doing it to earn money.”

“To earn money... Good, that’s good. I was like that as well. I wanted to become a singer at first, but my father said he would break my legs if I became an entertainer, so I ended up becoming an actor instead. It’s strange, they’re both occupations that deliver joys and sorrows to others, but one has a higher status than the other.”

“I heard it was like that in the past.”

“Everybody’s trying to become a singer now. It’s a good job. People shouldn’t be treating it so disdainfully.”

Maru took notice and filled up the glass again. Moonjoong drank a bottle and a half by himself, but he was perfectly fine, he has amazing alcohol tolerance. Maru thought as he put aside the bottles.

“I heard you were late because you wanted to take a girl home.”

“Yes, I was scared of sending her back alone. I’m sorry.”

“No, no, I was the one that made the request, so there’s no reason for you to be sorry. She must be a precious friend.”

“She’s somebody who I’m giving all of my heart to.”

“Hut hut! You’ll get headaches later if you start talking about love at such a young age.”

“I think so too.”

The flow of the conversation was comfortable. As expected, a quiet seating like this suited Maru more than mindlessly talking with other kids. The sizzling of the food being cooked, Moonjoong’s soft laughter, as well as the occasional sound of the wind blowing through the window created a tranquil atmosphere in the living room.

“Is the reason you’re acting because of that girl?”

“.....Was it that obvious?”

“How would I not be able to tell when such a clear child starts grinning nonstop when talking about her. So it’s for love. That’s also good.”

Moonjoong made a pleased smile and turned towards Maru.

“I felt this when I first met you, but you’re really mature. However, it’s almost weird because the maturity seems so natural. When I look at your peers, I can roughly tell what kind of life they’ve been living, but it’s different when it comes to you.”

“....”

“The reason I wanted to meet you tonight isn’t anything special. I just wanted to know a bit more about you. Would it be possible to tell me about yourself? Anything is fine. If you have any concerns, I can listen to them as well. The wits of an old man can sometimes become medicine.”

Concerns.

Maru put down the chopsticks that he had been holding. It wouldn't hurt to talk about some of the things I've been worried about to a senior in life.

### **Chapter 118**

"Teacher, you prefer black right?"

"I like variety."

"Then I'll buy something like citrus tea."

Ganghwan went inside the convenience store, then came back with a coffee and a citrus tea. He got in his car and handed the citrus tea to Junmin, who was sitting next to him.

"It's quite chilly."

"It's because it's winter. At least it's not snowing. It's cold enough, but if it snows on top of that, ugh."

"A young guy like you shouldn't be complaining about the cold."

"Senior, just because I'm younger doesn't mean I'm more resistant to the cold."

Ganghwan sipped on the coffee and looked at the clock. It had been 20 minutes since they left Moonjoong's house.

"Should we start heading back?"

"Let's wait for 10 more minutes."

Junmin crossed his arms and leaned on the seat. It looked like he would fall asleep as soon as he was left alone.

"You can't fall asleep."

"I won't."

"Anyhow, it's unexpected. I wonder why Teacher wanted to meet Maru."

"I didn't tell you?"

"What?"

"It looks like Teacher will be taking in students again, like he did in the past."

Ganghwan's eyes became round.

"Is that true?"

"Yeah. Not big kids like you, but it seems like he wants to pick and teach a kid with potential. I sent him the list of candidates earlier today, and for some reason, he chose Maru."

"I heard they met each other before, could it be because of that?"

“He’s not a person who would arrange a meeting just because he met somebody by chance.”

“That’s true, anyway, it looks like he favors Maru quite a bit.”

“It’s because he’s talented, charming, and determined. There used to be times when he would be flustered, not knowing what to do, but it recently disappeared. He doesn’t have any flaws to pick at.”

Ganghwan nodded at the fitting description.

“Is there anybody that you wanted to be chosen personally? If you were the one who organized the list, then there must’ve been a few that you liked.”

“I wonder. I have too many students that I’m already taking care of, for me to pay attention to others. If I had to choose one, it would have to be Maru, but even then, what I saw was only a possibility, not a guarantee.”

“You become too strict when you start judging people. You just need to say that you want Maru to be chosen.”

“I realize this whenever I work, but in this field, it’s important to draw a line between work and personal relationship. After all, my work is basically managing people. I’m bound to make a loss if I operate based on affection.”

“Somebody like that donated 300 million won?”

“That’s how investment works.”

“Invest in me too please.”

“Are you in need of money these days?”

“It’s a joke.”

Ganghwan knew that if he asked sincerely, Junmin would offer him an enormous sum of money without hesitation. However, Ganghwan had no thoughts of making a request like that. Even if he became penniless, he vowed to never ask others for a helping hand. Money was something that could be earned and lost, but the moment you lost a person, it ended there. Relationships were something that couldn’t be recovered. Instead, they had to be forgotten and started over from the beginning. A ripped piece of paper remains ripped even if it was pieced back together.

He would live the same life regardless of whether he had money. Ganghwan saw countless people whose relationships had broken down because of money related problems. He’d learned enough lessons through them.

“Senior.”

“What?”

“Please take care of me next year too.”

“....It seems like next year will be tiresome as well.”

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Maru knelt on his knees.

“I don’t have a knack for speaking, so I’m not sure if I’ll be able to get the meaning across, but...”

Maru paused and organized his thoughts. Everything should be looked over at least twice before being spoken out. He opened his mouth after composing his thoughts.

“It might sound absurd, but... I had a certain dream.”

“Dream?”

“Yes, it was a really vivid dream where I grew up, got married, and lived a regular life before eventually dying.”

“Hmm.”

“I have trouble believing that it was a dream because of how clear it was. After having that dream, the direction of my life took a turn. You told me yesterday that I was well-mannered, but a lot of that is because of the dream. In the dream, I was 45 years old and the head of a household.”

Maru spoke as truthfully as he could while mixing in a few lies. His feelings grew complicated as he spoke. He could never grow used to remembering his death, as well as the family that he left behind in that life.

“I can tell you’re serious by your expression. Continue on, let’s hear the rest.”

Moonjoong’s eyes became calm, Maru told his story more carefully after seeing his attitude.

“I was married and had children in that dream. Then.... I died from an accident. I had a billion different thoughts after waking up. I wondered if I could keep living like this, without aim, and my attitude changed since then. I’ve decided to do my best for the people I loved and to prepare for my future. The influence that one dream had on me was massive.”

“And so you decided to take up acting.”

“That’s right.”

“I heard from Junmin, he said you wanted 300 million won?”

“Yes.”

“I thought you just wanted to strike it rich, but it seems like that’s not the case. The 300 million must be something like an insurance for the future.”

“Other people might’ve laughed at me if they heard the request. After all, a mere third-year in high school was asking for 300 million won. However, I needed something that I could be sure about.”

“You had a lot of fears.”

“Yes.”

“It’s only natural to be scared if you really did experience something like that, a man who shoulders the weight of his child can only be scared. I was like that too.”

He felt anxious just thinking about the daughter that he'll have in the future. He wanted to prepare everything for the child whose face he couldn't even remember, and for that, he needed money.

"You can't help but be greedy for money when you're the head of a household. After all, money is required for a minimal amount of happiness."

Moonjoong emptied his glass, and put the glass aside.

"Okay, I understand that you asked for money because you were scared, but this can't be called a problem. Didn't you say that you had some concerns?"

"I only started looking back at myself recently, and my thoughts became complicated. It was fine up to the point where I chose acting and asked for money. The problem is that my interest in acting is growing."

"It's a problem that you're interested in?"

"Yes, if it was just slight interest that improved my focus, it would be fine, but the problem is that the amount of interest is growing without stopping. At first, my plan was to practice for 3 years and give acting a shot. If my skills weren't up to par after the 3 years, I was going to give up and go back to the plans I had before. Then it would've meant that I made 300 million in 3 years, which is a pretty good deal."

"But your concern now is that you'll still have feelings for acting even after the 3 years?"

Maru nodded in response. It was a problem that was simple, yet important. Forty was an age where you no longer felt temptation. He's definitely passed that age before. Back then, he gave up everything and only lived for the sake of his wife and daughter. He never wavered and reduced the time he spent on hobbies, so that he could deposit money into an account under his daughter's name. He thought it was the logical way to live.

However, the now young blood in Maru kept tempting him. He could imagine himself continuing to attempt acting even after hearing that he had no talent.

Looking at it now, that future appeared sweet. The face of himself challenging his limits accompanied by his spirit and dreams. The twenties was an age that shined brilliantly with vigor. If he didn't know the future, he would have been able to lead a life like that.

However, the problem was that he knew.

He found out.

He ended up knowing.

The job market would continue to freeze over. If employment was easy, he wouldn't have had to become a bus driver. He could vaguely remember society's atmosphere back then. The unemployment rate definitely wouldn't decrease, if anything, it increased.

If it was 300 million won, he might be able to try something.

If he gave up after being told that acting wasn't his forte, anything was possible.

As long as he could give up.

"I don't want to lose the girl I love, nor do I want to make it difficult for her. This might sound premature, but I also don't want to raise my child in a lacking environment. My concern is the attitude that I should have towards acting."

Maru stared at Moonjoong, wondering what kind of answer his insight will result in.

"It seems like a concern is giving birth to more concerns."

"..."

"There's nothing that can be done about that, concerns build on top of each other. In the end, it grows to a size that people can't handle."

"That doesn't mean that you can live a life free of concerns."

"That's why a concern is a concern."

Moonjoong laughed.

"Unfortunately, I can't give you an answer to that type of concern. I'm sorry that I can't be of help."

"..."

"However, I can offer a piece of advice."

Advice.

Maru corrected his posture once more and listened.

"Don't look at the world as if it's a scenery, but rather face it like reality."

"Face it like reality...."

"I can empathize with your feelings after listening to your story. I can also tell how realistic that dream must've been from your actions. I'm sure you must be worried about the girl you'll marry, the family you'll make, as well as the child that you'll have. While your life is filled with these worries, you're taking a step back to observe everything as if none of it has anything to do with you."

"You're telling me that I'm taking a step back?"

"Aren't you nowhere to be found in any of the things you spoke about?"

"....."

"And plus, you aren't an omnipotent child of god, one of the many who are walking along a narrow cliff called life. The same applies to me too. Nobody can be sure of their life, but here you are, trying to be responsible for everything."

"But if it's not me..."

"You said you had a girl that you liked?"

"Huh? Ah, yes."

"From the way you described her, she seems to have some talent."

"...She has more than just some talent, she's the heroine."

"Then let me ask you, you seemed to be serious about her. Are you planning on marrying her?"

"That's what I'm hoping for."

"Then it becomes easier. Hmm, it's 12am, what time do kids sleep these days?"

"She's probably still awake, she picked up when I called her before too."

"Then give her a call."

"A call?"

"Yes, a call."

Maru showed a moment of hesitation before taking out his phone to call her. It rang a few times before she picked up.

-Why are you calling this late?

A tired voice could be heard. She might've woken up from her sleep to take the call. Maru looked at Moonjoong. He did as he was told and made the phone call, but didn't know what to do after.

"Ask her."

"Ask her what?"

"You know, the things that you're worried about."

-Hello? Maru, can you hear me?

Maru let out a sigh. He knew what to ask, but because it was so sudden, he had trouble speaking.

-I'm going to hang up!

"Wait."

-Ah, I can hear now. So, what is it?

"Hey, just suppose, as a possibility."

-Just suppose what?

"If the man that you marry has trouble earning money and goes around chasing after his dreams... What will you do?"

-What are you talking about this late at night? I'm going to hang up if you're just making a joke.

"It's not a joke, I wanted to hear your opinion. I'm serious, please believe me."

-.....Really, what is it? I felt this last time too, but you're weird.

"Sorry."



-As always, you're good at apologizing. Sigh.... So what's the guy that I'm marrying like?

"Huh? Oh, let's just say that he's somebody you love a lot."

-Somebody I love a lot? If it's somebody like that, I'll probably yell and nag at him and tell him to wake up. After telling him to act his age and to start thinking about his family, I'll.....

"You'll?"

-I guess I'll just earn the money instead. You did say it was somebody I loved. My mom says this often, but love is being a bit happy when the person you love is hurt. If they get hurt, it means that you can look after them and help them. For that reason, he might be pathetic and frustrating, but... if I love him, I'll just carry him on my back. Hey, maybe I should just make him be the housewife! Haha, he'll have an apron on, and watch the kid. Meanwhile, if I become a popular actress, there won't be anything to worry about. Not bad, right?

"Yeah, yeah, not bad."

-I don't know what the problem is, but I think it's pointless to worry about something like that. The question itself is biased, if the guy can't earn money, then the girl can do it. Do you think women are just parasites who leech off men? Now that I think about it, this is making me mad. Who was the one that told you to ask a question like this? I heard a voice next to you earlier, don't tell me it was teacher Ganghwan? Was it?

"No that's not it."

Maru couldn't hold back and broke out in laughter as soon as he answered. He was unable to answer despite hearing, "Hey!" from the other side of the phone.

In the end, she hung up the call. Maru could envision the nagging that he was going to hear tomorrow, but for now, he was enjoying it.

Maru looked at Moonjoong after barely managing to contain his laugh, Moonjoong looked back with a satisfied smile.

"When a concern remains a worry, it'll look like a wall impossible to climb. However, if you collide with it, it often ends up not being much. The phrase, 'Life is a tragedy from up close, but a comedy from faraway', isn't there for show."

"It seems so."

"The distancing is important, you can't be objective from too far away, nor can you be emotional from too up close. The reason moderation is emphasized so much even in this day and age, is because it's closely related to life."

Moonjoong grabbed the glass that he put aside and signaled Maru to grab his.

"Let's have another drink, the night is still long."

"Yes, Elder."

"Elder? Hut hut, good, it's better than hearing something old-fashioned like Teacher."

The concerns melted away with the glass and flew away with the fragrance of the alcohol. The only thing remaining was the bittersweet glass of alcohol that perfectly described life.

## Chapter 119

Dojin opened his eyes and woke up while scratching his bushy hair. He saw his mom boiling soup as he came out from the restroom after washing his face.

“Doenjang soup?”

“Yeah.”

He put on his clothes as he sniffed the savory smell and placed the script that he was reading until last night into his backpack together with the candies that his dad always brought home.

“Will you be late today too?”

“I think so, don’t worry about it, Madam Lee.”

“You should try being a parent too, that’s not as easy as it sounds. Make sure to call me if you’re going to be really late.”

His mom yawned as she went back into her room. Dojin mixed a bowl of rice with the Doenjang soup and placed a fried egg on top. The yolk of the over-easy egg popped open when he poked at it. As expected, it’s good. Dojin made a satisfied smile and brought his bowl in front of the TV. He powered it on and turned it to the news channel.

Just a few months ago, Dojin watched the game channels while eating breakfast. His day usually started by watching the highlights of big games.

However, his life pattern changed after meeting Maru and Daemyung. Those two friends had already stepped into society despite being the same age as him. People had expectations for them and they worked hard to meet those expectations. It was the world of adults.

The reason he started to watch the news was influenced by Daemyung more so than Maru. The guy that used to play games together with him until midnight no longer appeared online. When Dojin asked him what he was doing, almost every time the reply was ‘thinking about acting-related stuff’.

Whenever Dojin heard those words, he felt pathetic. It wasn’t that games were bad. Even now, he thought of them as an outstanding source of leisure. However, when he looked back at his life, he played games to the point where they could no longer be called leisure.

Dojin wasn’t like adults who were old-fashioned and thought that games were a waste of time, but he did realize that it had to be done in moderation. Although he knew not to spend too much time on games, he didn’t know what else to do. He tried to read books like Maru, but could never concentrate. He felt exhausted just from looking at the words that were closely packed together, so he simply gave up. While he was thinking about something else to do that was adult-like, he heard Daemyung talk about current affairs.

That’s right, it was the news. If it was the TV, he could watch without being tired of it.

This was how he first encountered the news. It started with a childish reason, but it didn't matter. The fact that he was doing something adult-like with his two friends made him feel relieved.

"Are you watching the news?"

Dojin nodded at his dad, who had just come back from hiking. He could feel his dad look at him in a satisfied manner. It was definitely different; when he watched game channels, his dad would go to the restroom without saying anything, but now that he watched the news?

He started to make conversations about current events and politics. His dad seemed like a character from Romance of the Three Kingdoms, as he spoke about the different congressmen with difficult to understand words. It appeared that being able to have such conversations pleased him. Dojin's interest in the adult world grew after seeing his dad's changes and he hoped that he would one day become the real deal like his two friends.

"I'll be back."

"Okay, be careful."

Dojin said goodbye to his dad and left the house. Even as he walked, he was thinking if it was a good use of his time. He felt as if it were a meaningless struggle to try and catch up to his friends when he lacked the abilities, but it was too late to go back to the way he previously was. Dojin knew that he would become a member of society eventually, but he never would've imagined being concerned about it this early. Rather than being envious about his friends who went on ahead, he felt burdened by himself who stayed at the same place every day.

Dojin stepped on the bus and weaved in between the students who had uniforms on. When he took the bus in the morning, he sometimes felt like a college student, because Woosung High didn't have a uniform.

"I looted an OP item yesterday."

"Really? Then help carry me."

"Okay."

A nostalgic conversation entered his ears. These kinds of conversations used to be normal to him, but he couldn't mention the letter 'g' from game in front of Maru and Daemyung, because they didn't play any games.

"Yes, yes, I'll get a confirmation. Yes, I'll let you know after speaking with team leader Lee."

A man that was in his thirties had a suit on as he spoke on the phone. His speech that showed perseverance as he finished the call looked cool to Dojin.

Suddenly, he thought of Maru and the incident that completely turned the school over on its head this time. 4 transfers and 7 expulsions. Although the teachers kept quiet about it, rumors spread as if somebody went around talking about it. Some kids that were being bullied hired a lawyer and got their revenge. The lawyer was such an incredible person that even the chairman couldn't speak up. On top of that, the kids who were outcast were exercising in the gym and were definitely different from how they were in the past. There were several similar rumors.

Nobody knew that Maru was the person behind the incident. Dojin once again realized that he was the real deal. In between the gaps of the law, the lawyer, and the chairman, he solved the problem beautifully with the identity of a student. Although the one who showed off the most power was the lawyer, the person who orchestrated it was Maru. Even after doing something as amazing as that, Maru never showed it. Rather than brag about it, he was instead glad that there were no rumors involving him. Dojin grew restless when he thought about how relieved Maru had been because it didn't bring harm to the acting club.

Everybody around him was moving forward. Geunseok, Maru, and Daemyung, they had all been recognized and were guaranteed universities. It wasn't limited to universities, once they showed their talent, they'll be able to step into the acting world and the world of celebrities.

Similarly, Iseul, who was firm on taking over the rice soup restaurant and showed happiness whenever she talked about the owner who provided meat, was a full-fledged adult.

All the members of the acting club seemed to have clear goals and were making big strides towards them, even the ones who didn't seem to possess something special.

Dojin could only sigh whenever he thought about them. He wanted to aim for something further than studying, something more special.

He looked at the back of the man who ended his call and left the bus. The others will probably become like him.

Dojin exited the bus and walked towards Woosung High. It's going to be practice today too after school. These days, Dojin had felt that even practice wasn't that enjoyable. It was worth practicing when coach Miso gave him advice, but nowadays, she was always quiet. He wondered if she stopped caring or if he was so bad that he wasn't even worth criticizing. At least up until two months ago, he could imagine a scenario from the script, but these days, everything was blurry.

"Hey, we're going to be late, let's run."

He ran with a classmate that he met on the road and barely made it in time.

"How come you're never online these days? Is the acting club that busy?"

"Something like that. Bastard, make sure to loot a lot of items. I'll help you by taking them from you when I return."

"Get lost, I'm not giving you anything."

A normal conversation; it was a situation where he was supposed to be laughing, but he had a dry expression instead. This isn't the time to be playing games, my friend. He opened the rear door and went into the classroom. Maru was seen bent over sleeping. He's sleeping in the morning, that's unusual. Maru was somebody who only slept during lunchtime, as if it was scheduled.

"You're here?"

Maru woke up at the sound of the chair being pulled out. He yawned while stretching, but his face was no joke. His hair was bushy as if there had been a bird that sat on it and his face seemed like a person

who didn't get sleep for several days. It was accompanied by dim eyes that were typically hard to see from Maru.

"Did you stay up overnight?"

"I had something to do, I drove down from Seoul at dawn."

Yawn.

"Seoul?"

Dojin went through his bag and took out mint candy. If it was any other day, it would've been plum candy, but mint seemed appropriate today.

"Thank you, my mouth was feeling a bit stale."

"Why did you go to Seoul?"

"Some elder summoned me, ha."

Maru suddenly started to laugh.

"I went to get some life counseling."

"You? Counseling?"

"Yeah."

"....."

To think that Maru would get advice from somebody. That's new. Maru had always been somebody who gave out advice, rather than receive them.

"What do you mean by life counseling?"

Dojin was curious about the worries that Maru had. They're probably something that I can't even imagine.

However, the words that came out of Maru were completely different from what he expected.

"It was about how a man should meet a good woman, and how if you listen to adults, you'll profit even in your sleep."

"Huh?"

"I'm going to sleep again, wake me up if the teacher comes."

"Y-yeah".

What should I say?

The Maru who made a hearty laugh just now was like a completely different person. Should I say he seemed a bit less serious? He even seemed a little childish. If he had to describe it...

"Hey hey! Give me your phone, let me play some games."

“Fuck off, I’m out of batteries.”

He looked similar to the immature kids who were laughing and chatting in the front. It was only for a moment, but from that short moment, that was the feeling that he gave off.

What was that?

“Hey, Dojin.”

A girl called out to him when he pulled out his chair to get some sleep. He turned his head to the rear door and saw Iseul standing there with a smile.

“Huh?”

Why’s she here? Dojin was at a loss for words.

“Come to the club room.”

She disappeared after leaving those words.

And then.

“Dojin~!”

“Who was that? She was super cute.”

“I think it’s better to say that she’s pretty, is she in the acting club too? Huh?”

The kids came over in hoards. Dojin squeezed by his friends and went up to the club room. When he arrived, he knew why Iseul had looked for him.

Dojin opened the door and went inside.

“Is it for the observation?”

“Bingo, it’s a different class so it’s hard to make time, right? It’s hard to see them when we’re at the auditorium because we need to practice too.”

“So what do you want to do here?”

“What do you mean what, we’re going to talk. You can’t just stare at them as if you’re checking the freshness of meat.”

Dojin sat on the floor while scratching his head. It’s been a while since he was last in the club room, there was no reason to go to the club room since they usually practiced in the auditorium. It was an area that was more fit to be called the storage room rather than the club room. The faded stage costumes looked different today.

“And we need to see something fun too.”

“Something fun?”

“You know that Taejoon likes Soyeon right?”

“Yeah.”

“Hoo hoo, they’re talking in the auditorium right now. It’s going to be awkward if I get caught peeking by myself, so let’s go together.”

She spoke as she grabbed Dojin’s arm. Dojin became startled because she suddenly became so close. It was abrupt, but she really was cute.

“Ah, speaking of which, do you have time this Sunday?”

“This weekend? Why?”

“Let’s hang out at my house, I don’t think Taejoon and Soyeon will make any progress like that. Let’s all meet and then leave those two alone by themselves. Doesn’t that sound fun?”

She made a bright smile.

Dojin was speechless; it was like looking at a fox.

She’s a total kid.

The Iseul in his memories was a wonderful girl who led a family business, but after seeing her today, she was just a normal kid who loved to mess with her friends. Of course, her looks weren’t normal.

Maru and now her, what’s happening.

All of a sudden, the childish, yet serious concerns that he had just earlier in the morning felt meaningless. However, even these feelings disappeared quickly, as Iseul crossed his arms with hers and pulled.

“They might leave soon, let’s hurry up.”

“Oh, yeah.”

Her hair fluttered as she spun around.

Dojin took a note mentally.

Kim Iseul, she’ll do anything to have fun. Also, she’s cute.

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It was something that he often felt, but his body became a lot healthier after being reborn. His reaction times, as well as physical capabilities, were also noticeably better than his previous life. In most cases, he wouldn’t feel tired, and even if he did overwork himself, he felt refreshed by the next day.

However, even this upgraded body couldn’t handle drinking until 4 in the morning. How nice would it be if I had an ability that could expel the alcohol out of my body like in those martial arts novels?

But I’m still better than the coach.

His coach said that he would never drive while being drowsy and doused himself in cold water. This was during the middle of the winter. Thanks to that, they safely arrived at school, but Maru felt bad when he saw the coach shivering in the car.

I should get him a pack of herb medicine later.

A rowdy classroom.

It was the same area as always, but it felt especially affectionate today. Before, he wouldn't take a single step from his seat that was in the 4th row and only talk to Dojin. It might've been because he was prejudiced with the thought that everybody else was childish and that there would be nothing to gain from talking with them. However, after listening to the advice Moonjoong gave, he joined the other kids and talked amongst them. Although there were many topics that he couldn't follow, he still laughed and talked.

-It's your life, but Maru is nowhere to be found.

It was a voice that pierced the brain.

A voice which said that he was watching his life as if it were a scenery.

I neglected the Maru who was a high school student too much.

I took the age of my physical body too lightly.

I acted as if I carried the concerns of the entire world.

-I can be the one to bring food to the table.

He recalled her confident voice.

He started to laugh again. It seemed like he would be laughing without rest for a few days. He hoped that he wouldn't be mistaken as insane.

Jump in.

Maru took out his script and held it. Until yesterday, he looked at everything that was acting related as if it were his homework, but now it was different.

Nobody was telling him to do it; he wanted to do it of his own accord.

He pushed back his fears.

If the monster called acting swallowed him, he would think about it then. If it was hard for him to escape, he just needed to borrow her strength.

He remembered the spicy palm that would fly at him whenever he thought about weird things. As long as he had the palm that slapped his back, he was sure that he could wake up.

"Daemyung."

"Huh?"

"Let's do some reading."

## **Chapter 120**

Time passed, and it became Saturday. A week had passed since Maru had the conversation with teacher Moonjoong.



Maru grabbed his backpack after finishing the last period.

Whenever school ended, it became natural for him to head to the auditorium as if he were a salmon that was trying to remember its own birthplace. Even on the days without practice, he found himself auto-piloting there. Today was a day with practice, it was also a day where they would be getting their homework checked.

He turned the doorknob and went inside.

“You’re here.”

The second years welcomed him. Recently, the participation rate for the second years kept decreasing. It might’ve been because they were focusing on the fact that they were about to become third years, along with things like applying to universities and jobs.

Maru greeted his seniors and started to warm up, stretching was the basic among basics. Everybody did stretches when they entered the auditorium even without being told to. Daemyung and Dojin, who were on clean-up duty, arrived at the auditorium late.

“Huh? Not everybody’s here yet. Hello, senior!”

“Dojin is full of energy today too.”

Maru looked at the Yoonjung who was waving her hands above her head. He recalled the time when Yoonjung came into his class earlier in the semester to talk about acting. She carried a lively smile, a flawless personality, and piqued Maru’s interest in the acting club with her passionate speech.

Now that he thought about it, Maru might’ve been inclined to joining the acting club because he saw a shade of ‘her’ within Yoonjung’s face.

“Maru, why are you staring at me like that?”

“Because you’re pretty.”

“.....”

It was for a brief moment, but the eyes of the second years became complex. Four people gathered together and started muttering amongst themselves. Things like, “I think there’s something wrong with him after all,” could be heard.

“You’ve been strange since a few days ago, but you’re extra strange today. Are you okay? Are you really Maru?”

Dojin came to his side and whispered. Daemyung had a look of agreement.

“What’s strange about me?”

“You know, you’re just completely different from how you usually are.”

“How am I usually?”

“What do you mean how? You always have your mouth shut and scan your surroundings with a look that says you know everything. Right, Daemyung? But recently it’s been different.”

“Y-yeah.”

His two friends made a puzzled expression. Was I normally like that? Maru couldn't remember, but he had to admit that he had been different. His body was light as if he had weights taken off, and he felt mentally relaxed. I wonder if that's the cause for the change. Maru escaped from the auditorium and went into the restroom that was to the right.

The face that was reflected in the mirror was a mess. His bangs shot up to the sky because he took a nap during lunch and his eyes were sunken in from going to sleep late the night before.

Despite all this, he seemed to be full of vitality. It might've been because of his mouth that had been making a smile unconsciously.

“It's good to see.”

Maru washed his face and pressed down on his hair with his wet hands. When he figured it was enough, he let go of his hands, but the hair stayed the same. He thanked his healthy hair with a bittersweet expression.

The rest of the first years had all arrived by the time he returned to the auditorium.

“Haha! Are you a Super Saiyan? Your hair's no joke.”

Taejoon laughed as he asked. Maru nodded and went to where the first years were. They were sitting in a circle as they stretched.

Geunseok and Yurim could be seen right in front of where he sat. Yurim looked at Geunseok and smiled like she normally did, but Geunseok didn't smile back as he did in the past. However, he did reply to everything that Yurim said.

There was a rumor going around the kids that the two were going to break up soon and the common opinion was that Geunseok had grown cold. However, it didn't look like the two were going to easily break up from how closely they sat together. In the first place, when students were in a relationship, it was hard for them to break up because of their friends.

“Are you going to Anyang today too?”

Maru shook his head at Iseul who sat next to him and asked. It was almost time for the preliminaries and he was scheduled for amateur classes as well, so he decided not to go to the practice room in Anyang for the time being. Of course, he would go if he had time, but it would probably be difficult. Ganghwan also advised him to build teamwork with the members of the acting club.

“Really? Then can you stay for a bit after practice?”

“What is it?”

Iseul whispered back.

“It's about Taejoon and Soyeon, hehe.”

Ah. Maru knew what she would say as soon as he saw her mischievous face. It looked like she already told Daemyung and Dojin as well. The three of them shared a firm, but playful determination.

After doing some simple stretches, they joined the second years and started to talk about this and that. Suddenly, the door slammed open and Miso ran in.

“There’s so much damn traffic!”

“.....”

“Hoo, at least I’m not late. How is it? The charms of an adult who keeps her promises?”

It was a Misoface that wasn’t lacking compared to a pokerface today as well. Miso’s hands held onto two black plastic bags filled with snacks and drinks.

“Today’s the big viewing day, so we can’t be missing any of this.”

It was today. They would be acting out the characteristics of their partner that they’ve observed thus far. The members of the club who’d been chatting until now became slightly nervous.

“Good, good. Your expressions are all very good. As expected, there needs to be this type of tension between people. Now, now, you guys should go and prepare. The method is simple, you just need to go out and give a brief description of what you’ve seen and give a well-organized performance. You’ve all seen what a monodrama is, so you just need to do something similar to that. You’re excited, right? Doesn’t it sound fun?”

Miso made a face full of expectations as she observed the members. Maru found something that shouldn’t have been there as he organized the snacks and drinks.

“Coach.”

“Huh?”

“This beer...”

Maru took out a canned beer. They could see fried almonds and anchovies in between the snack bags too. Miso hurriedly grabbed the can of beer and side dishes as she grinned.

“They’re mine, so don’t worry about it.”

So that’s how you’re going to come out, teacher Taesik should’ve been here to see this. Everybody knew it would be pointless to stop her, so they simply said “Just don’t get drunk.” Although, there was no way a heavy drinker like her would become drunk from a single can of beer.

“Then who should we start with?”

She opened the can as she spoke. It was known that presenting first was better, but nobody wanted to be the first one to present.

“As usual, the one to take the lead should be the second years right? You guys did live a year longer.”

“Wow, that’s discrimination.”

“If you don’t like it then why don’t you be the coach instead, Yoonjung?”

“.....Tsk.”

“Tsk? Okay! The club president will be the first one to go to set an example for the others.”

“It was like that last time too!”

“So it should be like that this time as well. I’m conservative you see.”

Yoonjung must’ve realized that she would never win an exchange of words because she stood up with a gloomy face. As Yoonjung went up, everybody started to take out something like a paper or notepad to write down their summaries and evaluations of the performance.

Maru took out a notepad together with everybody else. He paid extra close attention when he observed his friends, as a way of replying to Daemyung’s advice. He learned how interesting it was to look into others through this homework.

People all had characteristics of their own. However, these characteristics weren’t something that always appeared, because people were bound to change according to the situation. Although it wasn’t something that always appeared, it was possible to get a sense of their behavior by observing them for extensive periods of time. By gathering small details to form a framework, then attaching the body to it, he was able to roughly explain the person called Daemyung.

“Maru.”

“Hm?”

“.....Please perform something cool.”

Daemyung requested as he made a faint smile.

Although they spent the past year together, it was strangely nerve-racking. Speaking of which, it was the same when they had presentations in class too, despite it being just talking in front of the kids that they laughed and spoke with. It made you strangely nervous, and unable to calm down.

This time, it wasn’t even comparable to just giving a presentation in class.

Soyeon tried to control her breathing as she went up. She could somewhat understand why the second years were so nervous. It was a different experience from standing on stage.

I can see too clearly here.

If you stood on the stage, it was hard to see the audience clearly because the lighting that shined down blurred their faces, and this blur gave a unique feeling of stability. The thought of the faces of the audience being imprinted in her was enough to send shivers through her body.

Soyeon felt her hair standing on edge. Why do these familiar faces feel so new? It was unexpectedly hard to perform in front of people you knew.

“Why are you nervous? This isn’t like you, Soyeon.”

“You were stiff up there too.”

Danmi poked directly at Yoonjung. Like she said, Yoonjung was slightly nervous when she stood in front of everybody too. When they were sitting down, they found that side of Yoonjung fascinating, but they understood it the moment they went up.

It's similar to that time.

The very first practice that coach Miso made them do - to stand on top of a chair and read the script while receiving attention from others. She felt the nerves from then come back.

Will I be able to do well?

Senior Yoonjung seemed nervous up until her introduction, but as soon as she started acting, she did an amazing job as if what she showed before was just a pretense. Will I be able to be like that too? It'll probably be hard. I might mess up my pronunciation at the state I'm currently in.

She started to give an explanation about Taejoon while thinking that.

The memories of the days when she observed Taejoon brushed by her. In the beginning, she couldn't even take a proper look at him because of how nervous she was. She tried to not be conscious of him, but because of the time they spent together increased, she couldn't help it. This grew to the extent where her palms began to grow sweaty from how nervous she became. Taejoon had good looks, but on top of having good looks, he had deep consideration for others. Her heart shook at the kindness he showed while asking all sorts of things. However, because she knew that they wouldn't look good together, she had to give up her interest in him.

At first she had thoughts like 'a fatty like me wouldn't stand a chance', but she soon corrected herself. She wasn't pathetic enough to shrink back because of outer appearances and men.

It's good enough that I'm getting butterflies in my stomach. Having a crush isn't too bad either. When else will I ever get to experience an innocent love like this? When she started to think like this, it became more comfortable for her to confront Taejoon.

Good.

First of all, Taejoon speaks a lot. It was almost miraculous that he didn't run dry of topics to speak about after talking with girls for an entire day. He's also good at listening to others, remembering little details, pleasant and affable.

Of course, there were parts of him that were a bit over the top.

As for the downsides... Maybe love had blinded her, but she couldn't see any. Ah! Maybe that his stamina is a bit lacking?

She used these facts to lay a groundwork for the character called Taejoon, and left it to the members who sat in front of her to judge how similar it was to the real Taejoon.

"This is the Taejoon that I observed."

She concluded her brief explanation.

Now, let's start acting.

She stopped shaking the moment she created a mental image.

It looks like practice doesn't lie.

Soyeon started her act by making a fuss like Taejoon.

"Hey, hey, did you see that? Did you see it? Hey, hey! Look at me for a bit."

"Even though there's no fun like this, it looks like everybody came well prepared."

It appeared that Miso was looking forward to something else.

The only two left now were Geunseok and Daemyung. Maru expressed Daemyung as an outstanding observer, and acted out the Daemyung who spoke shyly normally, but did a 180 when he went on the stage. Everybody nodded in agreement. Similar to a person whose personality changed as soon as they grabbed the steering wheel, when Daemyung went on the stage, he had more confidence than anyone else.

"Next up is Hong Geunseok."

It was Geunseok's turn. After he started receiving private lessons, Geunseok underwent a lot of changes. If Daemyung's ability to observe and understand his surroundings went up, then it could be said that Geunseok's ability to express things had dramatically increased. Geunseok was somebody who was good at acting in the past too, he dove into his character more than anybody else to make that character a reality.

Miso believed that if he trained his mental fortitude, his acting would evolve one step further. Apparently, Geunseok's coach was a supporting cast from a recent TV mini-series. Soyeon, if Maru remembered correctly.

"I'll be starting."

Geunseok spoke with a voice that showed no hesitation, the target of observation for Geunseok was Yurim. It was clear that Miso had her own intentions from the way she had assigned these partners. The Geunseok that Yurim performed a little earlier was quite average, a quiet boy who was good at acting. The performance was peppered with love from Yurim, making Geunseok look quite romantic. Geunseok opened his mouth after a brief moment of silence.

"I think it's becoming a bit awkward with the others, what should I do?"

Maru scratched his eyebrows as soon as he heard the line that Geunseok threw out; he could feel everybody's line of sight go towards Yurim, it was the first time a character representation had been negative. Maru glanced at Miso and saw her watching with her arms crossed. She had taken her hands off the can of beer for the first time.