

Once Again 911

Chapter 911. Crank Up 3

Only after petting for thirty more minutes did the Pit Bull's stiff muscles start to relax. When he let go, the Pit Bull stared at Maru for a while before going next to Woofie under the table, aggressively looking at the water bottle as he did so. Maru picked up the water bottle and took out some dog gum from the cabinet. It was something that made Woofie stand up and move whenever Maru started the vacuum machine as she would just flop on the ground without budging otherwise. He couldn't just give the Pit Bull one, so he placed one in front of Woofie as well. Not seemingly aware of the human's cheap tactic of buying him off with snacks, the Pit Bull enjoyed the dog gum.

"Hello?"

He picked up his phone after watching the dogs enjoy the dog gum with it between both of their front paws. Hey – he heard a voice coming from the other side, and he felt like he could smell alcohol from the sound alone.

"Are you drunk?"

-No.

The immediate response made it clear that she was semi-drunk. Maru looked at the time. It was midnight. The three musketeers calling at this hour were very likely to become uninvited guests. Without the fence known as Han Gaeul, they would have barged in without even calling. Maru spoke to Suyeon, who was snickering like crazy,

"You should go home if you don't want to be on the news tomorrow as a celebrity who was found sleeping on the street in the middle of winter."

-I have two reassuring bodyguards so it's fine.

They were the three musketeers after all. It seemed that Ganghwan and Geunsoo were with her. Or maybe, forced to be with her.

"Don't make other people suffer and go back home."

-I want to do that too, but the two people next to me are very busy people. It's been ages since we met up and drank like this.

Geunsoo's voice sounded over Suyeon's giggling words. He grumbled about how he couldn't even drink because he had to drive. It seemed that there were two drunk people, not one. That was for the better as if Geunsoo was sane, he would probably get the other two home safely when they shout for more.

"You should go back home after getting something nice and warm. Don't bother Geunsoo hyung-nim too much. Tell Ganghwan hyung-nim too that he should look after himself since he'll be performing the day after tomorrow."

Suyeon transmitted the message to Ganghwan. Ganghwan shouted something, but Maru couldn't hear it that well. From the looks of it, he seemed to have said something like don't worry.

-The two men are being so stingy. Before, we would go for three rounds minimum whenever we met up, but now they're coming up with all sorts of excuses to not go. How can they leave behind such a beauty like me to drink alone? I'm the number one actress that men want to go traveling with, you know?

Despite being drunk, she kept boasting about herself.

"They say you shouldn't do that to family members. Anyway, why did you call me?"

-They don't like drinking anywhere else, but the two men said they're okay drinking at your house.

"You know what the deal is already though. I don't live by myself anymore. You know who's at home."

-The cutie sweetie pretty tender refreshing Gaeul who's without a doubt wasted on you?

"Yes, that cutie sweetie whatever-you-just-said Gaeul is living with me so please mind your manners. I'd also love to drink with you and the two hyung-nims, but my cute Gaeul needs to rest after work. It's my job to take care of the breadwinner when she gets home. You know what I mean, right?"

Drinking with the three musketeers was something that he would gladly do, but it would be a different story if the place was his house. Whenever he looked at the mess that had become of his house, he felt his heart breaking. It was especially worse whenever the three of them came to his house semi-drunk as his house would turn into something akin to a pigsty. The drunk Ganghwan would make a mess out of the bedsheets, while Suyeon took out everything inside the bathroom cabinet. It was good that Guensoo didn't get drunk easily, but when he got drunk to the point he wouldn't be able to recognize his parents, he would cook pancakes on the floor.

-Did Gaeul say she's tired?

"She must be. You know how it is towards the end of the drama. It's practically a live feed. She's staying up all night and whatnot, so she's totally hectic. So I want to let her rest quietly when she's at home."

-That's so thoughtful of you, Maru. I guess I can't help it then.

"Let's drink next time. At that time, I'll serve you well."

-Next time, when?

"I guess some time in the future."

Though, as long as the place was his house, it was closer to never. He stood up with his phone and opened the door to the bedroom. He quietly said 'go back to sleep' in a soft voice at the empty bed.

-Is Gaeul sleeping?

"She seems to have woken up, but she's gone back to sleep. It looks like she heard me on the phone."

-Looks like I woke her up. Tell her I'm sorry.

"It's fine."

-There's no place better than your house to drink comfortably, what a pity. It's peculiar, isn't it? Whether it's Ganghwan oppa's place, Guensoo oppa's place, or mine, it doesn't feel the same as drinking at your house.

Grudges and complaints welled up inside him, but he held back and instead spat out a thin, long breath. Well of course it wouldn't feel the same. Drinking at their places meant they would have to clean up afterward, while drinking here would mean they didn't have to move a finger and could just go home. The charity work he had provided them until now had produced this terrible situation. He should have locked his door the first day the three musketeers barged in.

"You should come later."

At this point, it wouldn't be strange even if she gave up on coming after all the hints Maru gave her, but instead, Suyeon kept expressing that she wanted to come to his house. Her tenacity was on the level of synthetic rubber. Maru went to the veranda as he listened to Suyeon's chatter. He saw a car come into the parking lot through the night air. Now that he thought about it, he remembered that he promised Gaeul to go traveling together. As she had a strict schedule and was exhausted physically, they went grocery shopping together when she had a day off to replace dates. Perhaps he should take her to a ski resort once she came back from her vacation.

The car made a lap around the parking lot. It seemed that it couldn't find an open spot. Maru could see an empty spot in a corner to the right, but it was behind a truck, so it wouldn't be easily spotted by the driver.

-Why don't I see a spot?

Suyeon, who was praising seafood stew until mere moments ago, suddenly changed the topic. Maru followed the car that was driving laps around the parking lot. He suddenly felt a chill run down his back. It must be because of the cold night air. It couldn't be, right?

-Isn't that one right there right behind the truck?

His left cheek twitched. As soon as Suyeon said those words, the car slipped in right behind the truck. Maru grabbed the banister and narrowed his eyes. There was a reason his eyes were drawn to the car that entered the parking lot. It turned out that the car was a model that he saw quite a lot.

-Anyway, the seafood stew you cooked last time was so good that I just can't go anywhere else. I'm not joking. I'm totally serious. On a night like this, we should drink some soju alongside seafood stew!

The car opened and a person got out. He couldn't see because of the dark, but the silhouette was definitely that of the woman. The opening of the car door was precisely in rhythm with the last accented 'stew' syllable. He tried to deny reality, saying that there was just no way, but no matter how hard he thought, it was extremely improbable that the woman who just got out of the car was a different person from the person on the other side of the phone. The silhouette stood under a street lamp. The one looking up at the veranda with her phone against her ear was Suyeon after all. They made eye contact from dozens of meters away. Maru almost dropped his phone under the veranda.

-That's you, isn't it?

"No."

-The one that just turned around and is turning off the lights is not you?

"I don't know what you're talking about. I turned off the lights a while ago and was getting ready to sleep for a while now."

-Really?

"Yeah. Rather than that, you are going home, right?"

-Yes I am. I see the elevator in front of me. It's building 204. What an affectionate number, 204.

"That's a familiar number. You aren't perhaps at my house, right? I don't want to think that you are such shameless people, seniors."

-Of course. We're doing our best to respect your privacy. I'm the one who's stopping the other two from trying to go to your house. As a woman, I should be the one to look out for Gaeul, right?

"Right? There's no way you're coming, right?"

-Of course. If Gaeul is resting at home, then I would never go there. Unless I got permission from her beforehand.

There were parts that she strongly emphasized. 'If' she was resting at home and 'permission from her beforehand.' Maru stared at the door. When he focused with his breath abated, he heard the elevator arriving at his floor. The Pit Bull and Woofie also looked at the door, proving that he didn't hear wrong. He heard the doorbell. He checked the interphone. Suyeon's face filled up the screen. She had a bright smile on her face, as though demanding him to open the door this instant.

-The mistress of the house told me that she wasn't going to be at home today. Curious, isn't it? You said Gaeul was home. Maybe she's a clone?

Suyeon spoke directly into the interphone. She was practically a police officer with a search warrant. She looked like she would bust the door open if he didn't open it for her. He obediently unlocked the door. The three musketeers were outside. Each of them was holding plastic bags that had supermarket logos.

"How dare you try to deceive us," Suyeon said as she took off her high heels.

She seemed to have found the Pit Bull while coming in and stopped on the spot.

"So this is the one. I did see a photo that Gaeul sent me. He used to be in a dangerous place, right? Does he bite?"

"Watch out. He bites hard. You'll bleed."

"So he doesn't bite."

Suyeon approached the Pit Bull without hesitation and crouched in front of him. The actors who worked under president Lee Junmin all knew how to greet dogs. It was to reach their hand out so that the dog could smell them and then petting their heads softly after making the dog aware that they weren't an enemy. Suyeon was the same. The Pit Bull was wary at first, but after seeing the owner being completely indifferent, he seemed to have finished checking and let Suyeon pet his head.

"How smart. Unlike the owner, that is."

Geunsoo and Ganghwan entered as well, saying that they were intruding just out of formality.

"I couldn't forget about the seafood stew you cooked for us," Ganghwan said.

"Me too, I craved that today. I couldn't stop them. Sorry about that."

Despite apologizing, Geunsoo showed off the seafood stew ingredients stuffed full in both of his hands. Maru covered his face with both of his hands and buried his head on the sofa.

"Mister! Cook us one quick," Suyeon shouted.

Ganghwan and Geunsoo were already waiting in the kitchen. They said with their eyes: chef, what shall we do?

"There's a good seafood restaurant right in front of my house."

"We chose to come to this place over a hotel restaurant."

Suyeon hugged the Pit Bull and sat on the sofa as though no further conversation was acceptable. A chuckle left his mouth. It was a chuckle that came out when he had the premonition of defeat.

"We'll clean up before we go," Geunsoo said.

He said those words last time as well and did not keep them. Where was the pot again? It was better to accept his fate obediently when resistance was futile. He found Gaeul rather coldhearted today for not coming home.

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Suyeon, who went out to the veranda to get some fresh air, had her head smacked against the banister for 10 minutes now. Thinking that she might freeze to death outside, he tried to bring her back in, but she persistently stayed outside, being stubborn. Having no choice, Maru brought her a blanket. After getting covered in the blanket, Suyeon then grumbled that it was close. He couldn't understand her at all. He just let her be and closed the door to the veranda about halfway.

"Is she not coming in?" Geunsoo asked, his gaze glued to the veranda.

"She says she's cold, but she doesn't seem to have any intention of coming in. She just won't be honest. Don't take interest in her. She's meticulous about self-management, so she'll crawl back in once she feels like something's going to go wrong with her body."

Maru took out some fish and some cooked water celery from the fish stew and ate it. The three of them didn't seem to have any intention of drinking until they passed out as the plastic bags they brought were full of food ingredients. A single bottle of soju and three cans of beer were the only alcoholic drinks they had over the last hour, just as a drink of sorts to go with the food.

"Let's eat the sashimi."

Ganghwan, who was having a staring contest with Woofie, abruptly stood up before opening the refrigerator. Maru put away the fish stew where the soup was starting to boil off and placed the sashimi in the middle. It was flatfish sashimi.

“Have you not eaten yet?”

“Originally, we were going to go separate ways after drinking, but then we talked about going to your place. As you said before, I have a performance to do in two days, and the two others also have their own things to do, so we can’t drink that much even if we want to. Instead, though, we can eat to our heart’s content.”

“And here I was really nervous thinking that I had to clean up after three drunkards again.”

“You can’t call your seniors drunkards.”

“If you don’t want that kind of treatment from your junior, then hold back a little in the future. You three can’t even drink that much, but all of you will always drink until you pass out whenever you’re at my place. Think about the hardships of the person who has to clean up after you every single time.”

“I’d get angry if I heard anyone else say that I was weak at drinking, but I can’t say anything to you. Since we’re at it, have you ever gotten drunk?”

Ganghwan asked for some ssamjang. Maru passed over the ssamjang and spoke,

“If I keep drinking, I’m bound to get drunk eventually.”

Ganghwan spoke after stuffing his mouth full of ssam,

“Geunsoo, have you ever seen him drunk?”

“Nope, not even once. I did pass out a few times in front of him though.”

“Then should we see Han Maru getting drunk today?”

The two of them looked at each other and grinned ominously. It seemed that they clicked due to all the time they’d spent together. Maru cut in before they tried anything weird,

“That’s all the alcohol for today. If you want to open anymore, please visit the next restaurant.”

“Owner, you’re being way too petty.”

Suyeon, who they forgot about, opened the door of the veranda. There was a blanket over her head. Maru wondered what she was going to say, but Suyeon just stayed still. He put down his chopsticks and spoke,

“If you don’t have anything to say, then close the door behind you. You’re getting cold air in. I don’t want to waste money on heating bills so early.”

“There are three men here, yet how can not a single one of you give me some interest? Can you call yourselves men despite that? Hey? Everywan~?”

Suyeon acted coy. The first to react was Ganghwan. He went to the bathroom, saying that he felt sick and needed to vomit. Maru also stood up. He pushed aside Suyeon, who was making inexplicable nasal noises with her cheeks puffed up, and closed the door to the veranda. He decided to turn a blind eye to Geunsoo, who was looking at her like she was cute.

“Woman, stop speaking nonsense and get some sashimi. We bought it because you wanted it. What the heck is everywan?” Ganghwan said while waving his chopsticks in the air after taking refuge in the bathroom for a while.

Suyeon put down the blanket.

“How desolate. Can’t you call me cute, even if it’s just words?”

Suyeon sat down and got her own pair of chopsticks. It seemed that she had sobered up outside due to all the cold air.

“If it was anywhere else, people would have come up to me and asked what kind of worries I had, but the men here are all fixed on the food. No wait, one of you was worried about the heating bill, weren’t you?”

The tip of a chopstick flew right at his face. Maru tilted his head and avoided the chopstick.

“So if you’re here to eat and drink, you should eat and drink. Why would you go outside in this weather and sulk?”

“I’m not sulking. It’s a woman’s strategy. I’m gloomy so please talk to me – didn’t you get that vibe from me?”

“Not at all.”

He was just about to grab the fin sashimi but Suyeon’s chopstick blocked his way. She quickly snatched the fin away and smiled in satisfaction. She was practically a little kid. Only after doing that a few more times did she put down her chopsticks. She chewed on the sashimi in her mouth and looked at him in dissatisfaction.

“She doesn’t act like this outside, does she?” he asked Ganghwan.

Ganghwan pressed his palms to the sides of his head and said that she was like a fiery fox.

“Why’d you even ask?”

“Just wondering. Geunsoo hyung-nim, you should eat.”

“I’m full.”

When Geunsoo refused, Suyeon immediately made a ssam and gave it to him. When she shoved the ssam against his mouth with a ‘ah~n’, Geunsoo looked at the two others before eating it. Maru felt like he was smashed on the back of the head. He looked at Ganghwan’s face. He also looked at the two in a daze before making a fist-sized ssam and shoving it towards Maru’s mouth. Maru asked as he looked at the ssam right in front of his nose,

“What’s this supposed to mean?”

“They’re doing it, so we should do it too.”

“Hyung-nim.”

“What?”

“Let’s not embarrass ourselves. Please eat.”

Ganghwan used to meet a woman who ran her own business through the introduction of someone he knew and was all smiles until recently saying that he may get married soon, but apparently, they broke up a few days ago. He achieved a mythical record of having all the seats sold out for a play he was performing at the Daehan theater, but it seemed that his romantic business wasn’t going so well. Maru had to stop Ganghwan from opening another bottle of soju.

“Maru, it really churns me up when those two act like that. The guy who didn’t give Suyeon a glance no matter how hard she clung to him is now acting like that. Heck, I wouldn’t feel this jealous if they were going out, but now it’s Suyeon who says that they shouldn’t be hasty. They’re practically making a fool out of me, who just broke up.”

Ganghwan shoved the ssam he made in his own mouth as he shit-talked about the other two. It took a few seconds for Maru to process what he just heard. Who said that they shouldn’t be hasty?

“So the two of you finally are a thing now?”

He tried to ignore Geunsoo’s sweet gaze towards Suyeon as much as possible, but now that he had heard something, he had to have his confirmation.

“Not yet. We’re just getting to know each other a little more. I have a lot of things I haven’t told him yet. You know what I mean, right?”

Suyeon smiled shyly. That looked so disconcerting, so Maru stood up a little and got away from Suyeon.

“Did you confess or something similar?” he asked Geunsoo.

Geunsoo responded with an awkward smile instead. It seemed that Geunsoo talked about it the day Suyeon helped Maru out with Kang Giwoo.

“I’m sure the two of you will sort things out by yourselves, but let me congratulate you first. But this feels quite weird, I mean, your positions have switched now. Noonim, why don’t you just go out with him? You always wanted to do that.”

“I just told you we need time to get to know each other.”

“If you keep doing that, Geunsoo hyung-nim might change his mind. I mean, how many splendid women do you think are around him? You should reel up the fish while it’s still on the line. If you keep doing tug of war, you’ll only lose your bait and miss the fish.”

Is that how it works? – Suyeon thought for a moment, but she eventually shook her head, saying that it wouldn’t be the case. Oh? She would usually respond to a joke just as fluidly or just gloss it over, but this time, she was a little flustered. This was the perfect opportunity to tease her. When else would he get an opportunity like this?

“Don’t be too harsh on her. I’m sure Suyeon has her own plans. As she said, it is true that we need time to get to know each other,” Geunsoo cut in.

Then he proceeded to chide Suyeon, and watching them gave Maru goosebumps. Ganghwan had turned his head away for a while now.

“Right, you haven’t heard yet, have you?”

Suyeon, who was staring at Geunsoo, suddenly got startled and turned her head away. Maru could feel that it was a rather intentional change of topic, but he did not mention it. It was much better than seeing the two of them act lovey-dovey.

“About what?”

“We’re moving here.”

“What do you mean here?”

“Here is here.”

Suyeon used her index finger to point at the ceiling and the floor. Maru remembered that some moving trucks had been going in and out about two months ago. He was just thinking that the owners were having a hard time selling their apartments since no one moved in for a while but....

“When you say we, does that mean all three of you?”

Geunsoo and Suyeon nodded. Ganghwan sighed before speaking,

“I was originally looking to move elsewhere, but I just decided to come here. Unless it’s a newlywed house, this place is much more comfortable.”

“So the three of you are all coming to the same building?”

“Yes,” Suyeon said after she winked.

“Why?”

He blurted that without thinking. Just why? He could already imagine what would happen once the three of them moved. It definitely wasn’t looking good. He could already picture a pitiful young man looking after his seniors and crying sorrowfully.

“We’ve been talking about it for a while. Our president said that it would be fun if we all live near each other. A few years ago, I scoffed at the idea, but recently, I changed my mind. I’m not sure about any others, but I definitely do feel like seeing members of JA around often will be quite fun. Actually, you had a lot of influence on this decision. You somewhat acted as the center point for all of us,” Suyeon said while tapping his shoulder.

Maru wanted to push against the table and fall down on the floor. The three musketeers moving to this apartment complex was equivalent to a natural disaster walking into his own bedroom. It was obvious that they would snoop around his house whenever they had a day off. Heck, they were barging into his house despite living in other parts of the city right now.

“Sooil is going to come too. He said he doesn’t want to live by himself in that huge apartment. Senior Taeho decided to stay in Incheon. He has a family to take care of after all.”

The comfort zone that was building 204 was about to turn into a residence of eccentric actors.

“Also, let me tell you something in advance. The president said that you’ll think about moving the moment you hear this news, but he wants to tell you that you shouldn’t even dream about it. He said forcing this on you is reasonable since he didn’t abandon you despite wasting five years.”

The president’s words made him speechless. Maru put a piece of sashimi in his mouth. He had dipped it in sauce, but it tasted like nothing.

“You must be lying, right?” he asked with a final shred of hope.

Suyeon smiled and replied with a no.

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When he came to, ‘Wednesday Nights’ was a thing. They had decided to meet up in this apartment every other Wednesday evening and play around to their heart’s content. If there was a small problem, it was that the owner of this apartment had no say in this. Though, seeing the three of them singing ‘Wednesday Nights’ so passionately, it didn’t seem like anything would work on them.

“I’ll clean up afterwards.”

“And cook.”

“Just trust this noona.”

They were no different from politicians right before an election. They were blurting out policies that they could not fulfill, not like they had any desire to fulfill them. Maru brought some omija tea to the three people sitting side by side on the sofa while patting their stomachs. The three were better off staying still rather than awkwardly trying to help. He put the pot he cooked the seafood stew in under some hot water while washing the rest. He thought about the reason he had to wash dishes at 2 a.m., but he couldn’t think of any plausible reasons. If there was one, it was that he had sinned for being born later than them.

“Aren’t you leaving?”

Maru pointed at the clock hung right above the TV. It would only take these people 30 minutes to get home if they took a taxi, yet they didn’t show any signs of leaving at all.

“Don’t worry, we won’t sleep here.”

“Did you book a nearby hotel or something?”

“We just told you, yet you forgot already? We’re moving here. The house above this one and the house below this one are both empty, so we can get some sleep there.”

“I had totally forgotten about that because the reality was too terrible.”

“Three great seniors are going to be living near you, and you call it a terrible reality? Not a blessing? You got yourself an environment that many other actors can only dream of. You should learn to be thankful,” Suyeon said while opening both of her hands.

Theater, film, drama. Having seniors who had made a name for themselves in each of those industries might be a fantastic environment for some. That 'some' did not include Han Maru, or so he desperately hoped. He didn't want to be the modern version of a slave.

"How are the preparations for the film going?" Geunsoo asked.

"You're doing a film?"

Ganghwan looked like this was the first time he heard about it. The same went for Suyeon. It seemed that only Geunsoo knew about it because he was close to the film industry, or maybe he heard from the president himself.

"I haven't even prepared anything. I have yet to receive my script."

"It's a project where director Park Joongjin is in charge of both the production and creating the scenario. I'm sure he wants to produce a good result even if it takes some time. No date set on when you can receive the script?"

"He told me that he already edited the script once, but he also said that he needed to edit more ever since we went to Suncheon Bay together. I don't think it will take that long."

"Sounds like director Park cherishes you a lot. From what I hear, it is very rare for director Park to go experience hunting with an actor before he shoots."

"Maybe he found me unreliable and wanted to teach me something."

Geunsoo smiled, saying that Maru should be wrong.

"What's the genre?"

"I guess you can call it the story of a man. To borrow the words of the director, it's old-fashioned. A man who looks after dog cages encounters a change due to a certain event. I guess you can summarize it like that."

"Everything becomes old-fashioned if reduced to one line. A growing conspiracy behind a police officer's exposé, the lives of two men who loved one woman, what would happen if a person right before his death goes crazy - you can summarize the recently released titles like that, but the masterpieces and the bad pieces are separated according to how they unfold. Of course, since it's director Park Joongjin's work, it'll be a masterpiece for sure."

Ganghwan, who was listening, chimed in,

"How probable do you think the chance of a home-run hitter hitting another home-run is in the next round? Don't think optimistically and try your utmost best. If you play the lead role of a film by a director who hits a home run every single round, the public's arrow of blame will go to you if it doesn't do well. Well, not that I'm that knowledgeable about the film industry. But it shouldn't be that different from theater production, is it?"

"Even if you didn't tell me that, I already have a mountainload of worries. Popularity is one thing, but the director's personality is extraordinary too. I had a nightmare a few nights ago where I had to do a

hundred takes for a single scene. The director kept indifferently clapping the slate in front of me, and when I woke up, I found that my shirt was drenched with cold sweat.”

The three of them on the sofa nodded all at once. It was probably a common fear among all people who acted for a living.

“Since we’re talking about this, why don’t you three pay up?”

“Pay up?”

“Show me your acting. It’s fine even if it’s just a gist.”

“We’re all expensive people, you know? Don’t you think a single pot of seafood stew is cheap?”

Suyeon crossed her arms. Maru knew that she wasn’t just bragging. It was true that they were expensive since they were all paid hundreds of millions to act.

“If you don’t want to, then I guess I can’t help it. But instead, I’ll lock the front door every Wednesday. I will not pick up any calls after 10 p.m. unless it’s related to work.”

“You’re coming out strong.”

Suyeon grabbed the hands of the men on either side of her and stood up. With this ‘Wednesday Nights’ was official. Maru was now in a position where he had to set up a drinking occasion every fortnight, but it was quite a cheap price to pay if he could get advice from these three. Though, they would still listen to his request even if he just asked.

Maru sat down on the sofa, from which the three seniors stood up. It felt rather weird. Three people, who were capable enough to be called ‘famed actors’, were standing in front of him. He was now in a position where he could instruct them to act, and from up close too.

“Looking at your eyes, it looks like the respect that had been hidden from you for years has come back to you. Geez, where can you find a junior like this? And the seniors too?”

Suyeon chuckled before asking him to elaborate. Maru described the dog cage he saw that day in as much detail as possible. He also showed them the photos he took so that the three actors could form a character in their heads.

“We just have to show you a general idea, right?”

Geunsoo walked towards the kitchen after looking at the photos. The boundary that connected the kitchen to the living room became a makeshift stage. It hadn’t even been two minutes since he finished explaining and showed them the photo, but it seemed that Geunsoo had formed an outline of the character already. Maru sent the two dogs sitting underneath the dining table into his bedroom before saying that he could start.

“It is somewhat embarrassing to do it like this.”

Unlike his words though, his expressions changed in an instant. His eyes were filled with boredom. He scratched his belly like someone who just walked out of bed and slowly walked to the living room. His cloudy eyes looked around. He seemed to have entered the greenhouse. He yawned and grabbed the

remote control, which was supposed to be the rod. He poked around indifferently, without the slightest bit of hesitation. For a moment, his eyes flashed with glee. With the eyes of someone who had found a bowl of leftover food after starving for days, he insistently stared at the TV stand and pushed the rod back and forth. Maru could picture a frantic dog yelping and falling on the ground. He could also see the rod that kept poking at the collapsed dog. Geunsoo moved his hands as though the movement of the rod had nothing to do with the dog's death before eventually dusting his hands and standing up.

"Did you say I can't kill the dog?"

"Yes, but it doesn't matter. That was enough."

Geunsoo sat down on the sofa, saying that he was done. Despite only a few lines of explanation and a few photos, he managed to come up with a plausible character in a very short period of time. It wasn't that his acting was awkward either.

"When I see that oppa act, I sometimes feel that the world is so unfair," Suyeon said.

To compare, Geunsoo was analogous to Lee Heewon. Questions shouldn't be asked to him. He was the type of person to ask back with 'how do you not understand' when asked about something. He was prime evidence of the fact that a competent senior doesn't always equal a senior who's great at teaching. Maru just had to extract what he could from his act.

Following that, Suyeon showed her act. Her character was rather easily upset. She swore from the get go. 'Fuck' was nothing more than conjunction. Holding the rod, Suyeon swore a lot but did not use the rod so easily. In fact, she carefully reached out with the remote control with a fear-stricken expression. When she walked past the sofa, she got startled and even took a step back. People could not get used to doing everything – this seemed to be Suyeon's idea. The character she showed went through a conflict at every moment. It was far from the plain lunacy that Maru wanted, but an interesting interpretation nonetheless. The startled expressions were something worth using as well. After all, constantly putting on a heavy expression didn't mean good acting. He would probably be able to make use of it once he started the shoot later.

"The one after me will fulfill all the criteria, so I tried changing it up."

'The one after me' that Suyeon talked about had fallen into thought behind her at the dining table. Geunsoo softly said that he might need more time. Ganghwan stood up when another ten minutes had passed. He didn't say that he would begin. Maru could tell that he started acting the moment he stood up.

"Yeah, I told you. Right."

He was on the phone as he walked towards the TV and picked up the rod. His eyes were fixed on the ceiling, his mouth was busy talking to his phone, and his hand was holding the rod. He was at the epitome of proficiency. He swung around the remote control, and every once in a while, he would give a glance down and stab hard with his hand. It was a move that subdued the dogs without any big movements. The topic over the phone was about money. It seemed like someone who borrowed money had not paid back in time. He then brought the water bottle they decided to use as the kettle before tilting it slightly. He was venting his anger on the dog. Maru rather liked the fact that he was pouring water indifferently while on the phone. It was a plot device that showed that the character had become

so used to his job that he could do it alongside other tasks. After emptying the water bottle, Ganghwan scoffed before turning around. He looked like he had finished a small task.

"I hate improvisations like this the most. Even when I was learning."

"It's people like that who always grumble the most. I'm sure he's doing it on purpose despite knowing that what he did was the best one," Suyeon said with a frown.

Maru immediately grabbed Ganghwan and asked him questions. It was clear that both Geunsoo and Ganghwan were incredibly good at acting, but there were differences in their ability to teach. That was also why Ganghwan was in charge of teaching back at the amateur acting class.

"I'm not sure what that director wants from you, but rather than preparing something new, you better polish what you have been doing now. If I'm the director, that's the kind of thing I'd be expecting from you. In my opinion, a good actor is not someone who suddenly shows something incredible one day, but someone who perfectly shows what he or she has refined over a course of a long time."

"I think director Park wants that from me too."

He threw a few more short questions and learned about how to create situations. Just then, he realized that he could no longer see Geunsoo and Suyeon. He tried opening the door to the bedroom. Suyeon was on the bed, and Geunsoo was on the floor. They each had a dog in their arms.

"Don't those two know any shame?" Ganghwan said.

"You aren't one to speak," Maru retorted with a smile.

Chapter 914. Crank Up 3

He got a text from Sora. Apparently, their work was invited to the short film festival in Chungmuro. She said she had to attend, but the actors did not have to. This director Kang was actually rather busy.

Maru finished cleaning by hanging the rag on the drying rack in the veranda. He felt refreshed after seeing the spotless kitchen and the living room. It was peace he had finally gained after driving out the three musketeers who stuck around till morning. He drank a cup of coffee and left the house with the two dogs who kept nagging him to take them on a walk. He could feel that December was right around the corner. He went to the local park after putting on his orange jumper. He walked a lap around the park while the dogs walked back and forth around him.

"Your voice doesn't sound good. Did you not get good sleep?"

Maru picked up the phone while firmly grabbing onto the leashes. It was Gaeul. After coughing for a while, Gaeul spoke,

-I kicked the blanket away during the night because it was hot, and I think that's gotten me sick.

"You should've been careful."

-It's fine since it's nothing serious. I'll get better with a cup of honey tea and some aspirin. Rather than that, how was yesterday?

"How do you think it was?"

-A fun party?

"It was hell on Earth."

-They're all good people. You should treat them well.

"If I treat them any better than this, my parents will be disappointed in me, you know? They'll tell me I'm being filial to someone else."

-Mr. Kind Han Maru, you aren't mad at me, are you?

"If the door lock says you got the wrong passcode when you come home later, then you're free to think whatever you want."

He calmed Woofie from running off and walked towards a bench.

"Can I ask you where you are now?"

-I just got out of Mijoo's house.

"Did things go well?"

-Yeah, somewhat.

Maru waited while petting the Pit Bull's head so that Gaeul could continue talking.

-Uhm, you know?

"What?"

-You said that lying is sometimes necessary, right?

"I did."

-I lied to you when I said nothing happened yesterday.

"I know. I had a gist. Is it a big problem?"

-No. I just didn't want to make you worry. But I realized that you already noticed when I talked with you.

"We've known each other for years. There was a gap in the middle, but it's easy to deduce the situation from the way you speak, just like how you saw through my lie."

Maru tapped Woofie on the butt and stood up.

"It's fine if it's nothing big. So, when are you coming back home?"

-Well, if you promise me you won't nag me and pry into it no matter what happens, I can go back right now.

"You know I'm known for not getting angry."

-Are you sure?

"Yes."

Woofie suddenly tried to dart off to the point that the leash became taut. He threw his gaze towards the place that Woofie was trying to go. He saw Gaeul waving her phone in the air. Maru smiled and walked over to her. When he got closer, he could see the white piece of cloth attached to her face. No matter how quickly the latest trends of fashion changed, there was no way attaching a piece of cloth to the face would be trendy. He started walking quickly. He reached his hand out to Gaeul, who was smiling awkwardly. The sensation of the gauze climbed up his fingertips unpleasantly and vividly.

“Did you get into an accident?” he shouted as he let go of the leash.

He was angry at her for smiling as though it was nothing.

“You promised to not get angry.”

Gaeul picked up the leash. Although he promised her not to get angry, it was a different story since she showed up with a gauze on her face. He asked her to elaborate, but she just grabbed his hand, saying that they should go back first. Since there were eyes around, he decided to listen to her first. Maru’s eyes were fixed to Gaeul’s face until the moment they returned to the apartment and opened the door. There was a gauze and an adhesive tape attached to her cheek and chin. It seemed that she wasn’t injured elsewhere.

“Home sweet home,” Gaeul said as she sat down on the sofa.

Maru turned on the air heater first.

“You promised you won’t get angry. How can you get angry the moment you see me?”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t feel like joking right now. Are you okay? Are you sure the injury is not big? Was it a traffic accident? Or did something happen at the set because of some props?”

“This is why I was originally planning to wait a week before coming so that it could heal. Geez, you’re so scary that I feel like I can’t say anything to you.”

Gaeul tossed her feet while on the sofa, saying that she should leave. He lost his energy in his shoulders. He said all those things, so he couldn’t afford to not keep them. He also pitied Gaeul, who was very wary of him despite smiling.

“Want something to drink?”

“Some honey tea would be nice.”

“Alright, get changed first.”

All sorts of things came to his mind while looking at the boiling kettle. If it was a small traffic accident, there was no need for her to hide it, since it was not like she did anything wrong. What could’ve happened? From the way she told him not to get angry, it meant that the cause of the injury was something that could get him angry. He gave her the mug when she came back out after changing her clothes.

“Thanks.”

After taking a sip of the honey tea, Gaeul let out a slow sigh.

“I won’t get angry so tell me what happened.”

“It wasn’t anything much. I guess I paid the price for ignoring your warning?”

“My warning?”

“You told me before that I shouldn’t get into a fight with someone whose eyes have gone mad, that such a person might do anything.”

“So it wasn’t an accident, and someone did that to you on purpose?”

“There you go again, becoming all tense.”

She told him not to frown with a smile and waited a few more seconds before speaking,

“I got scratched by a bag. I went to the hospital and they told me it wouldn’t leave behind a scar so I shouldn’t worry about it.”

“Whose bag was it?”

“The old woman who picks a fight with me all the time.”

“Lee Miyoon?”

She nodded once. He knew that there would be an accident one day, but he did not even dream that she would do something like this. He expected her not to do anything to famous actors and actresses since she was someone who detested having her reputation defamed.

“Remember how I said that she looked really nervous lately? It looks like she really has a problem. From how she even did this to me, maybe she’s pushed to the edge of a cliff.”

Following that, she emphasized again and again that she was okay and that there was no problem at all, but all of that didn’t enter his ears. It didn’t matter if Lee Miyoon had a terrible personality or did whatever dirty things without other people knowing. Gaeul had kept her distance from her and had never received damage. But a problem had occurred. That woman actually took action against the one person she must not. It didn’t matter what pushed Lee Miyoon to the edge or what kind of state she was in now. The only important thing was that Lee Miyoon inflicted a wound on Gaeul’s face.

He thought as he kept looking at Gaeul’s cheek. What methods did he have to pressure her? As he didn’t have any realistic power right now, the only method he could take was to use other people’s hands to deal with her instead. The faces of two people came to mind. One was president Lee Junmin and the other was lawyer Park Sunggoo. They were the people who could give him practical help. Even among the two, lawyer Park Sunggo was better. The president was someone he would not be able to move so easily, but he could have lawyer Park help him if he paid the required fees. If he gathered the people who had been oppressed by Lee Miyoon until now without having Gaeul stand up for herself and have them all sue her....

“Han Maru.”

He returned to reality after imagining writing names down on a petition. Gaeul was looking at him. Her eyes were like that of a mother that was chiding her child.

"I want to eat frozen polack soup. The one I couldn't eat yesterday."

Her eyes soon turned into a soft curve. He could not say anything to those eyes, and to that smile.

"You know I always yield, right?"

"I do. I always boast to everyone that my boyfriend is such a gentle person. Please cook me some frozen pollack soup with that gentle heart, and don't think about anything else. Do you need help?"

The anger that rose to the top of his head was all dispelled when she looked at him with affection. The person in question was being calm, so it would be rather funny if he, an outsider, got angry instead.

"It's all done, so I just have to boil it."

"Then I should wash the little ones' feet while it's warming up."

Gaeul put down the mug as though all talk about Lee Miyoon should stop here, before standing up. Maru placed the empty cup at the sink and took out the frozen polack soup that he had put in the refrigerator. He could hear laughter in the bathroom, as well as a voice telling the dogs to stay still.

He put the pot on the stove and lit up the fire. Even a snot-nosed brat would understand the meaning of a wound on an actress' face. Although she said that it was fortunate since there would not be a scar, things could have just as easily gone awry. Above all, the placement of the wound made him nervous. A slight change in the angle or the timing, and the wound might have gone right across her eye. Maru picked up his phone. Since Gaeul told her not to do it, he could not pressure Lee Miyoon publicly. But that didn't mean that he was going to stay still while sucking on his thumb. One of the reasons society was functioning properly was that one law was being kept to a certain extent. Those who committed crime were punished accordingly.

He sent a text to Kim Dongwook. Although that man said that he would take his hands off anything related to Lee Miyoon and YM, but the eyes he saw on the day they met Choi Miyeon was definitely not that of someone who had given up.

Gaeul left the bathroom. Maru put his phone in his pocket and placed the frozen pollack soup on the dining table.

"What a good smell."

"Have a good meal."

"How about you?"

"I had a light meal in the morning."

"I don't want to eat by myself though."

Gaeul stared at him. Maru took some rice out of the rice cooker.

"The wound will heal soon so don't worry about it. It didn't get caught by the camera either. BB creams are amazing these days."

"What happened to Lee Miyoon?"

"What else? I dealt her a big blow. She kept snooping around when she didn't have a shoot, but now she won't be able to do that. I said I'd sue her if she came and threw a tantrum one more time. Do you know? I became a total hero at the shoot. I had to stop the staff from throwing me into the air."

"It's not surprising."

"But I'm worried. I'll be going on the paid vacation right? I'll have to see her face when we have a joint schedule outside free time, but it's a pain in the head already. It's entirely her fault and I have done nothing wrong, but she's a senior after all. I hope she just stays quiet like this, but I don't think she'll do that given her personality."

"I guess her not going on that vacation will put many people at ease."

"True, but she probably will, I think. She loves getting treated well."

Gaeul said 'who knows?' before starting to eat. Maru also got some soup and drank it.

"You aren't thinking about doing anything strange, are you?"

"Do what?"

"No, it's nothing. Just don't worry about what happened to me."

"Alright," Maru replied with a smile.

He thought about what she said just a while ago; that lying is sometimes necessary.

Chapter 915. Crank Up 3

"Madam, we'll do that again. Also, are you tired today?"

There was a thorn hidden in the polite question. Lee Miyoon frowned, but then just let loose. She didn't have any energy to get angry.

"Director Kim, why don't we take a 10-minute break?"

"Okay. You should get some fresh air too, madam."

Her pride was hurt. She had been making mistakes for 20 minutes straight in the same scene at the same line, so she had no excuses either. This was the first time such a thing happened. Her mind was in chaos, and she found it disgusting that she couldn't digest that easy act. Her stomach was hurting as though it was being squeezed as well. Whenever a pickling pain jolted her head, she was reminded of Hong Janghae. Unless she cut off the root of all trouble, she might as well die of stress.

She went to the rooftop and put a cigarette in her mouth. One disaster struck after another. The fact that she swung her bag at Han Gaeul's face also bothered her mind. Although that wrench said that she was okay, she might make use of this weakness at any time. She threw away the cigarette after puffing twice. The sparks at the end of the cigarette butt that was being extinguished without burning all the way looked just like herself. Lee Miyoon stomped on the cigarette butt with her heel and put it out. It was supposed to be her job to decorate her finale. She did not plan to walk out bitterly because of someone's whim.

She went down to the set while calming down her mind and body. Right now, she had to look after herself. Now that she lost her support, she could no longer be the topic of controversy, at least in acting. She walked past the staff members who gave her secret glances. It was still okay now. She could feel that her authority as an actress was still alive. She had to protect it while she still had it.

"Director Kim, let's start," she said like it was nothing.

Producer Kim sat down in front of the monitor and had everyone get back to their positions. Under the lead of the assistant director, the background actors walked past her eyes. Cue – signalled the director.

"Did president Choi order you to do this?"

The male actor sitting in front of her shook his head. He was a young boy that had decent acting skills. His face was also quite good-looking, so she took a liking to this kid.

"No, ma'am."

"Then how did that USB end up in Gyeongmi's hands?"

"I don't know either. I handed it to Park Joowon just as you ordered me to."

"This is troublesome. Joowon told me he doesn't know anything about this, and yet you tell me that you handed it to him. Consequentially though, Gyeongmi got her hands on the USB and President Choi benefitted from it, so one of you must be lying to me."

"I only acted as you ordered me to, ma'am."

He scattered a manly gaze as he spoke firmly. This kid would rise as long as he was given the right foothold. If it was before, she would have scheduled a meeting with him and dote on him, but the situation didn't look too good right now. Cut – Lee Miyoon loosened her strained eyes at that sound. If she made a mistake this time, she might have been disappointed with herself.

"Thank you for your work."

The kid who would usually leave the moment the shoot ended, spoke out to her this time. This was one of the rare pairs of respectful eyes in a situation where she was surrounded by enemies. She felt good for a moment.

"Yes, you too. And you're...."

"Yoo Jiseok, madam."

"Right, I'm sorry. I've been caught up with a lot of things these days, and I'm having trouble remembering names."

"No problem at all."

She liked his smile. She thought that he was a pretty decent kid when she met him during weekend drama shoots, but now that they acted together like this, she realized that his foundation was solid as well, not just his looks. Miyoon had a look at Jiseok's face in detail. Although he looked rather unfamiliar because of his hairstyle, she definitely saw that face before.

"Have I seen you before?"

"I played a supporting actor in a sitcom a few years ago. I was the friend of the grandson of the character you played."

When she heard that, she was reminded of a face. A kid who kept grinning nonstop. Ever since she warned him not to smile, he never showed his expression in front of her, so her impression of him had gotten faint over time.

"Oh, I remember. You grew up splendidly."

"Thank you."

"If we knew each other, you should have reached out to me before. I would have looked out for you."

"I'm happy just being able to watch your acting, as I can learn a lot from it. But today, you looked like you were having a bad day, so I talked to you because I was worried."

He was young, but the way he talked was quite nice. It felt comforting after dealing with people like Han Gaeul who would raise her claws at her like some kind of feline animal. This was the kind of treatment she deserved.

"Oh, thanks."

"Was I overly worried for nothing?"

"No, it's true that I've been having a bad day."

"I knew it. Madam, you should look after your health more. Only when people like you hold on and guide us will young people like me learn from you."

"I want to do that too."

She would be able to return to her livelihood as long as she chased out those pesky flies and regained everything that she had lost. She would only be able to get back to good acting once she was back in an environment where she no longer had to worry about just acting. She could see actors whispering among themselves as they walked by behind Jiseok. They weren't giving a single glance this way, but Miyoon could tell that her name was being talked about among them.

"How rude of them," Jiseok said.

He was also looking at the actors that just walked past.

"It must have been a mistake or an accident, but there are people who are talking as if you did that on purpose. Madam, don't worry about them. They're all just jealous."

Those words scratched her where it itched. She left the hostility-filled shooting set and walked outside, waving at Jiseok to follow her. After having her manager go buy some coffee, she gave one to Jiseok.

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me. I'm only grateful that right-minded people like you still exist today. Just as you said, it was a slight accident, but they blame everything on me. Heck, even Gaeul herself knows that it was an accident, but those who don't know anything are blabbing on about it, so it bothers me a lot."

"You should ignore those words. Doing anything else is more nutritional than listening to things like that."

"You're good, Jiseok."

He was a polite kid. Why had someone like him never entered her eyes before? Miyoon reached out and grabbed Jiseok's hand. His hand was quite masculine. His face still had a trace of when he was a child, but his hand definitely belonged to a rough man. She also tapped on his thigh. It was sturdy. When she tried grabbing it, she could feel a nice sense of tension in the muscles.

"Do you like working out?"

He only smiled awkwardly when asked that question. She also liked his docile attitude. She should definitely give him some support if things were good. While drinking coffee, Jiseok took out his phone.

"Excuse me, madam. I'll just go pick this up."

Jiseok talked over the phone a little bit away. During his call, he would often look over and smile at her, and it made her aching head refreshed.

"Sorry about that, but I think I need to get going."

"What a pity."

"Me too. I'd love to listen to your words a little more, but I have something to do."

Just as he was about to go back, Jiseok stopped on the spot.

"Madam, can you give me some advice as a senior in life?"

Miyoon gladly agreed. Jiseok thanked her before starting his story,

"It's somewhat awkward of me to say this, but my relationship with someone I knew for quite a long time went awry. To be precise, I was betrayed."

Miyoon clicked her tongue. She was also in such a situation.

"And?"

"I tried persuading that friend – let's call him A – that we should go back to the old days in consideration of our old friendship, but it didn't work. Money was one thing, but it concerns some people so it's quite a sensitive thing. I'd love to get this sorted out as soon as possible, but then, a person called B suddenly reached out to me. I found out that B also has things to sort out with A. B says I should grab his hand and sort the problem out with A, but I'm a little hesitant."

"What makes you hesitant?"

"Working with B wouldn't make me look cool, and if B turns his back on me, I think I'll be the only one getting in trouble."

"Do you think you'll get some progress on that problem of yours if you join hands with B?"

"Yes. B is quite persistent. He's good at work."

"Then there's no need to hesitate. What you're worried about is getting betrayed by B later on, right? Then if you get yourself prepared beforehand, you won't fall into a trap so easily. Meanwhile, you have to sort your problem out with B in order to get money or people back, right?"

"Yes, that's true."

"Then you should join hands with B first. You should watch out for B while you still work with him so that you can counterattack if you feel like he's going to attack you."

"So an enemy of an enemy is a friend, and I should join hands with him first, right?"

Miyoon nodded. If it was something that could be predicted beforehand, prevention was just as easy. The same could be said for what happened to her. Had she noticed Hong Janghae's schemes a little earlier, she wouldn't be in this situation.

"Thank you, I think I'll be able to sort this out."

"Alright. Don't make a dejected face just because you're facing a problem. You should smile since it will ruin that pretty face of yours."

Jiseok smiled and stood up. It had been quite a while since she talked to someone who she could get through to. It would have been great if everyone under her was like that too.

"So now, you don't say anything to me because of my smile."

Jiseok said those words before saying goodbye. Miyoon scoffed. It seemed that he was mad about what happened before. Even that looked cute though. She decided that she would meet him once things were sorted to an extent.

Miyoon put the empty coffee cup on the bench and stood up.

Chapter 916. Crank Up 3

His lips trembled as a result of curling up his lips by force. His palms were sweaty as well. He felt like he had climbed on top of the railing of a high-rise building without any safety measures. Yoo Jiseok wiped his hands against his pants. He was worried that Miyoon might be suspicious of him, but thankfully, she didn't notice anything. The excuse he came up with just in case she asked turned out to be unnecessary.

After seeing Miyoon walk off, he made a call.

"I thought my heart was going to fail."

-Don't you ever say that even as a joke. I'm not sure about anyone else, but when it comes to you, heart failure sounds too realistic.

"I wasn't joking. It would've been an interesting sight if I fell over because of tachycardia."

-Sorry I asked you to do something that's bad for your heart.

“As long as you know. I listened to your request just because of Gaeul.”

-Don't tell Gaeul any of this.

“Of course. She'll cause a mess if she finds out.”

-Since your heart is fine and you're alive, seems like things went well?

“I was really nervous. It'll be a pain in the head if she starts suspecting me. For now, I told her what you told me to tell her.”

-How's her reaction?

“She might be just saying it, but she said she's willing to join hands with an enemy in order to get rid of the enemy in front of her. She says she wouldn't need to worry about being betrayed if she's careful.”

-That's more than enough. The words she uttered will remain inside her head and influence her future course of action.

Jiseok returned to the bench that Miyoon left and sat down.

“She definitely looks like she's being chased by something. Leaving her terrible personality aside, her acting skills were indisputable, but recently, she's doing terribly. Just today, we had to take three breaks just because she kept making mistakes on the same scene continuously.”

-I don't know the specifics, but it looks like a big portion of Lee Miyoon's business had been stolen from her. Her mind is elsewhere, so there's no way she could do well in acting.

“A business she's involved in, huh? Are you talking about her porridge restaurant or her barbecue restaurant?”

-The other one. The one that only people in the know, know about.

“You mean selling people?”

Jiseok clicked his tongue. The bad rumors about Lee Miyoon were enough to make most people feel disgusted. Even Jiseok, who tended to believe in people's good hearts, could not believe in Lee Miyoon.

-I'll tell you more once I find out.

“It feels like it's going to be a very gloomy story. Are you sure you want to tell me? What are you going to do if I tell other people about it?”

-If you're the type of person to do that, you would have long lost your place in my contacts list.

“That makes me feel grateful. The social media star Han Maru is telling me that. I saw that you know? The one where you sang inside the restaurant. You were on top of your chair, acting all cute...”

The phone hung up there. Jiseok could almost hear an ‘f’ just as the call ended. He smiled and gave a call again.

“Don’t be so embarrassed. It’ll all come back to you as a promotion and will work in your favor. I went to Instagram and saw those hashtags. I think at least ten thousand people have seen it already since senior Joohyun shared it on her account. Thanks to that, I think many people are getting to know about it.”

-Do you know something called the right to be forgotten?

“The right to laugh is bigger than that. I also had a good night’s sleep after I watched that. It’s stress-relieving.”

-Fine, laugh all you want.

He could picture Maru’s indifferent-looking face. As much as he wanted to tease him more, he felt like his number would get erased off Maru’s contact list if he went any further, so he decided to hold back. There was something he needed to tell him too.

“I heard that Yoojin’s coming back to Korea on December 2nd.”

-That’s the day after tomorrow.

“Yep. She called me a few days ago and told me that she got in touch with you. It seems like she was quite frustrated that she didn’t know that you and Gaeul got back together.”

-Don’t tell me you bragged that you knew about it?

“Hey, I may love laughing, but there’s no way I would test my friendship in order to laugh, is there?”

-So you did brag. You sound like you’ve bragged about it to death.

“Yoojin told me that she’ll beat you and Gaeul half to death once she comes.”

-And you?

“I’m included too. I had fun talking about it, then I got hit with a counterattack right at the end. And anyway, we’re all doing pretty well huh? Gaeul is doing well all the way up there, while you and I keep doing actor work. Yoojin’s also working in her own way while continuing to try out as an actor.”

-It’s good that we aren’t doing nothing. You said you’re graduating next year?

“Just barely. I didn’t even go to the military that other people go to, yet I still haven’t graduated yet.”

-It’s not like you were doing other things, you were working, so it shouldn’t matter. Oh yeah, my mother told me to get your autograph. She’s enjoying your weekend dramas.

“I’m thankful that she’s looking at me in a good light even though I don’t appear that much.”

Jiseok checked the time. It was about time for him to return.

“Leave me a message if you need me for anything. I’ll listen to the specifics once I meet you in two days.”

-Thanks for listening to this difficult request. I’ll pour you some good drinks when we meet in two days.

“There you go again. You know I can’t drink. Just get some protectors ready. Yoojin seems like she’s going to hit hard.”

Jiseok hung up and stood up.

* * *

“She was probed out in passing, so it’s likely that it’s close to what she truly thinks. She should have been reminded of the situation she was in too,” Maru said to Dongwook as he put his phone down.

“It’ll be great if things go the way I think they will, but I should prepare just in case it doesn’t. She wouldn’t have gone that far in the first place if she was gullible.”

Dongwook stabbed the table with his pen.

“Now, we should be able to make some progress as long as we create a contact point with her.”

“We should find out what situation she’s in before that. If we don’t prepare ourselves, we might get used instead. It’ll be easy if Lee Miyoon helps us out. Even greater if she could testify alongside Mari.”

“Can that Mari person be trusted?”

“It doesn’t matter since our relationship is not maintained through trust. We’re only cooperating since we want something from each other. Anyway, I’ll get in touch with Lee Miyoon once I get a full grasp on her situation.”

“So the general picture looks like Hong Janghae screwed Lee Miyoon over, right?”

“It’s pretty much a given since Hong Janghae is in full charge of Japan. That will also explain why Lee Miyoon is acting frantic right now.”

“What’s your final objective? I’ll be satisfied as long as I can get rid of Lee Miyoon from my sight.”

“I’ll go as far as I can.”

“Are you going to continue keeping it a secret from Miyeon-noonim?”

“Why would I tell anything to an outsider? She’s managed to settle in her job, so I should let her continue living like that.”

“You might need her help later.”

“If things reach that point, I might as well take my hands off this matter. I’m not doing this because of some petty sense of justice. How about you, what are you going to do?”

Maru put down the glass of water he was just about to drink.

“I’ll go along with whatever you do. I’m going to run the moment I feel it’s dangerous though.”

“Then I’ll notify the president. I’m not sure about anyone else, but I don’t think lying is going to work on that man. If the president tells you to take your hands off, then you take your hands off.”

“He’ll understand since I won’t let it affect work. It’s not like I’m going to be doing the work myself. Rather than that, you should look out for yourself. You said Hong Janghae has people who kidnap people.”

“I’ve been doing this job for 20 years. I’ll be running the moment I smell anything fishy so don’t worry. You know what I say all the time. I’m the ultimate self-preservationist.”

Dongwook put away the notepad and the pen and stood up.

“So you focus on your work for now.”

“Okay.”

Dongwook left the café. Maru sat back down and organized his thoughts. He would have to wait to see the results, but he had a general grasp of the situation. The rabbit is the king of a mountain without a tiger. Although she had been using other people’s names in order to do her business, she had lost that business right, so that must have made her go crazy. If they could make use of her decreased reason, they might be able to easily procure physical evidence. It wouldn’t be easy since she had been betrayed once already, but people were bound to grab the opportunity given to them if they were desperate. It was also rather probable that she might take drastic action in order to regain her reputation as an actress, which had been damaged by attacking Gaeul, another actress.

The problem was with timing. If they could give Lee Miyoon what she wanted at the most important time, they might be able to easily exploit her.

While Dongwook worked hard to get the practical stuff done, he had to observe Lee Miyoon. Thankfully, he had no lack of eyes and ears on her. If he asked for help, he could easily get a grasp on Lee Miyoon’s situation.

“Rather than that.”

Maru quickly swiped his phone. The dance he did while half sane at the kal-guksu restaurant was going around on the internet. Just as Jiseok said, it was on Joohyun’s Instagram account as well. He had been getting text messages nonstop since yesterday, and every one of them talked about it. He didn’t realize that his friends would be the very people spreading it around on the internet.

He looked at himself on the screen in a daze before turning his phone off. He could see people giving him glances from another table. From the suits they were wearing, they seemed to be salarymen from a nearby company. He slowly looked away and stood up. He walked towards the counter with the two empty cups when he felt the back of his head itch. Just as he had imagined, a gaze was persistently following him; one moment, on the phone, then on his head the next.

Maru returned the cups to the counter and turned around. There were less than ten steps away from the door.

“Uhm.”

A woman blocked his way after another four steps. She looked at him in puzzlement before smiling. She seemed convinced.

“You are Han Maru, right?”

He never knew that she’d mention his name. He couldn’t say no, so he replied yes. The people in the café all started showing interest.

“Can I take a photo with you?”

“Of course.”

The moment he realized that he could not run away from this, his businessman mindset took over. The experience of smiling at an unpleasant business partner in his previous life shone through. He just had to take a photo and leave the store quickly.

“Senior! It’s him!”

The woman in front of him called out to the others elsewhere. They were just like her, salary women wearing suits. At the same time, he could hear other voices. He looks like a celebrity, I don’t know him, but should I take a photo with him, etc....

“Please take care of me in the future,” he said out of reflex.

Take care of him how... he did not know either.

Chapter 917. Crank Up 3

“Looks like you’re really busy.”

“Thanks to a certain senior who refused to reveal his name, I was able to work without getting any rest. Thank you, senior.”

“Nah, I didn’t do anything. It’s my junior who helped you by ordering flowers from you.”

Dongwook watched Choi Miyeon move a small cactus to a small vase. Smiles appeared from time to time on the face that always had a shade cast over it. He was reminded of the saying work makes worries go away.

“I’ll get going then.”

“Already?”

“I only visited because I had some business nearby. I checked that you’re doing well, so I should get going.”

“You should have lunch or something. The restaurant next door is really good.”

“Maybe next time. I have a lot of things to do right now.”

He stopped Miyeon from seeing him out and left the store. He could see Miyeon smiling behind the glass door. The fatigue from pulling an all-nighter disappeared in an instant.

“How did it go?”

He picked up his phone as he got in his car.

-We’re still asking around, but it’s hard to catch any clues. Some of the stores have CCTVs, so I think we might be able to find a clue if we look at the footage.

“I’ll go there right now. You’ll be reported to the police if you ask for CCTV video without any warrant.”

-I'll send you the location by text. Then I'll move to the next spot.

"Please."

The self-proclaimed private investigators that president Lee Junmin introduced to him were investigating Incheon and towns within an hour of traveling distance. Mari and the man, who came to the country through Incheon airport, were caught while trying to take refuge in a shelter they arranged in Incheon, and then they were dragged around in a black van to a warehouse in the middle of a mountain. From there, Mari was released and she returned to Incheon, while the man went missing. He was searching for clues based on Mari's testimony that she was carried in the van blindfolded for about an hour, but he had not found any concrete traces yet.

He moved to the address the private investigator had sent him. It was a store that might possibly have footage of the car that headed to the nameless mountain. It was a Chinese-style restaurant that took up the entirety of the first floor, and it had CCTVs looking towards the street. According to the private investigator, they were installed because accidents happened during parking.

He went inside the store. Even though it was Saturday afternoon, there were only two tables with customers. There were more employees than customers.

"Welcome. Are you here to eat?"

"Rather than eating, I'm here to see the owner."

"The owner?"

The waitress scratched her eyebrows before poking her head into the kitchen. As it was an open-style kitchen, the inside could be seen, and the man standing in front of a wok responded to the waitress' call.

"What is it?" said the man as he came out.

"Are you the owner of this restaurant?"

"Yes."

"Oh, I'm this kind of person."

He gave out the business card he used when he still worked for the TV station. The owner, who accepted the business card, looked at him and the business card alternately.

"If you're here for a TV show, then forget about it. I don't have any money to give you."

"I'm not here to scout this place as a good restaurant. I work in a different field."

The owner gave him back the business card.

"If it's not for such a show, what business do you have?"

"Let me start off by telling you that it's definitely not something that will bring you harm. Currently, I'm chasing down a big piece of news. I found evidence of a famous celebrity's secret love."

"A celebrity?"

“Yes, though, forgive me for not being able to tell you the details.”

The owner rubbed his nose and spoke,

“You’re saying that that celebrity visited my restaurant?”

“No, but the couple frequently had meetings in this area. What I want to ask of you is to have a look at the CCTV footage installed around the store. I won’t be asking anyone any questions, since that’ll annoy many people.”

A customer, who had finished eating, walked past. The owner took off his chef hat before sending that person out. Dongwook took a step back and had a look at the owner’s face. From how he didn’t refuse outright, it seemed like he was willing to show the CCTV footage; just not for free. Dongwook immediately talked about the thing that the owner wanted to know about.

“Of course, you’ll be giving me help, so I can’t ask you to do it for free. I get some money for work expenses, and I’ll give you 500,000 won. I’m sure it’s not much to you since you run such a big restaurant, but it’s quite a lot to me.”

“Well, I wasn’t really hoping for something like that.”

“I’m sure you didn’t. But please accept it as it’ll put both of us at ease. If the secret love scandal is confirmed, I’ll make sure that the show will leak information about this place. You know, right? These days, people on the internet find out the precise location of places that appear on TV with minimal clues. People will definitely take interest in your restaurant if a super popular celebrity used to hold secret meetings in front.”

That seemed to have dealt the finishing blow as the owner immediately opened the door leading inside from behind the counter. When he went inside, he found a computer right next to a shelf of food ingredients.

“Take your time looking.”

The owner left the small room while stuffing the 500,000 won in his pocket. Dongwook inserted the external hard drive on the computer. The owner even kindly helped him move the files to his external drive. He moved the video footage ten days before and after the day Mari came to Korea. These days, popular CCTV products required special security software in order to watch the footage, but this restaurant’s CCTVs were on the level of just high-resolution cameras. Thanks to that, there was no additional work necessary.

“Thank you for your help. If things go well, I’ll definitely visit this place with my colleagues in the future.”

The owner told him to contact him any time he needed help. That was the magic created by 500,000 won and the empty serving hall. There would never come a day when this restaurant would become a hot topic on the internet or a day when he would bring his colleagues here, but the owner wasn’t losing out since he got 500,000 won.

He drove his car back home. He turned on the PC placed in the middle of the living room and cooked some instant noodles. He immediately uploaded the CCTV video onto a cloud server so that the private investigators working for him could see it.

Dongwook played back two videos at the same time at double speed. He quickly looked around while slurping some noodles. He stopped and watched closely whenever he found a van that looked like the one Mari told him about. The first thing he noticed was that he could read the license plates. It was a pity that he wasn't able to see inside the vehicles if the windows were tinted, but he was in no position to worry about that since he lacked information.

He did not take his eyes off the screen for a while. This was the first time he focused so hard since he was a probationary journalist. When he checked the time, he saw that it was 11 p.m. His back was screaming at him since he had been staying absolutely still for nearly six hours.

Just as he thought that he should go wash up after checking for ten more minutes, another van that resembled the one Mari talked about appeared on the screen. There was an accident in front of the store, so the van wasn't able to move forward. A person got out of the van after staying still for about twenty seconds. When a skinny man opened the back door and stepped out, Dongwook stopped the playback. He could see legs tied up inside the car. The resolution was pretty good, so he was able to check the man's face. At this point, he wanted to kiss the owner of that restaurant for using such high-resolution CCTV. He immediately called Mari.

"Miss Mari. Did the van stop any time when you were caught?"

-I don't know. I was so scared that I wasn't paying attention.

"I understand that it must be hard for you. But can you focus a little more?"

-I do remember it stopping a few times, but most of the time, it should have been traffic.

"There must be something else among those memories. If I say it myself, I might influence your memories, so you must remember it yourself. Think back carefully and just tell me that there wasn't if you don't remember anything."

Not many people would be carrying a tied-up person inside a van in South Korea. Dongwook's intuition told him that the van on the screen belonged to the culprit, but the information would lose value if he could not find any common points with the testifier's memories. After staying silent for a while, Mari spoke,

-There was one thing that was different. It wasn't long after a gang barged into the room and kidnapped me and oppa. The van suddenly stopped and the man next to me got off while swearing. I also heard something like 'get out of the way' or something. Then the man got back in again. I'm sure that's what happened. I went through it slowly as you said and I remembered it.

Dongwook clicked his fingers and played back the video. Just as Mari said, the man got back in the van and the van departed again. The estimated movement route that the private investigators came up with turned out to be accurate.

"I think I found the vehicle. Your help was big in this one."

-Then can you find oppa as well?

“We have both money and people, so we’ll investigate all hills and warehouses in a one-hour range from this place. I’ll also investigate the man that got caught on the camera. If things go well, we might be able to find him unexpectedly easily.”

-It only just came to me, but nothing bad must have happened to oppa, right?

“Kidnapping is a serious crime, but murder is even worse. Even though they are men who act before they think, they shouldn’t have taken any unnecessary risks. Your man shouldn’t be in danger of losing his life. He might be injured though.”

-Please, just find him.

“I’ll do my best.”

Dongwook hung up. While he consoled Mari with hopeful words, he could not exclude the worst possible scenario. Mari’s man did not have any relatives. There was no one who would report him as missing, so there was no way the police were going to move. Even if Mari reported herself, it was extremely improbable that a large-scale force would be dispatched for that case. As such, it was possible that he might have been dragged to an incinerator. Hired assassinations made the news these days. It wouldn’t be strange even if something bad happened.

He immediately shared this information with the private investigators. They would track down the van’s movements and the identity of the man from other sources. Dongwook immediately grabbed his phone and wrote a text message. He was in the middle of the legal and illegal, and now, he needed to rely on civil authority.

“Inspector, it’s me, Dongwook. Why don’t we have a drink after all this time? Oh no, I wouldn’t ask anything special from you, would I? If you just tell me one trivial thing, I’ll pay you back for my whole life. What was that? I have ten such debts to pay you already? Inspector, let’s meet up first. How about some tuna?”

Chapter 918. Crank Up 3

“Inspector, over here.”

Dongwook stood up and waved his hand. Inspector Choi smiled and waved back.

“I thought you had been looking good, but now you look haggard again. People might mistake you for one of my men in undercover missions. Men of age should think about what they wear.”

“You’re nagging me again right as we just met.”

“If you don’t want to hear my nagging, then you should get married already. Isn’t it boring for you to live by yourself after forty?”

“I don’t have any time to feel bored. I’m very busy these days.”

“Liking your work won’t last that long. Just wait until you get a little older. You’ll find that having a wife is better than not having one, even if she nags at you.”

He poured some sake for inspector Choi, who said he was thirsty. The omakase sushi that he had ordered beforehand came out just in time as well.

“You should eat something first. I’m sure you’re having a hard time catching criminals.”

“I wonder what you’re going to ask from me this time after this.”

“As I told you over the phone, when have I ever asked you to do something difficult?”

“That you haven’t.”

“So just relax and eat. We’re all doing this for a living.”

Saying that he was right, inspector Choi picked up his chopsticks. Dongwook ate a few pieces of sushi and spoke when the fried snapper head came out,

“You didn’t happen to come across a dead body of a man in his thirties around Incheon, did you?”

“What the heck are you talking about while eating? You’re making me lose my appetite.”

“Just asking.”

“How can you ‘just ask’ if someone died?”

Inspector Choi drank some sake before continuing,

“Well, I got nothing at least. My jurisdiction doesn’t cover all of Incheon though, so I’m not sure about other areas. Are you looking for an unidentified dead body?”

“No, I know who it is. I was asking just in case.”

“I wonder just what you’re digging into this time.”

Dongwook took out his phone and showed him the man caught on the CCTV.

“I’m looking for this man.”

“Did he run off with your money or something?”

“Would I have called you if it was something like that?”

Inspector Choi, who sucked on his teeth to pull out the piece of sushi, narrowed his eyes and put his face against the phone.

“To me, the one tied up behind that man catches my eyes more.”

As expected of an inspector from the violent crime section, he had good eyes. Inspector Choi put the phone down and looked at him. He looked like he wanted an explanation.

“The one I’m looking for is the man inside the van.”

“Tying that with how you asked about news of a dead body, did this man do something that might have killed him?”

“There are some circumstances.”

“If it’s a kidnapping, you should have filed a report. Catching guys like these is what we get paid to do.”

“As much as I want to, I can’t do that.”

Things would blow up out of proportion if he found out that this man was someone who connected prostitutes to high members of society. If things got out of hand and it was discovered that he was investigating him, Hong Janghae would cut off his ties without hesitation. Eliminating the surviving man and erasing any traces of evidence would be an easy job for them. Reaching the core of the YM group might be too greedy of him, but it didn’t look impossible to drag Hong Janghae down. Since he had started something that he shouldn’t have, he could not afford to end it moderately. His subtle wrath would only subside if he at least cut off their arms and legs.

“My experience is telling me that I shouldn’t dip my feet in this.”

“Of course, you shouldn’t participate in this. I just want to know who this man is. And if possible, get some info on this van.”

The inspector pouted his lips and tapped on the table for a while before asking if it was possible to take food out.

“They should package it for us.”

“Then wrap up some of the good ones for me, so I can bring it to my kid. He’s in his third year of high school, so he can get some energy to study.”

Inspector Choi pushed the phone towards him. Dongwook put his phone back inside his pocket.

“I know who he is,” said the inspector.

It turned out that was why he wanted to package the food.

“Who is it?”

“There’s a gang called the Lee Doosik Gang, and the underlings all scattered while fighting with another one. They were eventually absorbed by another group, and he used to be an action leader there. I’ve seen him a few times, so I do remember his face.”

Dongwook had found the right person for the job. Dongwook asked more about this action leader,

“Do you know what he’s doing now?”

“Ever since Doosik’s gang collapsed, he should have switched to loan shark business. But while he’s not a good guy, he’s not someone who would kill a man.”

“He should have accepted it if simple threats were all he had to do for money, right?”

“He’s crazy for money, so he should have accepted it if it’s just that. He even grumbled to me a couple times that he’s busy feeding his group.”

“Is there a way to contact this man?”

“So you can ask where the man in the van is?”

“If he likes money, I think I can get through to him.”

“Wait a little.”

Inspector Choi left the store. Dongwook waited while drinking some green tea. Not long later, inspector Choi returned.

“He’ll be here soon. Apparently, he’s nearby.”

Dongwook spent the remaining time listening to inspector Choi bragging about his children. Dongwook conditionally kept looking at the entrance from time to time, and it took 30 minutes for the action leader to show up. He was wearing the exact same clothes as the day he kidnapped Mari, as though he had walked straight out of the video.

“It’s been a while, hyung-nim.”

“When will you stop calling a civil servant hyung-nim?”

“Once a hyung-nim, forever a hyung-nim.”

The action leader took his eyes off inspector Choi. Dongwook stood up and reached his hand out to the action leader, who was looking down at him.

“I’m Kim Dongwook.”

“I heard over the phone. You have business with me.”

“It’s not something bad, so please sit down.”

Dongwook immediately took out his phone. When he showed the action leader the video from the CCTV, his face darkened. He also gave a glance to the exit.

“Calm down. This fellow didn’t call you here to catch you. Neither did I,” said inspector Choi.

This action leader seemed to trust inspector Choi a lot and turned back around to the table.

“The one I’m looking for is the man who was inside this van on this day.”

“Why him?”

“Let me ask beforehand: you didn’t kill him, did you?”

“Did you eat something wrong? Do you need meds?”

The action leader glared at him while grabbing a chopstick. If inspector Choi didn’t pat his back to relax, he might have been stabbed with it. Although he felt a chill, Dongwook did not take his eyes off the action leader either. He might have strayed off, but he also used to be a journalist for the local news. A chopstick wasn’t enough to snap the boldness he earned while facing those who killed people with words.

“You have pretty eyes. Relax. I was joking with ya.”

The action leader let go of the chopstick first. Dongwook also sighed in relief.

"I may be in a gang, mate, but I don't wanna have to kill people. I'll be honest with ya; I'll be doomed if I kill a man in this tiny country, so why would I do that?"

"Okay. So the man is still alive."

"We only scared him a little, he's doing fine."

"Can I ask who asked you to do that to him?"

"Mister, is there anyone who sends out such requests with their real name? We went through a middle man too. They told me they'll give me some good business deals if I could take care of this. Though, it wasn't that great since some Korean-Chinese^[1] people were mixed in."

"Then who brought this job to you?"

The action leader stayed quiet. He seemed unwilling to reveal it.

"Alright. If you can't tell me, then I guess I can't do anything. Instead, just tell me where you took the man. Of course, I'll make sure that you receive no harm."

The action leader looked at the inspector.

"Go on, tell him. Only then would you not get another line added to your criminal record for kidnapping. Well, it'll be a good thing for me if I can get another achievement. But aren't you going to be spending quite a lot of time if you go in this time?"

Hearing inspector Choi's words, the action leader sighed.

"Really, don't you get me caught up in this. I'm only saying it because I trust in you, hyung-nim."

"Alright, alright."

It seemed like no money was necessary. Thanks to inspector Choi, the action leader managed to speak.

"We brought him to Busan. He's probably doing manual labor over there."

"What's the address?"

Dongwook wrote down the address that the action leader told him.

* * *

Maru received a text from Dongwook saying that he was going to Busan. He called Dongwook.

"Did you find him?"

-I'll have to go and see. Things are going well, but whether the results are good is something I'll have to wait and see.

"Watch out. Let me know if something happens."

-If something happens, I'll be calling the police, not you. Don't worry about me and do your thing. I'll do my thing as well.

"Alright."

Maru hung up. Jiseok, who was in the passenger seat, twitched his eyes and asked,

“That’s one serious-sounding call.”

“It was perfectly harmonious though.”

“Like hell it was.”

“You watched too much drama. Maybe you see it that way since you play a corrupt role?”

“Is that how it is?”

Jiseok smiled blandly. Maru turned the wheel and changed lanes. It seemed like they would reach Incheon airport in twenty minutes.

“When did Yoojin say she got on the plane?”

“10:40. We’ll have to wait about 30 minutes when we arrive.”

“Aren’t we overreacting by going there a whole 30 minutes early?”

“Maru, if we’re late, you’ll be beaten up to death, not to mention me. How long had it been since you have not seen her?”

“At least five years.”

“You might see the reaper if you receive 5 years of resentment all at once, so brace yourself. You should’ve kept in touch.”

“True.”

He parked the car in the airport parking lot before going to the arrivals section. They checked the landing schedule and went to the gate where Yoojin would be arriving.

“I hope at least one person recognizes me,” Jiseok said.

Saying that, he raised his head up and looked around. It was as if he was trying to promote himself.

“Stay still.”

“You became a famous star with your cute dance, but that didn’t happen for me.”

He smacked the giggling Jiseok on his Adam's apple with the blade of his hand. Why was it that his cheekiness didn’t disappear with time? Although Jiseok’s aim in life was to enjoy every moment since it was unknown when things might go south, from how nothing happened to him until now, it looked like he would live a long life.

“That didn’t take long,” Jiseok said as he looked at the arrival schedule.

The airplane from Japan was landing at Incheon airport.

[1] Or “Joseon-jok”. People who migrated to China from the Korean peninsula in the 20th century. Strictly speaking, they’re classified as a minority race in China rather than South or North Korean.

Chapter 919. Crank Up 3

Yoojin arrived with just a backpack. It had been six years since he last saw her, but he recognized her immediately. The eyes beneath the baseball cap moved around busily. Jiseok waved his hand at Yoojin. Brightening up, Yoojin came over. Now they were about 10 meters apart, Yoojin suddenly stopped and took off her cap. Then she started charging at full speed.

Maru instinctively realized that he would be hospitalized for at least three weeks if he stayed still. He immediately dragged Jiseok by the shoulder and placed him in front of him. Yoojin, who was panting like a boar who had just found a potato field, stopped right in front of them.

"You look pretty good considering you cut off all contact all of a sudden."

"Thanks."

"And your shamelessness hasn't changed at all. Forget everything else, and give it to me straight. Are you dating Gaeul again?"

"I am."

"I'll warn you this time, but if you make her cry one more time, I'm going to go to your house even at the risk of being reported. I thought she was really going to die the day after you went to the military. You went even though you knew that things would turn out that way."

"I have no excuses."

Maru could only apologize. After scanning him from top to bottom, Yoojin sighed.

"It's somewhat strange for me to get angry since you two are happy together, so... anyway, you should do well this time. She might look strong usually, but things are beyond salvageable if she starts breaking down."

Yoojin, who patted her own chest in relief, glared at Jiseok this time. Her target seemed to have changed. Maru silently watched as Yoojin fired a barrage of words straight at him. Jiseok was looking at him for help, but he chose to maintain his silence. He didn't want to get caught up in the fire. After uttering all her grumbles and disappointed feelings, Yoojin put on her cap again.

"Is Gaeul in her shoot?"

"Today's the last shoot."

"Isn't the final episode in two days? That's a really tight schedule."

"It's a chronic disease of Korean dramas."

They got in the car. There was only one destination. Maru had no excuse to refuse Yoojin's strong demand to see how they were doing together. He parked the car in the parking lot.

"The view here sure is good. Han Maru, looks like you earned quite a lot of money during the time you cut off all contact."

"Allow me to prepare myself by telling how many times are you going to mention that I cut off all contact."

"Well, I'll see how you do."

From the way she was talking, it seemed that Han Maru was going to become Han Cut-off-all-contact today. He entered the apartment with some groceries that he bought on the way back. He was waiting after pressing the button for the elevator when he heard some footsteps coming down the stairs. A moment later, Suyeon came down wearing a training jersey.

"Your friends? One of you looks familiar."

"Out to exercise?"

"Yeah. I'm going to try and learn flying yoga."

Suyeon walked past him and waved her hand. Seeing her walk out the entrance, Yoojin spoke,

"Gosh, that startled me. I thought it was Kim Suyeon. That big sister has a great figure."

The elevator came down. Maru tapped Jiseok, who was staring at the entrance where Suyeon disappeared through.

"That wasn't senior Kim Suyeon, was it?" Jiseok asked.

Maru just said that she was a look-alike. Along with a bell that signaled their arrival, the elevator doors opened.

"Hyung-nim, what are you doing?"

Geunsoo was standing in front of his door, wearing sunglasses.

"Oh, you weren't home."

"Even I go out from time to time."

Geunsoo looked at Yoojin and Jiseok and lightly nodded his head as a greeting. The two of them whispered to each other and greeted back awkwardly.

"Can you lend me your vacuum cleaner? I don't have one right now because not all of my stuff has been delivered."

"Wait a sec, I'll be right back with it."

Maru opened the door and told his friends to come in. Geunsoo, who stepped off to the side, smiled at his friends as they entered the apartment.

"It's him, isn't it?"

"No, it isn't."

The two of them stared at the front door from the living room. Maru came back out with the vacuum cleaner.

"Just text me once you're done, and I'll go pick it up."

"I'm the one borrowing it, so I should return it myself."

"Okay then. But what's up with the sunglasses?"

"I got laser eye surgery recently. The doctor told me it's not absolutely necessary, but it's better to have one on. Does it not suit me? I think it is a little big for me since I grabbed whatever pair that I could find."

"I suddenly feel uncomfortable with you asking me something like that. You look good in anything with that face of yours so don't worry about it."

Geunsoo thanked him for the vacuum cleaner and went back upstairs. He was starting to feel worried. There would definitely be rumors if the three musketeers snooped around the neighborhood. If Yoo Sooil appeared on top of that, the entire apartment complex might be filled with extreme fans. The residences of famous actors becoming sightseeing spots after being revealed by the media wasn't something that happened once or twice. Once more and more people walked around, he would have a hard time living with Gaeul.

"That was Hong Geunsoo, wasn't it?"

"I said he isn't. He's not, is he?"

The two of them asked as soon as he came back in. Maru said that he wasn't. He just introduced him as a handsome unemployed man. When he asked them back how funny it would be if a famous man like Hong Geunsoo came downstairs just to borrow a vacuum cleaner, the two of them seemed accepting.

"That's true. From what I know, Hong Geunsoo lives in an office-tel in Gangnam. I watched it on TV before," Yoojin said as she organized the groceries.

She opened the fridge and the cupboards without hesitation as though she had been here several times before. She did everything without having to tell her what went where. Meanwhile, Jiseok wrestled with the dogs. It was his job to calm down the dogs asking him for a hug.

"When's Gaeul coming?"

"Today's the last shoot, so she'll come home after a get-together. They shot throughout the night last night, so they should finish things off early today. The get-together should be a simple one since there's a separate afterparty. She'll be back by 9 if she's early, I think."

"I should text her to come quickly."

Yoojin put down her phone after texting and brought some beer from the fridge.

"You want to start drinking already?" Jiseok said.

"We have a lot to talk about, so yes, we're drinking starting now. We won't drink enough to get drunk. Just enough to talk."

Yoojin put down the beer and the snacks on the floor.

"Now then, tell me what you've been doing all these years that you've been staying out of contact."

"It's not that interesting though, because I didn't do much."

"I'll listen to you even if it isn't interesting, so tell me. I'm curious about why you just disappeared without a sound. After that, we should discuss how shallow our friendship was."

"You're putting me in a difficult position before we even start."

"That's why I told you to drink. Jiseok, you come here too."

Jiseok sat down next to Yoojin with the Pit Bull in his arms. While he grumbled that he knew everything already, he was obediently following what Yoojin said. Maru grabbed a can of beer.

"So, should I start from the day I went to the military after breaking up?"

* * *

Gaeul looked at the man sitting next to her. This man, who succeeded his father and was sacrificed to the politics of the hospital, single-handedly fought against injustice. He was a foolish man who made losses against the strong because of his unrelenting attitude, and against the weak for giving away everything he had, but that was why she loved him even more.

"Isn't it cold?"

The man shook his head. Gaeul wrapped a blanket around the man's shoulders and grabbed his hand. The man's hands, which once conducted intricate surgeries to the point that they were called the hands of a machine, could now no longer hold a scalpel. It was the consequence of saving a child's life. An iron beam penetrated his hand, shattering his bones and snapping his nerves. Even as his career as a surgeon came to an end, the man checked the state of the child in his arms.

Gaeul wanted to become his hands. His war had just been shifted from one that was conducted on an operation table to the entirety of the hospital. There were still many patients as well as doctors who waited for his actions.

"The board director left the fate of doctor Kang to me," said the man.

"What are you going to do? Strip him of his gown?"

"No, his skills are too good to go to waste. There are places that need his skills. I'll put an eye on him so that he will not have any time to think about anything other than surgeries. Of course, if he doesn't accept my offer, then...."

"Then?"

The man looked at the old pine tree in the hospital park. It was something that his father had planted.

"Then I should persuade him until the end. So that he can save other people's lives; so that his medical skills are put to the right use."

Gaeul gripped his hand even tighter. He always acted like a fool. That was why she couldn't take her eyes off him. She tapped on his cheek as though to tickle him before kissing him. She placed her head against his shoulder and looked at the pine tree, one that had always been watching over them like a father.

"Cut! That was great!"

A voice echoed inside her ears. Gaeul took two deep breaths. That was how she returned to her original self after being a character. She immediately stood up. She did not forget to wipe her lips with the back of her hand either.

"Thanks for your work," said Giwoo, who was sitting next to her.

Gaeul faintly smiled at him before turning around. It was a blessing that all of her personal emotions disappeared once she started acting. It allowed her to whisper love and even kiss that horrific face. She wouldn't have been able to do it if she was sane.

"You worked really hard, unni."

Mijoo ran over and put a thick jacket on her. She warmed up her lips with some hot tea since they were cold from holding an ice cube in her mouth before.

"Gaeul, that last expression was really good. I was originally planning on demanding some more since it was the last episode, but you made me change my mind. It was really good."

"So only at the very end do I get to hear a big compliment from you, director."

"When did I ever not compliment you? I did it every time."

"I was joking with you. Thank you for your job too, director."

"I never want to do a medical drama again. It's too much of a pain."

"I know you'll do it if you get a good scenario."

"If there's something like that, then I will. I do have to make a living. You know that we're just having a light meal before splitting up, right? It's not good to go for 2nd and 3rd rounds since there's an afterparty."

"I agree. I want to go back home and rest."

"You're quite a home person too, huh? Did you hide a pot of honey at your home or something? Why are you so hung up on going home all the time?"

"Yes, in fact, I do have a pot of honey at home."

The director smiled at her and walked over to Kang Giwoo this time. She could hear his excited compliment all the way here. Everyone looked good because the last shoot was finished. She looked at the staff from right next to the heater. The cleanup process was quicker than ever. That was the energy created by the word 'final'.

"Everyone gather up! We'll take a photo."

Gaeul grabbed Mijoo's hand and walked to the old pine tree. The entire cast and staff of Doctor's Office gathered up. It came to her that this was really the last time.

Chapter 920. Crank Up 3

The get-together was held in a mackerel restaurant near the set. Gaeul walked around the first floor and talked to the various staff members. She felt touched when she heard that they wanted to work with

her next time as well. She even thought that maybe she should have talked to them more often. There were many staff members who offered her drinks, but she mostly toasted back with empty cups or just juice. She couldn't afford to go back home drunk today as there were friends she would be drinking with all night at home.

After making rounds on the first floor, she went to the room on the 2nd floor where the main cast and the main production staff were staying. She could hear laughter from every room. The fact that they finished early was one thing, but Lee Miyeon's absence made the mood a lot softer.

"Gaeul, we should toast."

A great senior raised a bottle himself. She couldn't afford to refuse, so she raised her glass. Starting from the director to the assistant director, everyone received a glass full of soju. A drunk senior humorously celebrated the finale of Doctor's Office. Along with the word cheers, everyone raised their glasses up in the air. Gaeul only drank a sip before putting it back down.

"You don't seem to be doing well today?" Giwoo said.

Whether it was intended or a coincidence, Giwoo ended up sitting next to her.

"I'm just going to drink moderately today. There's a separate after party too."

Giwoo nodded. Ever since she clearly expressed her rejection, Giwoo did not persistently speak to her. It didn't seem like he had completely given up though, so she was always on alert. She didn't want a moment's mistake to end up in hooking up with him.

"Our blessed couple! The drama went so well thanks to the two of you."

When a senior started applauding, the others started applauding as well. Gaeul waved her hand in the air in denial before jokingly speaking,

"I'm not sure about all, but I think 2% of the viewing rate is thanks to me?"

"Of course it is thanks to you, Gaeul! And it's also thanks to Giwoo too. Since we're at it, we should have our couple do a love shot^[1]."

She tried to refuse with a smile, but Giwoo cut in first. He gave her a glass. Everyone seemed excited because they just finished the last shoot. It would become awkward if she suddenly turned stern and refused. She picked up her glass and looked at Giwoo with an awkward smile that anyone in front of her would be able to tell was forced. Even though it might have hurt his pride, Giwoo smiled joyously. That smile made her insides churn. It felt like he was declaring that he would happily accept whatever she does. A sensation even more unpleasant than him talking to her enveloped her body.

"But I like Hyeyeon-uni more than Giwoo. Now I feel like she's my real sister just like during the drama."

Gaeul indifferently nodded towards Giwoo, who sat to her left, and turned around to her right to give the glass to Hyeyeon. Hyeyeon gladly picked up her glass. People laughed about it as well. After crossing their arms and drinking, she had a look at Kang Giwoo. His lips were twitching as though he couldn't stand being ignored so fully. She dusted her empty glass above her head^[2] and stood up.

"I'd love to stay here for longer, but a friend of mine flew over from Japan today. I haven't seen her in quite a while so I'd like to get going now. I'll accept the rest of the drinks during the afterparty."

This was no coerced drinking occasion, nor were there any stuck-up seniors, so she was able to get out easily. She said goodbye to the director who told her to be careful on her way back before coming down from the 2nd floor. She left the restaurant after telling Mijoo and Chanwoo that she would be leaving first.

"Han Gaeul."

Kang Giwoo was standing behind her.

"What is it?"

"I was just curious about why you hated me so much."

"I don't like bringing up what I already said before."

"That you have no plans on dating someone?"

"Yes, so you do remember."

"I'm not saying that we should start dating right now. I've given up on that notion too. Allow me to truly apologize for not understanding how you felt before and forcing myself on you. I was too awkward in my expressions."

"If you know, then it's fine."

Gaeul waved at the taxi approaching from afar. It would've been great if it was an empty one, but unfortunately, it was occupied.

"What should I do? I just want to become a good friend of yours. Of course, if I had the opportunity, I'd love to try my best so that we can further our relationship into that of lovers."

"I feel like we're plenty good friends right now. We can shoot together on set without much friction and we eat together afterwards. That's the ideal definition of friends there to me."

"I want to shorten the distance more than that."

"Sorry to tell you, but I don't want to do that. If you want me to be honest with you, I hate this situation where I'm saying sorry to you out of formality all this time. The women you've met until now might have liked you for that, but that isn't the case for me. I held back because it might have influenced the shoot, but let me tell you clearly today: I don't have a shred of a mind to become lovers with you. And this will not change."

"Let me ask you again. Why do you hate me so much? I might sound cocky, but I'm not exactly a bad guy."

"Of course. Who in this world can tell you that you're a bad guy? You're a good guy. So please stop being persistent on a woman who has no interest in you and look for another one."

She waved her hand at the taxi going the opposite way. The taxi driver replied with a hand gesture, and she started walking towards a place where it was possible to do a U-turn.

"You should go back. See you at the afterparty."

She followed the taxi that made a U-turn and was driving towards her. Just a few moments ago, she got a text from Yoojin telling her to hurry. She had to go quickly if she didn't want to get bombarded with nagging from her friend armed with it.

"Talk to me for a sec."

When the taxi pulled up, Giwoo grabbed her wrist. Gaeul looked alternately at Giwoo's hand that grabbed her wrist and his face.

"What are you doing?"

"I hope you understand how serious I am."

"So forcefully holding back someone as she's about to leave is you being serious?"

"You never give me an opportunity, so I want to earn enough time to talk to you even if I have to do something like this."

"I said all I need to."

"Well, I haven't."

Giwoo tightened his grip. She could feel his tenacity to never let go through her wrist. Was it because of the drinking? Or was it because he thought that today was the last opportunity? She couldn't care less about the reason. There was only one answer.

"Why don't you let go when I'm still in a good mood?"

"Han Gaeul, I really...."

"I warned you."

She grabbed the wrist of Giwoo's hand that was holding onto her arm and pulled it downwards with all her might. Giwoo gasped and staggered when his center of balance was suddenly shifted forward. Gaeul used her left hand to strongly push the staggering Giwoo on the shoulder. He fell down on the spot just like that. Gaeul looked around. Just as she had checked before she made a move, there were no passersby. There was a smoking couple watching them from a distance, but they would not be able to think that some celebrities were causing a ruckus here.

"Young lady, aren't you going to come in?" said the taxi driver as he rolled down the passenger seat window.

His tone was not that of complaint, but of worry. His eyes were looking at Giwoo, who was sitting on his knee. Gaeul moved slightly in order to block the driver's eyes. He might have a terrible personality, but she could not afford a scandal. She did not want to be introduced as 'actress H' who got into a fight with Kang Giwoo in some gossip news outlet.

"Young lady, you okay?" the taxi driver asked as soon as she got in the taxi.

Gaeul pulled up her mask and looked at the driver.

"It's fine. I'm quite athletic."

"You should still watch out. A woman can't beat a man no matter how athletic she is once a man goes crazy. Are you sure you don't need to report him?"

"He's just a coworker, but he's drunk. I'm sure he'll apologize to me tomorrow."

"They say people's real ego comes out when they're drunk. Don't put people like that near you. I have a daughter who's also working, but a man like that is her superior, so she always complains to me whenever she goes to a get-together."

"There are always bad people who make many people tired."

The taxi driver agreed with her and drove off. She looked outside the window. She could see Giwoo becoming smaller and smaller. It was terrifying to see him staring straight at the tail of the taxi while standing straight up. She thought that she should tell her agency to watch out so that her work didn't coincide with Kang Giwoo's.

After nodding along to the driver boasting about his daughter, she found herself standing in front of the apartment complex.

"Be careful on your way home."

"Yes, I will," Gaeul said as she closed the door.

* * *

It was humiliating, yet for some reason, he was laughing. Giwoo looked at his wrist that Gaeul grabbed. He could feel an irresistible charm from her when she strongly resisted. He could understand why fishermen were so fixated on big fish. The long wait, the tug of war with the fish, the final desperate struggle. The sensation from the hands that only appeared at the very end of the long arduous process was not something that small fry could compare to. Gaeul was a woman overflowing with vitality just like a carp. When he grabbed her because it felt like she was an easy catch, she would flap her tail and escape him.

He couldn't begin to imagine how big the ecstasy would be when he caught her, and how big the satisfaction would be once he put her in a fish tank. However, he was almost getting fed up. Since he had enough of that sensation from his hand, it would be great if she obediently allowed herself to be caught by him. He acted warm because it seemed like she did not like being forceful, but she was even angrier instead.

What could've gone wrong? He didn't ask her out for a meal and just wanted to talk to her, yet she was so rejective of it. It was almost unnatural.

A man.

That word suddenly came to his mind. Did she find another man after getting rejected by Han Maru? Or was she fed up with men after getting rejected? It would be great if it was the latter. He did not want her to be one of those cheap women who switched men on short notice. That woman, who was proud yet filled with vitality and had a charming smile, had to remain the woman he wanted her to be.

"Did you send Gaeul off well?" asked a senior as soon as he returned.

"I safely grabbed her a taxi."

"Tell me honestly. You have the hots for Gaeul, don't you? Many people tend to get such feelings if they go through so much in dramas."

Giwoo scratched his neck a little and spoke,

"Was it obvious?"

The people around him soon showed interest. Some people laughed, saying that they knew it, while some people cheered for him because the two of them suited each other.

"I'm sure Gaeul feels something for you as well. She can't look at a person with eyes like that if she doesn't have any feelings for someone."

"Right. Gaeul's eyes when she looked at you when you were acting was really sweet. She really looked like she was in love."

They were words that made his ears pleased. As much as he wanted to hear more of it, he had to fall back here.

"Don't push her too hard since she might be flustered if she hears it."

"We aren't that dumb. But we'll try to fan the flames from the side. There's the afterparty too. You should try your best."

Giwoo smiled and nodded. People were creatures easily swept by the atmosphere, so it was likely that Gaeul might fall for him if other people pushed her that way. Maybe they might ride the flow to become close in one go. He felt joyful when he pictured Gaeul being drunk at the afterparty. How cute would it be if she acted cute with her cheeks flushed red? He emptied the glass in front of him in one go. He rather looked forward to this afterparty.

[1] When two people are paired up to drink. I've explained this before, and maybe the 'ten levels of love shot' might jolt your mind. Without any context, it's just hooking arms to drink.

[2] A sign to show that she finished drinking what she was given.