

CHAPTER ONE

Yu-na's Ordinary Life



The alarm went off at 7:15, and Han Yu-na was already half-awake before the second ring — not because she wanted to be, but because eight years of opening and closing bars had trained her body to distrust sleep past a certain hour, the way a soldier never fully relaxes even in peacetime.

Her side of the room told the story before she said a word of it herself. A twin mattress against the wall. A single shelf with folded clothes instead of a dresser. A suitcase in the corner that had never quite been unpacked, not because she was planning to leave, but because some part of her still hadn't decided this counted as hers. Ha-eun's side of the room, by contrast, had spilled outward over the years like a plant left to grow wild — a vanity crowded with skincare bottles, fairy lights taped along the window frame, a corkboard of photos going back to high school. Two people had been living in this room for three years, and only one of them had made it look lived-in.

"Yu-na!!!!," Ha-eun's voice came from the kitchen, flat with the particular irritation of someone who had already showered. "It's 7:40. You had a seven-fifteen alarm and your shift's at 9, which means you have exactly enough time to get ready if you get up right now."

"I'm up," Yu-na says with sleepy voice.

"You're horizontal. That's not the same thing," Ha-eun says laughing, she always is.

Yu-na sat up, dragging a hand down her face. Through the wall she could hear the neighbor's television, muffled and indistinct, and under that the hum of the refrigerator, and under that the city itself, already awake and already loud. She had lived in this apartment — a boxy one-room "villa" on the third floor of a building with a broken intercom — for three years, ever since her last roommate had gotten married and Ha-eun, freshly done with nursing school and looking for someone to split rent with, had asked if she wanted in. Yu-na had said yes before Ha-eun finished the sentence.

It wasn't that she disliked the apartment. It was that she still, on some mornings, woke up and had to remind herself that it was allowed to be hers too.

She got dressed in under four minutes — jeans, a plain shirt she'd change out of a black work polo, hair pulled into a low knot — and came out to find Ha-eun holding out a piece of toast like a hostage negotiator offering terms.

"Eat this while you put your shoes on. I'm not saying it because I'm nice. I'm saying it because if you pass out at work again, Dong-wook will call me, and I will have to leave my actual patients to come get you."

"That happened one time."

"That happened one time that I know of." Ha-eun poured the last of the milk into her own cup, which left none for Yu-na's coffee, and made a face like she hadn't meant to do that. "Sorry. I'll buy more today."

"I don't even like milk in my coffee."

"You say that, and yet every morning you look at the carton like it owes you something."

Yu-na almost laughed — the real kind, not the customer-service kind she used forty times a shift — and took the toast anyway, eating it standing up at the door while she laced her shoes. On the small shelf by the entrance, tucked behind a stack of unopened mail, there was a photograph in a plastic sleeve, the kind that came free with old film development. A man in his thirties, laughing at something off-camera, one hand resting on the head of a girl who couldn't have been older than six. Yu-na didn't look at it every morning. She didn't need to. She just liked knowing it was there, the way you like knowing a light switch works even when the room is already lit.

Her father had died when she was fourteen. A construction accident, quick, the kind of quick that people meant as a small mercy and that Yu-na had never quite managed to feel as one. Her mother had lasted two more years after that — two years of trying, Yu-na believed, genuinely trying — before deciding that raising a teenage girl alone on a service-industry income was a harder mountain than she had the legs for. She'd left a note. Yu-na still remembered that it was polite. That was the part that had stuck with her longest, stranger than the leaving itself: that her mother had thanked her, at the bottom, for understanding.

Yu-na had not, in fact, understood. But she had learned, in the years since, that understanding wasn't a requirement for moving forward. You could carry a thing without agreeing to its terms.

"You're doing the face," Ha-eun said, watching her from the kitchen doorway.

"What face."

"The staring-at-nothing face. Go to work. Text me if it's a bad night."

"It's a Tuesday. Nothing happens on Tuesdays."

"Famous last words," Ha-eun called after her, already turning back toward her own morning, her own twelve-hour shift on a hospital floor that would ask just as much of her as any bar would ask of Yu-na, if not more.

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Blue Hour sat at the end of a narrow backstreet, wedged between a shuttered print shop and a twenty-four-hour convenience store, its sign a soft cursive script in blue neon that had been flickering on the second o for as long as Yu-na had worked there. Dong-wook kept saying he'd fix it. Yu-na kept telling him the flicker had character. Neither of them had done anything about it in two years, which was, in its own way, a kind of agreement.

Inside, Soo-jin was already restocking the garnish trays, her sleeves rolled up, a half-eaten kimbap roll balanced on a napkin by the register.

"You look like you slept in a chair," Soo-jin said, without looking up.

"I slept in a bed. It just wasn't for very long."

"Same conclusion, different furniture." Soo-jin slid the kimbap toward her. "Eat. Dong-wook's in the back doing inventory and muttering about the whiskey order again."

Yu-na took a bite gratefully — Soo-jin had covered her lunch more times than either of them bothered to count anymore — and got to work wiping down the bar top in long, even strokes, a habit she'd have sworn she picked up on her own until she noticed, one day, that it was exactly how Dong-wook did it. Copy the person who trained you long enough and eventually you stop being able to tell where their habits end and yours begin.

The early shift was slow, the way Tuesdays usually were — a couple having a quiet argument over cocktails in the corner booth, a man reading something on his phone with one earbud in, a regular named Mr. Oh who came in every few days to drink exactly two beers and complain, warmly, about his adult son. It wasn't until closer to eleven that the night showed its teeth.

They came in as a group of four, suits loosened, ties already gone, the specific loudness of men who had been drinking somewhere else first and had decided the party wasn't over. Yu-na clocked the dynamic in about four seconds — three of them tired and ready to go home, one of them not remotely done. That one sat himself at the bar directly across from her and ordered a whiskey neat with the tone of a man used to being obeyed by people paid to obey him.

She served it. She served the second one, because the second one was fine.

By the third, his friends were trying, without much conviction, to get him to switch to water. He waved them off and reached across the bar — not violently, just carelessly, the way a person reaches for a TV remote — and closed his hand around Yu-na's wrist as she went to take his glass.

"One more," he said, smiling in a way that clearly worked on people who didn't know him.

Yu-na looked down at his hand, then back up at his face, her own expression unbothered in a way that was itself a kind of warning if he'd been sober enough to read it. "Let go of my wrist, and I'll consider it."

"I'm just talking."

"You're talking with your hand. Let go, and use your mouth instead. It's the part that's supposed to do the talking."

One of his friends laughed too loudly, the kind of laugh that comes from relief rather than humor, and the man let go, more startled than chastened. Yu-na straightened, unhurried, and set his glass firmly out of reach.

"You've had three. House policy after three is water or the tab closes. Pick one."

"Do you know who I—"

"I know you're the guy who grabbed a bartender's wrist in front of his friends and is about to find out that doesn't end the way he thinks it does," Soo-jin said pleasantly, appearing at Yu-na's shoulder with the kind of timing that only came from years of working the same room. "Water it is. On the house, because we're generous."

The man opened his mouth to argue further, and that was when Dong-wook stepped out from the back, not fast, not dramatic, just present — a solid, quiet weight at the end of the bar, arms loosely crossed, saying nothing at all. He didn't need to. Something about a fifty-something man built like he'd spent a decade doing manual labor before he ever poured a drink had a way of ending arguments before they escalated. The man's friends were already pulling him toward the door, apologizing to no one in particular, and within a minute the group was gone, the door chime settling into silence behind them.

"You okay?" Dong-wook asked, not moving from where he stood.

"I've had worse Tuesdays." Yu-na rubbed her wrist once, briefly, then went back to wiping down the counter like nothing had happened, because in the scheme of an eight-year bartending career, genuinely, not much had. "He'll be embarrassed about it tomorrow and tip badly to compensate. It's a whole cycle."

Dong-wook watched her a moment longer than the situation strictly required. He had a way of looking at her sometimes — not suspicious, not pitying, just watching, like he was checking something against a memory only he had access to. "You're pale."

"I'm always pale. It's called not going outside."

"Yu-na."

"I'm fine, Sajangnim." She used the honorific the way she always did when she wanted the sentence to end the conversation rather than start one. "Go finish counting bottles. I've got the floor."

He let it go — for now — and disappeared into the back office, and Yu-na exhaled slowly enough that no one saw it, rolling her shoulders once before picking up a tray of empty glasses. A drunk man had grabbed her wrist and been sent home; that was Tuesday, that was most Tuesdays, that was the ordinary weather of the job she'd built her whole adult life around because it was the job that had been willing to hire an eighteen-year-old with no family to vouch for her and no safety net beneath either of them.

By the time they locked the doors at half past midnight, her feet ached in the specific, bone-deep way that came from ten hours on tile floors, and the walk home felt longer than its actual fifteen minutes. The streets were quiet, streetlamps buzzing overhead, a stray cat watching her from beneath a parked car with total indifference. She thought about nothing in particular. She thought about how the milk carton was probably still empty. She thought, briefly and without any real weight to it, about how nice it would be to sleep for eleven hours instead of six.

That was the point. This was simply Yu-na's life, and she had long since stopped waiting for it to become something else.

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