

## Once Again 301

### Chapter 301

“Lunch is ready.”

The staff started disappearing one by one when they heard the voice. Other than a few people to look after the equipment, they all left the gym.

“Go and have lunch. You’ll have to be back by 2.”

The leader left those words before leaving. The time right now was 1:20 p.m. They had to finish their meals in 40 minutes and come back. The staff were heading to the school cafeteria as though this was planned beforehand. Maru wondered if he could join them.

“We have to eat separately.”

The man spoke as he took off the training clothes. Maru found out his name during the wait. Park Woojoo. Although he said that he had a stressful childhood thanks to his name, he said that he liked it right now.

“We don’t get any food?”

“For us, we receive separate lunch money. 3000 won. So we have to eat outside.”

Maru nodded. He wondered if there was any place to eat outside the school. He remembered seeing a Bunsik restaurant when he was driven here. It wasn’t that far from the school entrance according to his memory. The dozen or so supplementary actors scattered. Some just ate some bread and milk that they brought beforehand. Maru walked towards the school gates through the back of the school. The luxurious imported cars had increased in number. Most of them were Mercedes-Benz. BMW and Audi could be seen here and there as well.

“This one’s huge,” Woojoo spoke.

“It has to be. It’s priced that way too.”

“It’s priced that way? I haven’t seen this emblem before.”

“That one’s a Mercedes-Benz as well.”

“This is a Mercedes-Benz? That’s not how I remember it looking.”

“It’s called the Maybach. If I were you, I wouldn’t be standing in front of that car. Scratch that and you might have to sign a slave contract.”

Maru brushed past Woojoo who was standing in front of the sedan. There was a Rolls-Royce next to the Maybach as well. He was wondering why the parking space right at the entrance was empty, but now that he saw the brand of the car, he understood why. It was probably something like the VIP parking space.

“So does it cost around 50 million won? I’m not knowledgeable when it comes to foreign cars.”

“50 million? That’s cute. It’s probably more like 700 million.”

“700 million? I guess I’m not getting one my entire life then.”

“Only the rich can afford stuff like that.”

“But hey, you’re quite knowledgeable about cars, knowing things like that.”

“Yeah, well.”

It was some trivia that he gained through work. When he was a road manager, he frequented places like Cheongdam-dong, Apgujeong-dong, and Myeong-dong, driving his actors to work. The first thing to watch out for when driving was safety, but in reality, he had to be more careful of the real-estate-on-wheels. He remembered the words he heard from a senior manager, who told him that his life would rapidly make a sharp fall if he ran into one of those.

He passed by the parking lot and arrived at the school entrance. The security guard nodded his head after giving them a glance. Following the road that led downwards, Maru found the Bunsik restaurant to his left. Woojoo and two other supplementary actors entered that place, while the rest headed towards the convenience store that was a little further away.

The restaurant was quite empty. It seemed to be because it was targeted towards students. On the wall, there were post-its full of writing from students. Celebrity autographs could be seen here and there as well. Maru wondered if this place was well-known.

They ordered the things they wanted to eat. Maru ordered a bowl of ramyun and a roll of kimbap. He wanted to eat some Doenjang-jjigae as well, but he didn’t order one since he knew that these kinds of places didn’t have good Doenjang-jjigae since it was targeted towards students.

“That kid back there was horrible. He has a good face, but he couldn’t look more awkward when he says his line.”

“It’s not just him, is it? Though, he did mess up four times in a row. If the producer had a bad personality, he would’ve been told to go home already.”

Since most of the others had experience doing this job already, they talked about how it was on other drama sets. Woojoo also talked about his experiences. Maru, who had nothing to say, just listened to the story as he drank the warm ramyun broth.

A lot of words were exchanged, but they were generally talking about the same thing - that it was extremely rare to find places where supplementary actors were treated well, as well as that it was extremely common to not get paid.

“Do they pay you on a daily basis like on construction sites?” Maru asked the others.

They all shook their heads at the same time.

“It’s all paid two months later. Am I right, everyone?”

When Woojoo said so, the others nodded their heads.

“It’s not like shooting the episode immediately makes money. Everything’s calculated after it’s aired. That’s why we receive payment in two months.”

“In my case, I have to actually go to the production company and get my pay, so it’s quite a hassle.”

“For us, they do directly deposit the money into our bank accounts, but more often than not, they delay their payment. So it’s hellish when paying for bills. It’s because they’re supposed to pay on the day I pay bills.”

One of them shook their head. Paid in two months? A part-time job was done because of the need for quick cash, so this was quite a weird way of payment.

“If you know what you’re doing or go through the leader, it’s okay, but if you get the work through some weird branch company, you’ll be in for a hard time.”

“I was like that when I started out. I went to them after looking at the ad in the newspaper and worked for two days, but the company that was supposed to pay me just disintegrated into thin air. I had to pay an application fee too.”

“Those kinds of occurrences are everywhere. It will be better if the TV stations have full control over them, but they don’t. That’s why it’s harder for us. A friend of mine worked for about two months, and about 3.5 million won’s worth of money, but he never got paid. They said the company went bankrupt, and that they couldn’t take responsibility. It’s a hell of a world.”

They were a ‘passer by 1’ in the drama, and they were treated as one in reality as well. These companies were not the primary subcontractors of the TV stations, but were more like secondary, tertiary, or even quaternary subcontractors. TV stations - drama subcontractor - supplementary actors company - and then their branch company. As Maru knew what kind of things happened with one more chain in the distribution process, he could only smile in vain. There were always people that took advantage of the loopholes in a system.

“Isn’t there something like a labor union?”

When he talked about a labor union, the three others widened their eyes. They all smiled in vain.

“A labor union, huh. As far as I know, there is one. The KPU. Am I right?”

The other two nodded at Woojoo’s words.

“But we don’t apply. We’re treated like temporary workers rather than official employees.”

Hearing those words, Woojoo added.

“I once got into a fight with a company once. After all, my pay was getting delayed indefinitely. Thanks to that, I couldn’t do any work for a long time because I was blacklisted by them. I looked into the KPU, but they told me that they can’t do anything. Fortunately, I met the current leader and was able to get more work now, but I feel the chills when I just think about what happened back then. If you want to fight, not only do you need the courage, you need to be prepared to face the consequences as well.”

“You must regret your actions then.”

“Hm, no, not really. If I endured it, I would’ve just felt more pathetic. I can handle physical hardships, but mental hardships are bad.”

He smiled bitterly. Maru did not talk about that anymore. Since when did this country's laborers receive any kind of good treatment? Even in the faint memories of his 45-year-old self, he could remember news about labor unions going on strikes, so it would be even worse right now, where laborer's rights were practically in the ditch.

At the same time, Maru realized that Woojoo wasn't just a naive young man. Unlike his silly smiles, he was a man who could fight against injustice. Being able to bear the consequences and press forward with fighting against injustice was an incredibly difficult, as well as courageous, thing to do. Maru himself wouldn't be able to do it. If he could gain profit by hopping on the bandwagon of injustice, he would hop on it without a second thought. Compromise was the path to stability.

That was why he considered people like Woojoo as cool.

"But it's not all bad. If you get to work with the true actors, it's really enjoyable."

"You're right. I once worked together with the actress Gong Yeonsoo, and she actually paid for the meals for all of the supplementary actors. She kept coming up to us and asking if we were okay too. That's when I became a fan of hers."

"I met her as well. It was during a traditional drama, and she was really kind. She's pretty, both on the outside and on the inside. The man that gets to take her as a wife must have saved the country in his previous life."

Gong Yeonsoo. She was known as the Drama Queen. She became famous during her late-teens, and the rumor that a drama would always be successful with her in it started floating around during her mid twenties. That was something he heard from the host of a TV program that his sister was watching.

A drama that aired at the end of last year, titled 'Wing of Love', became so successful that even Maru knew about it. 54% peak viewing rate. It was a view rate that put all other dramas aired at the same time to shame. Gong Yeonsoo was the main heroine of that drama.

The three people started praising Gong Yeonsoo. A woman in her early thirties, whose beauty had matured, whose personality was more beautiful than a flower. There wasn't a single bad word about her. The evaluation of her was just that good.

"Oh, we should get going now," Woojoo said as he looked at the clock. Since they were chatting, they were nearly at the end of their allocated lunch time. They quickly paid for their meals and walked towards the school. There weren't any people in the convenience store. It seemed that they went ahead.

When they walked past the school gates, they saw students at the school field. They were doing a group skipping rope. As they were told not to disturb the students as much as possible, they walked to the back of the school.

"Just what happened here I wonder."

It was just then when a leisurely voice could be heard. Maru looked at the group of middle-aged people in front of the Maybach. One man was looking at the bonnet with a groan.

It was obvious that there was a problem. At times like these, the best thing to do was to just walk past pretending to not know anything. The others seemed to think the same thing as they walked past. Just then,

“Huh? It’s him. I saw him standing in front of your car, director,” the middle-aged woman pointed at Woojoo as she spoke.

“What?”

Woojoo turned around in a fluster. A middle-aged woman was still pointing at Woojoo with her finger. Middle-aged people with heavy atmospheres started looking at Woojoo.

“You were standing in front of this car, right? I saw you from the other side.”

“Yes. I was. I was just looking at the car. I mean, it was the first time I saw such a car.”

“He’s suspicious. I don’t think he’s a student here. What are you doing here?”

“I’m here for the drama they’re shooting over there.”

“A drama?”

The middle-aged woman looked at the others of her group. Some of them nodded since they knew about it.

“Then why were you standing in front of another person’s car?”

“I told you that I was just looking,” Woojoo raised his voice slightly.

He was suddenly being interrogated, so it wasn’t that surprising that he was getting angry.

“Hah! What a funny kid. Hey, young man. Why are you angry at me? You did something wrong, didn’t you? From what I see, you don’t look like a person that knows the rules around here.”

“The rules? Hello, ma’am. Did I do something wrong?”

“See? I told you he’s suspicious.”

“Excuse me!”

Woojoo’s voice became another level higher. He looked like he couldn’t stand being wronged.

Maru looked at the two alternately. What would happen to Woojoo if a commotion erupted out here? The cooperation of those middle-aged people was definitely necessary to shoot the drama here at this school. Woojoo did nothing wrong, so he wouldn’t be wronged or anything, but they might go to the producers of the drama later. The name of the crime? Offending their feelings. No, it was likely that the producers might act first. It might seem petty, but there were quite a lot of people who took those petty actions. Maru knew what kind of actions a person in a superior position did to a person in a socially lower position.

Maru grabbed Woojoo’s arm from the back. Woojoo flinched and looked back at him. Maru shook his head. ‘Why’ could be read from Woojoo’s eyes.

“Should I call the security guard?” Maru stepped up and asked.

He tried to be as polite as possible. He was expressing that he had no intentions on getting on their bad side.

“Security? Ah, Security. There’s a CCTV here, isn’t there? I guess I didn’t think about that.”

“Hey, go call him.”

Maru received the middle-aged group’s permission. Maru winked towards Woojoo and went to the security guard’s office to call the security guard. Only after the security guard came did they understand what was going on. The car’s emblem was out of place.

“There’s a CCTV in the parking lot, so I’ll go check right away.”

The security officer ran into the school building before coming back out with someone that looked to be one of the teachers here. The middle-aged woman that scolded Woojoo was still glaring at him. Whenever Woojoo looked like he was about to say something, Maru pulled on his arm to prevent him from speaking.

“I checked the footage, and it seems like some of the students played a prank during lunch time. I deeply apologize.”

The teacher took a deep bow. Only then did the middle-aged group start smiling.

“A student of the school? Haha, it’s natural to play around when growing up. It’s not like there was big damage done to the car, so don’t scold them too much,” the middle-aged owner of the car laughed heartily as he spoke.

The others also laughed saying that it was something that young people do. The scary atmosphere from before was all but gone.

“Hey. Don’t act suspiciously in the future. You’re lucky because you ran into good people like us. Others would have called the cops on you. Understand?” The middle-aged woman spoke.

She was still putting the blame on others until the end. Maru blocked Woojoo from taking big strides towards the woman. He also gave glances to the other two and had them help him hold Woojoo back from the group of middle-aged people.

“Geez.”

Woojoo sighed deeply. Hearty laughter could still be heard from the parking lot. The teacher and the middle-aged people were exchanging good words.

“There’s nothing good in getting angry at shit. Let’s just go.”

“Aren’t you angry?”

“Angry? If you become angry at every irrationality, then you’ll have a hard time living in South Korea.”

“....”

“I get what you’re thinking, but let’s get going for now. We get nothing back from getting angry, so there’s no point. Also, it’s almost time.”

Maru pushed Woojoo, who had a complex expression. At the same time, he remembered the faces of the group of middle-aged people, especially the middle-aged woman.

Avoid fights you can’t win, but remember their faces - that was what was on Maru’s mind.

Woojoo, who walked with heavy steps, sighed and told him ‘thanks for holding me back’ in a small voice. It seemed that his anger had calmed down a little.

Hot blooded youths are cool - Maru thought as he shrugged with a smile on his face.

### **Chapter 302**

Unlike the morning, the atmosphere at the set was looking bad. Some of the staff members expressed their discomfort very openly. The guy named director Choi from the TV station was just talking to director Lee regardless of what everyone else was thinking.

“We’ll take a short break,” the woman with the red cone glanced at the director before speaking. Her eyes looked scary.

“How desolate.”

Everyone seemed to be at the mercy of director Choi. Regardless of whether they had an employee card hanging around their neck or not, everyone seemed to be wary of this director Choi. The difference was that the people with the employee cards were expressing their annoyance at their boss, while the ones without were clearly hostile.

A weak-hearted person would’ve gone crazy due to all the attention, but this director Choi didn’t seem affected at all. He was like a lion being surrounded by rabbits. Even if the others bare their teeth, they were, in the end, just rabbits. They weren’t capable of hurting a lion.

“Oh my, my dear actors. Have you all had a good meal?”

Director Choi delightfully greeted the idols that came back from lunch. Even though he had slight disdain in his words when he talked to the staff, he was very servile towards the idols. Is it uncomfortable in any way? Is acting going well? I’ll treat you to something later - kind words such as those were spoken. It looked like the atmosphere was becoming warmer at a first glance, but it was warmer only around that area. The other places were still as cold as ice.

Maru saw that Woomin had an awkward smile on his face as he talked to director Choi. From how he was giving glances to other people, it seemed that he realized that the mood wasn’t good here.

“I can’t keep you tied with me any longer. Let’s get to the shoot.”

Director Choi was especially mindful about the girl idol with short hair. Perhaps he was asked to take care of her specifically by someone else, or perhaps he had other intentions towards her, what he had in his mind was unknown. The girl with the short hair greeted director Choi with a smile.

“I’ll take my leave now. Director Lee, have a drink with me after the shoot. I’ll treat you.”

“Uhm, director Choi.”

Director Lee stopped director Choi from leaving. He dragged director Choi by the arm to a corner, and he looked very desperate. The gazes of the staff followed him. Director Lee started explaining something desperately with gestures involved, and director Choi firmly shook his head to express his rejection.

Director Lee clearly seemed to be in the weaker position, and that quarrel ended in a brief time. Director Choi pulled on his suit jacket and twitched his nose to replace his greeting.

Maru tapped on his chin with his finger as he watched the two people. What made director Lee so desperate? Why is the staff looking at the two directors? The tense atmosphere on the set started loosening. It wasn't the problem-solved kind of loosening, but the I-have-no-energy-anymore kind of loosening.

“It feels heavy.”

The air was filled with frustration. No one had the motivation to create something. Director Lee put a cigarette in his mouth before he snapped the cigarette in half. It was forbidden to smoke at school.

“It looks like the shoot will get longer.”

“No, it probably won't,” Woojoo replied to him.

How were they supposed to continue shooting in this atmosphere? The results were clear. Director Lee gestured with his hands. The staff started moving all the equipment outside the gym. He said that they'll be moving over to the cafeteria for the next scene.

“Because they need to pay more if the shoot gets longer,” Woojoo said as he stood up.

Maru understood it instantly. Just like with movies, time was money when it came to shooting dramas as well. Just the human resources fee was considerable if they were mobilizing this many people. Also, there was the equipment as well.

“This drama is outsourced, isn't it?”

“It is.”

“But I see that the people holding cameras or lights all have employee IDs on their necks. Their logo is from the TV station as well.”

“It is indeed the subcontractor that produces the drama, but the expensive equipment is all rented from the TV station. I mean, they cost quite a lot. Also, it's not easy finding people that can actually use them. The TV stations supply the subcontractor with the production budget and the equipment.”

“That makes it easier to understand.”

The TV station provided the budget, the equipment, as well as the human resources. No wonder the subcontractor was in a servile position.

“You're quite knowledgeable.”

“This is my third year working in this field now. Three years is enough to find out about most things.”



The supplementary actors also headed towards the school cafeteria upon the leader's instructions. The cafeteria was not that far away from the gym, which was to the west of the main school building.

They stepped into the building while stepping on the shiny marble floor. Wooden tables greeted them just like a high-class restaurant. The cafeteria consisted of two floors, and it was large enough to host the entire school. The back mountain could be seen outside the glass window. Maru's mind was not filled with the scenery of the school, but questions about how much the tuition was here. It was an independent school, so it was probably at least a million won per quarter.

"This is one nice school."

"So this is what money gets you. How nice."

The supplementary actors all commented as they looked around.

They understood why they picked this school as the set for the drama. The view was very good no matter where you went. It wasn't the 'square and boring' school like ordinary schools after all. They could see students doing sports through the glass window. They were running freely around the sports field covered with natural grass. A camera was capturing that scene. This was supposed to be a youth drama featuring 'ordinary high school students', but the very environment screamed 'fantasy'.

"You sit here. You two walk around with food trays in your hand at the back there. Sit down and talk about whatever. If you really don't have anything to say, sing the national anthem or something."

They sat down according to the leader's instructions. The camera director adjusted the positions after glancing around. He seemed to be pushing the supplementary actors to the outside more so that the faces of the main actors could be emphasized more.

They spent around 10 minutes sitting. The shoot was just about to begin when director Lee walked towards the supplementary actors. The leader immediately approached the director.

"Yes, director."

"Uhm, leader. Is there someone with experience? I need someone that can make a servile face. This scene wasn't originally in the script, but we got an extra script just now."

"If that's the case... Woojoo. You can do that, can't you?"

"M-me?"

"Yes, you. You can do it. Producer, this kid is quite good."

Director Lee looked at Woojoo's face before nodding. Maru raised his thumbs up and told him 'good luck'. Around twenty minutes after he was called away, one of the staff entered the cafeteria. In his hand was a cardboard box. What came out of the box was a pair of trainers. The short-haired idol wore those shoes. Director Lee mentioned something about an extra script, but it seemed that they fixed the script so they could put the trainers as product placement.

In the end, it all came down to money.

The rehearsal began. When the short-haired girl put her foot forward, Woojoo bowed and apologized. He had a line, and his face was on camera as well. He had much more weight compared to extras.

“Good.”

Director Lee seemed to have taken a liking to Woojoo. The cameras were placed and the staff started preparing for the shoot as well. Maru started talking with the actor in front of him as he picked up his spoon. He didn't talk about anything serious though.

“That restaurant we went to for lunch was quite good, wasn't it?”

“Yeah, it was decent. There were celebrity autographs as well. It looks like it's quite famous.”

Just as they were talking about things not related to drama, the cue sign fell. Woojoo started walking from Maru's opposite side and collided with the actress. The actress, who was having a good time showing off her new shoes got angry at him and Woojoo took steps back, flinching away. Minor actors started attacking Woojoo with words after gathering around. Then cut.

“Hey! You were doing well last time. What happened to you?” Director Lee shouted. It seemed that Woojoo was the problem. Woojoo apologized to the staff and the other actors.

“Let's do that one more time. Do it properly this time.”

That was followed up with a small 'cue' sound. The moment Woojoo started acting though, the director shouted cut again. The actress, who was wearing the trainers sat down in annoyance. Director Lee approached Woojoo.

“What are you doing. Do you think we're playing around?”

“I'm sorry.”

Woojoo lowered his head like a sinner.

He seemed nervous. Maru sighed. Just like how it still rained, despite rarely, in the desert, opportunity found its way to everyone. Skill referred to being able to take that opportunity or not. Perhaps it could be called luck. One might sigh and complain about the opportunity not coming at the right time. However, a missed opportunity would never come back. There was only one thing that people could do, and that was to grab the opportunity if it came their way.

The entertainment industry was something where that brief appearance on TV might make or break a person. This was a world where a nameless actor became famous through just one appearance on TV. Woojoo probably knew himself that this was an opportunity of his lifetime.

The third shoot began, and Woojoo made a mistake this time as well. He screwed up his steps. Seeing Woojoo misstep and look like he was about to fall over, the director just laughed in vain. The leader took Woojoo away. Having returned, Woojoo just sighed and sat back down.

“This isn't going well.”

Bitterness could be heard from his voice. However, that only lasted a brief moment. He soon returned to his smile. The nearby supplementary actors consoled him saying that it was okay. Woojoo smiled and

nodded his head. Meanwhile, the director declared a break time. The staff put down the heavy equipment and stretched out their bodies. The supplementary actors stood up as well. Woojoo was within that group.

“Isn’t this an opportunity for you?” Maru asked Woojoo.

Woojoo blinked several times as he looked back at him.

“Did you tell the producer that you’d like another chance?”

“What?”

“Opportunity came your way. So you should grab it.”

Maru felt rather annoyed since Woojoo, who looked like he could fight against injustice, was looking so powerless here. Why not bring up that courage here?

“It’s nothing great.”

“Yet, you’re making such a disappointed face. Are you sure you don’t want to try again?”

“...I do.”

“Go tell him then. Tell him that you want to try again. If you can’t do it even after that, only then do you give up.”

“I already messed up three times. I’ll be inconveniencing others.”

“If delaying everything by five minutes is an inconvenience, I guess those people who screw up four to five times as much as you must be serial killers. Hyung, you were very brave against that woman before, right? That’s bravery that will make you face losses. Yet you stood up to her. Right now, it’s the opposite. It’s an opportunity you can profit from. It’s fine if you put a thick face on. I heard you got into a fight against a company because of payment delays. Why don’t you talk to him with that kind of resolve?”

“That’s a different situation though.”

“If you keep minding the situation, you’ll eventually be driven out by people that don’t mind the situation. Even a hero of justice needs food to eat. I thought your dream was to become an actor. Yet you want to miss this opportunity where you can have your face go on TV? What about after that? Do you think that picky leader will ever pick you again? Are you going to keep doing part time jobs forever?”

“Hey, watch your words,” Woojoo frowned.

“Good. You won’t be nervous if you get angry. Don’t just face losses and profit where you can. If I look at people like you, it makes me angry, honestly. Why don’t you care about yourself rather than others?”

Woojoo was a naive and kind man. That could be seen from his attitude, expression, and actions. Maru could sit back and laugh when he was watching trashy people fall into shitholes, but he would become angry if people like Woojoo were not desperate because they were ‘considerate of others’.

At that moment, the director gestured towards the two. He was calling out to 'the one that fell over'. Woojoo's eyes shook.

"If the director tells me to take that role, I'm taking it."

"..."

"To be clear, I don't kick away opportunities that come my way. Right now, it's right in front of me and once it's within my reach, I'm definitely grabbing it. So why don't you try and do something before it comes to me?"

Maru pointed at director Lee with his chin. Woojoo clenched his teeth before walking towards director Lee. The two started conversing. Director Lee scanned Woojoo from top to bottom before putting up his index finger. He probably meant something like 'just once'.

Director Lee turned around. Maru met eyes with Woojoo. Woojoo nodded slightly. It seemed that the director gave him permission.

The shoot resumed. Woojoo walked in between the main actors. There were no mistakes made this time. He played a person who was pitiful and unjustified. The director gave it an okay this time. He seemed satisfied.

Having returned, Woojoo scratched his head.

"Aren't you gonna thank me? I went out of my way to help you."

Seeing Woojoo make a flustered expression, Maru smiled.

"If you feel thankful. Try to get me a place if you get something good next time. Sorry about acting so rudely before. It's only effective if it sounds rude."

Hearing those words, Woojoo smiled. At that moment, a commotion erupted on the staff side.

"You said that this month wasn't a problem. Also, you said today that it will be done by two, didn't you? Hah! I can't do this shit anymore. I'm done with it."

A man, who was standing in front of director Lee violently turned away. At the same time, the majority of the staff followed the man out of the cafeteria. The shooting location became a mess in an instant. The main actors, the idols, were at a loss while looking around, while director Lee and the staff around him sighed as they chased the staff members that left the cafeteria. People that seemed to be the managers came in and started making calls. Only the people with TV station employee cards were calm.

"Looks like something happened."

The supplementary actors also made a move to find out what this was about.

Maru also left the building for now.

### **Chapter 303**

What Maru saw first after leaving the building were the staff that were standing on the opposite side of director Lee. There was no commotion though, since both sides seem to understand that nothing good would come out of causing a commotion within school grounds.

"I said we should shoot for now. Only if the episode goes on air do we get more budget to work with."

"I heard those words two months ago. You said the exact same thing word for word back then, too. Producer Lee, isn't this going too far? Is everything okay as long as you receive your pay? You've changed too much."

"Hey, I didn't change at all. I'm also on your side. I'm eating out of the same pot as you."

"You say we're eating out of the same pot, so why do we get to starve to death while you get to have your fill? Look at our kids."

The man who was standing opposite to director Lee grabbed a pair of two young men behind him.

"These two are our youngest members. They're really hard-working, good kids. They come early in the morning to move equipment around, go on errands that your people give them, and clean up until the very end even after the shoot ends. But you know? This guy has a part-time job right afterward at a convenience store, while this one has another job at a bar. You know why, don't you?"

"...Bro Kim. Let's talk inside."

"Who the hell is your bro! Producer Lee, no YOU. You promised us two months ago, didn't you? That you'd pay us properly for the full amount that we didn't get paid; that you'd talk to the CEO of the company and have the pay transferred to our bank accounts. Hello? Producer Lee? Am I, no, are we asking for money that doesn't exist? We're asking for the amount we worked for. A few of us can still cope with daily life since we have other work elsewhere, but these youngsters are putting their entire lives into this, yet you have the heart to not pay them? I know that TV broadcast runs on money, but aren't humans supposed to be more important? No, even if humans are less important, you should at least allow them to have a proper life at least!"

"I know, I really do. That's why I said we should talk inside. Things will get complicated if we cause a scene here. You should remember that we barely got permission to do the shoot here."

"And who got that permission? It was one of ours that was stuck to the phone all the time, getting the permission, and coming here with boxes of drinks to hand out to the people here, wasn't it? Don't say it like you did the work."

Director Lee raised both of his hands in an attempt to calm the other party down. It seemed that this was a payment problem. It seemed that they didn't get paid for two months, or even more. It had to be quite serious considering that they were rioting during the shoot.

You should at least allow them to have a proper life at least - while the middle-aged man's words provoked both the emotional and legal issues, it wasn't enough to change the situation. Maru had never seen a financial problem that was solved verbally. Money-related problems were always solved through visible power, whether it was violence or an effective law.

"Doesn't this mean that we have a problem as well?"

“Probably.”

Word got out amongst the supplementary actors as well. Where did the supplementary actor’s pay come from? The production company, of course. Even official staff that signed a contract with the production company had their salary delayed, so would the supplementary actors, who were considered like temporary employees, get paid in time? Probably not.

After realizing that this had something to do with them, people quickly walked over to the middle-aged man’s side. They started glaring at director Lee from behind the staff.

Director Lee became visibly more nervous. It seemed that he felt very agitated because the shoot was halted. The middle-aged staff member, surnamed Kim, kept asking him to call the president and get a clear answer. Director Lee had no choice but to make the call.

“Yes, yes. I’ll hand you to him. Here, take it.”

The middle-aged staff raised his voice as soon as he received the phone.

“Hello? Yes, we met once, didn’t we? I’m Kim Jangsoo. You do know why I called you, right? What? I should continue shooting for now? Are you fucking kidding me? You’ll pay me after shooting the next episode? Do you take me for a fool? Your sugar-coating won’t get you anywhere this time. Do you even know what we’re going through right now? There’s a kid that’s staying at a friend’s house because he can’t pay rent, and there’s a person who can’t even pay for food for his baby, you cunt!”

Mr. Kim widened his eyes before taking the phone off of his ears. He laughed once before handing the phone back to director Lee.

“So you’re hanging up on me, huh. Let’s pull out. We’re not getting paid for our work anyway. We aren’t playing around here.”

The staff members behind him all nodded. It seemed that they were prepared for this. At that moment, people not standing on either director Lee nor Mr. Kim’s side started speaking. They were the staff members that were standing with the people with the TV station employee cards.

“Let’s shoot for now. He did say he’ll pay you after shooting the next episode, didn’t he? Also, if you quit like that, the TV station might claim damage. So let’s talk about it after we finish shooting the episode. They should have their own circumstances, shouldn’t they?” One person, who had an employee card on his neck, spoke.

Maru scratched his eyebrows as he looked at the three groups. Director Lee and the production company’s side, Mr. Kim and his staff members, and lastly, the staff members employed by the TV station. The sides that had stable salaries were saying that they should shoot for now, and the other side was saying that they will not budge unless they got paid first. Common sense dictated that whatever company that was paying them should pay them to get them going, but from the looks of it, it seemed that this company had no intentions of paying them right now.

“Hey, you can’t do this to us. You can say that because you get monthly salaries. How desperate do you think we are to the point that we are taking our hands off everything? You know what it’s like, so you can’t do this to us. Also, damage claims? Stop kidding. You want to discuss who did bad things first?”

“That doesn’t mean you can just dump your work like that. You should be responsible for your work. Don’t you have any love for the work you’re doing?”

“Love? LOOOVE!? Try living in a run-down single room and eat ramyun for three meals a day. Any love you have will be gone. If you want to shoot it so much, then you can shoot by yourselves for all I care. Or else, you can pay us with your own money, considering it as sharing your so-called love.”

“Are you shitting me?”

“You know better if I’m shitting you or not.”

Maru nodded his head and inwardly applauded. The one called Mr. Kim had awesome verbal skills. Even the TV station staff started glaring at the man that talked to him. They were indirectly telling him to read the mood a little.

The staff members on Mr. Kim’s side started turning around with cold eyes. It seemed that they were set on leaving.

“Bro Kim! You can’t leave like that!”

Director Lee grabbed Mr. Kim.

“Bro Kim, yes. I already got the money. I did. I also know how hard your lives are. But if you leave like this, you’ll have an even worse time. Do you think the production company will try to prevent you from leaving at all costs? You know they won’t. They’ll just hire new people.”

Hearing those words, the people that were leaving all stopped in their tracks as though they hit an invisible wall.

This was the worst ace-in-the-sleeve - Maru thought. Mr. Kim’s ‘right words’ could not win against director Lee’s ‘realistic words’. Director Lee’s words were a snare trap. No matter how hard Mr. Kim wanted to ignore it and shake it off, it was already around his neck. The moment he started walking, it would end up strangling his neck. Everyone here knew that. The hostile atmosphere died down in an instant.

Director Lee’s words contained rotten hope. Although they were working without pay, just the fact that they were working gave them a sense of stability. Director Lee touched on that. If they left now, even that ‘work’ would disappear.

Most of the staff members were in their early to mid twenties. Those young people turned around slightly and looked at director Lee. While they needed money, an opportunity to gain career experience was also important to them. This might be no different from a part-time job in terms of environment, but it was also a job that got better treatment the more experience you had. Working part-time at a petrol station or a PC bang was never a ‘career experience’, but experiencing the TV broadcasting scene raised them to ‘immediate usable manpower’ status.

Mr. Kim and a few others were still showing their frustration, but the majority was alternating between director Lee and Mr. Kim with unease.

It was over now. The goddess of victory took director Lee’s side. Overdue wages versus unemployment. Faced with a choice, even Maru would choose overdue wages over being unemployed, even if it meant

that his payment was getting delayed indefinitely. Without the confidence to get another form of employment immediately, it would be extremely difficult to let go of one job.

'While that's true, it still feels....'

Bitter. It was no longer a world where the offender had uneasy and sleepless nights and the victim could rest at ease. It was a world where the victim became tragic and sleepless, and the offender proudly walked out in the open.

Maru did want to help them. However, he couldn't because he had no realistic solution in his mind. Telling them to cheer up in consolation was no different from making fools out of them.

The meaningless dispute was nearing its end. Mr. Kim had a look at the expression of his team members before sighing.

"Can't we get one month's worth of payment at least? Let us pay our bills at least."

"I'll ask the president again. If they had the money, they would've paid you already. But the fact that they don't means that they have their own circumstances. We are colleagues in this business, there's no way they're doing this on purpose, right? Also... the students are watching us, so let's not make a big deal out of this any further."

Students had come to watch from some time onward. It wasn't just the students. People that seemed to be their parents were also here. Perhaps today was parent's day after all? Seeing that they had attracted a lot of attention, Mr. Kim frowned.

Just as he was about to give the final decision, one person stepped out from behind the students.

"Excuse me, what is going on here?"

"It's nothing much."

"It doesn't look like 'nothing much'. That man's voice is so loud that I'm worried that it might disturb the students in class."

A middle-aged woman dressed in a suit frowned as she spoke. Director Lee quickly apologized.

"Don't ruin the student's study environment and work quietly. From the gist of it, this seems to be a problem stemming from a small amount of money. You shouldn't do that as grown men. What would the students think about you?"

"Yes, yes. You're entirely right. We've managed to come to a conclusion for now, so you need not worry."

"You look like you reached a conclusion all by yourself though. That man still looks like he's about to shout. Am I wrong?"

The woman in the suit stood in front of Mr. Kim. She then stared at Mr. Kim with disdain. Just as Mr. Kim twitched his lips and was about to shout at her, a man who seemed to be similar in age to him quickly held him back. Mr. Kim sighed as he spoke.

"Fine, I'll be quiet. But also, you can't just say that because it's not related to you."



Mr. Kim spat on the ground before turning around. When he did, the woman growled in a low voice.

“What is up with you? Who told you you can act like that here? You should listen if people are speaking to you nicely. Where do you think this is? Do you think you can act as you wish here? Are you some thug? Or the mafia?”

“And why the heck are you sticking your nose in other people’s businesses, huh?”

“My, dear. Excuse me. Hello? This is a school. This is the place where they teach youngsters not to become people like you. Hah, geez, how absurd you are.”

“People like me? Hey, woman. Let’s get that straight. You mean people like you.”

“What was that? Are you sure this man isn’t the mafia? Hello? Who told you that you could be here? On whose permission?”

The woman spoke to director Lee. Director Lee calmly replied to her that they were shooting a drama.

“Aah, drama, huh. Hey, you. Where do you work? Name your company. Do you think I will stay still when dealing with people like you? Thugs like you need some reprimanding.”

“And why do I need to tell you who I work for, ahjumma?”

“Hah, ahjumma? Hey, what TV station does he belong to? I have people I know over at UBS.”

“He has no relationship with a TV station though,” director Lee spoke stiffly.

The woman snorted when she heard those words.

“Then what, is he a part-time worker then?”

“He does belong to a company but... ma’am. I’ll take care of things here. So, haha, please let us go here.”

Director Lee lowered his head. The middle-aged woman frowned.

“Are you the producer?”

“Eh? Oh, yes, I am.”

“You must be having a hard time thanks to strange people like them. I’m the chairwoman of the Parents Association at this school. Tell me if any problem arises due to people like him. I’ll go talk to the director of the school immediately.”

“Oh, no. Not at all. You must be busy, so you don’t need to use your precious time for us. I’ll take care of it myself.”

“Geez. There are so many uneducated people these days. How dare they shout in front of my babies like that. What does he think this school is? Hey, apologize to me right now.”

The middle-aged woman glared at Mr. Kim.

This was probably what it meant by ‘there are always people above you’. Maru looked at Mr. Kim, whose face was turning red due to anger and frustration. If he really fought that parent here, he would

cross the line of no return. Maru looked at Woojoo who was standing behind Mr. Kim and signaled him to hold Mr. Kim back. However, he ignored Maru's gesture due to being angry himself.

Mr. Kim's lips twitched. Maru scratched his eyebrows. It seemed that he was about to fight big time here.

He decided to interrupt and act as the 'good boy'. Maru immediately stood in front of Mr. Kim. When Mr. Kim glared at him as well, he smiled back at him.

"What is it?"

Just as Maru was about to put an end to the situation by bringing up the students,

"What is going on here?"

A man walked up to them from afar and spoke to them. He was a man in his early 50s. He was also someone that Maru knew very well.

"Oh, I didn't think I'd see you here."

"You're right. It's been a long time. I hear news about you from Junmin from time to time."

The man approached and offered him a handshake. Maru smiled back as he shook that hand.

#### **Chapter 304**

"I did hear that you entered JA."

"As a matter of fact, I did."

Maru looked at the middle-aged man in front of him, Lawyer Park. He had lost weight compared to when they met last time due to the school matter.

"Is there a problem?"

Lawyer Park asked the middle-aged woman. The woman alternated between Maru and lawyer Park before making an elegant smile.

"It's nothing for you to worry about, lawyer. Looks like there was a commotion due to a misunderstanding. Sorry about making you worried."

"How the hell is this a misunderstanding?" Mr. Kim, who had been listening, spoke as he glared at the woman. The woman didn't become angry when facing Mr. Kim, and as such, spoke calmly unlike before.

"Excuse me. Let us stop now. Bear in mind that there's a limit to my patience as well."

The woman glanced at Mr. Kim before going towards where the students and the parents were standing. Mr. Kim, who had been condemned one-sidedly, was about to shout back at her in anger, but the people around him held him back. Mr. Kim didn't seem to have any intentions of having a big fight so he just turned away his head in anger and just ignored her.

"Sorry for your inconvenience. Well then. Let's go back inside, everyone," director Lee grabbed this opportunity to speak.

The TV station staff went back inside the cafeteria first. Director Lee dragged Mr. Kim by the arm and was practically begging him to go back in. When he did so, the others started walking as well.

“Lawyer Park. We’re about to go.”

The woman smiled and pointed at the path leading behind the cafeteria. There was a path to the hill. The students were returning to the main building. It seemed that there was some business that had to be attended by the parents alone.

“Go ahead. I’ll be right behind you.”

“Eh? What do you....”

The woman panicked slightly and looked at his expression. The other parents standing behind her made awkward expressions as well.

“Are you sure you don’t need to go?”

“Help me out a little here. They’ve been dragging me with them since morning, and I’m about to have a headache.”

“They’re glaring at me though.”

When lawyer Park seemed like he had no intentions of moving on, the woman entered the cafeteria after telling him that they’d be waiting inside. The parents were staring at Maru and the lawyer from behind the glass door.

“Uhm, do you owe them money or something? They look quite uneasy.”

“It’s not about money, but ties.”

“Ties, you say?”

“I’m somewhat acquainted with the head director of the school. They’re talking about raising a new building in the empty lot in front of the hill, and they want me to help them out on that.”

“The Parents Association does stuff like that too?”

“Well, they are all people who have one authority or another. Thanks to that, it’s a pain in the butt. I came here to see how my daughter’s school was doing during vacation, and I feel like I shouldn’t have come.”

Lawyer Park looked at the cafeteria before sighing.

“That sounds tiring.”

“I’ll just take care of it and go back and rest. Rather than that, what was that just now? It looked quite serious.”

“There was a dispute thanks to wage issues.”

“Ah, everything in the world is about money problems.”

Maru stared at lawyer Park for a brief moment. This man, who was loosening his tie as he looked at the main building, was the man to go to for help. What was a better way than going to a lawyer for consultation for a legal matter?

"I think you have something to say to me," lawyer Park asked.

Maru thought about it for a moment before shaking his head.

"It's nothing."

Although they were having a conversation right now, strictly speaking, Maru wasn't sufficiently close to him that he could ask him for help. He would've never gotten to know this man if not for Junmin. Asking someone to do something for him was just being shameless. Moreover, being a lawyer was this man's job. He got paid for doing his work. Maru thought that borrowing his expertise without proper compensation was no different from extortion, so he decided not to say it.

"This came across my mind the last time we met, but you look like you have a lot of thoughts."

"My talents are lacking, so I have to make up for it in other parts."

"There's no way Junmin would employ someone that lacks talent. Rather than that, if you're being considerate of me, I'd like to tell you that you don't have to for today. I'm on holiday right now, after all. If I consult you as a lawyer, annoying stuff like non-disclosure agreements and whatnot will have to follow, but I can consult you as just an ordinary civilian and as an acquaintance of a friend of mine. Instead, I have a favor to ask of you as well."

"You want me to help you run away from those people?" Maru looked at the back before speaking.

"Run away doesn't sound cool, so let's name it tactical retreat. That woman over there is so wild, so I can't bear staying with her."

Lawyer Park made a refreshing smile. Maru felt this the last time they met due to the matter at his school, but this guy was quite easygoing. He gave off a heavy pressure when consulting him about legal issues, but outside that area, he laughed and joked like a completely different person. It seemed like the strict atmosphere was a form of work as well for him.

Lawyer Park told him to wait before walking towards the cafeteria. Not long later, he came back out. The other parents followed behind him and walked up the hill behind the cafeteria while expressing their disappointment.

"What did you tell them?"

"I told them that you were a child that needs desperate legal advice thanks to a serious issue, and that I can't ignore you. I also told them that that was it for me today. This is one thing that's good about being a lawyer. You get to sound serious no matter what you say. I can cut off any annoying matters by saying it's a legal issue."

Lawyer Park took off his suit jacket and spoke.

"Well then. Let's hear it already."

The two bought some coffee from the vending machine next to the cafeteria and talked about what happened between the staff. Lawyer Park, who had been listening without saying a word, smiled faintly.

“That’s common.”

“It’s common?”

“A colleague of mine was once in charge of a civil case related to this, and I helped him out from time to time. That’s when I found out about this. Do you know how the TV station’s content production is structured?”

“I heard a little. The TV station would outsource it to a subcontractor, and the subcontractor produces the drama.”

“Yes, that’s precisely it. Before that was a thing though, the TV stations used to produce their own content. However, the government ordered them to mandatorily outsource some of its content production to other companies starting in 1991. What do you think the reason is?”

Maru scratched his brows. Three public TV stations, self-production of content. Massive amounts of capital. Just from those three elements, it was pretty easy to figure out.

“The biggest reason must be the prevention of monopoly. There’s no way the TV media would grow in market size if the three public TVs are monopolizing everything. If they use subcontractors, the cost of production would go down and the quality would go up thanks to market logic. Ah, there’s the additional benefit of creating workplaces for people. After all, there would be more workplaces than if the three public TVs are monopolizing everything.”

“...Do you want to help me sort documents? I think you’re better than most of the new recruits at my company. Anyway, it’s just as you say. Since the government instructed them to outsource their production, the TV stations got on board and delightfully started outsourcing their content production. Actually, it’s easier for the TV stations as well. They are relieved of their responsibility, yet they still hold on to the authority after all.”

“They are relieved of their responsibility?”

“Well then. Let’s say that a drama season is being produced. Numerous content production companies would bring them storyboards in hopes of competing for that spot. The TV stations then would browse through those storyboards. However, what’s more important than that is the production budget. Then, it goes like this: company A requires 30 million per episode and possesses two star actors, while B also requires 30 million won per episode but only has one star actor. What happens then? It’s given to A of course. Do you get why the value of actors is rising dramatically?”

“Because they need those stars in order to compete with other subcontractors, meaning they would be competing for the actors as well, leading to an increase in actors’ values.”

“Yes. That means the subcontractors need to cast as many stars as possible in their dramas. That’s a problem in itself, but there’s an even bigger problem. I told you how the TV stations are relieved of their responsibility, right? I mean it. The TV stations are just giving the budget to the subcontractors and are not dealing with any of the problems that occur after that. Why? Because the subcontractor already has the production budget. The problem occurring between the subcontractors and the people they decide

to hire is fundamentally the TV station's problem, but they're avoiding all responsibility with the excuse that 'they already supplied the production budget'. In the end, the strong is just watching from the top while the two weaker ones are fighting each other at the bottom. This country's problem is always not due to hierarchical violence, but violence within the same level."

Lawyer Park made a loathing smile as he continued.

"Also, one more thing. The subcontractors are fighting each other trying to hire star actors, but look, the budget hasn't changed. From the 30 million they received, they have none after paying the star. What do you think is the easiest payment you can reduce?"

"Human resources fee."

"Correct. They just shave down that money. No, they just delay it entirely. 'Delaying' is not a crime. Like that, they will air the episode first and fill in the losses gained through ads and stuff. Only then can they get paid."

"What if it's not profiting?"

"What do you think they'll do then?"

What can they do? There's no money to pay. No, it was likely that they wouldn't want to pay either. There's money in the pocket, so how to avoid legal responsibilities in this case?

"What if they go under and set up a new company...."

"I see a splendid potential scammer in front of me right now. If a legal person is judged as having gone bankrupt, the government pays any debts for it in their stead up to a certain amount, so they handle it with that for the time being. After that, they will set up a new company, not under their name this time, but they will still hold practical power. The matter I helped out back then was similar to that as well. Laws are not there to help the just, but for the knowledgeable to use as they wish, so many people just get conned even if they are watching out."

"Is that even okay?"

"Legally, there are no problems at all."

"That's good, the law, I mean."

"It is."

"Then what can I do? It doesn't seem like they want to pay us, and if we just go on a strike, I think the producer will just hire others like he said."

"I told you that the law is there for the knowledgeable to use as they wish. There shouldn't be a lot of overdue wages for the staff. If it's under 20 million won, you can sue them, though it will be a civil case with a small-claims filing. What's important here is that you don't need to go to court. A family member can take the suing party's place instead. It's a system created by the people that actually had some consideration for the ordinary civilians. Also, don't do it alone, and do it in groups. It will take a long time for the payment order."

Lawyer Park drank the coffee. He crumpled the empty paper cup and threw it into the trash can next to him.

“That’s the consultation I can give you as an adult. I’ll take the coffee as payment.”

“Thank you. I’ll go talk to those people about it.”

“Tell them to do it fast. It can take up to two months until they are actually paid. They should have some of the budget left if they’re still in the beginning stages. Considering the financial things, they should be able to pay for the employment considering the flow of money. The company wouldn’t be able to just feign ignorance and not pay. I mean, they’re still shooting after all. They wouldn’t want problems occurring between them and the TV station so they will get things done and pay the staff.”

Lawyer Park put on his jacket.

“I wish my daughter was as smart as you. She’s nagging me about wanting to become a celebrity these days.”

“The family circumstances allow it, so why don’t you let her?”

“It’s me that has the money, not her. I’ll just get her a house once she reaches twenty and be done with her. Only when she realizes how hard it is to earn money would she stop wasting money.”

“Haha.”

“If I get her a house, she’ll think that it’s only natural for me to do so. I mean, kids these days are scary.”

“She has a father that’s doing well, so it’s not surprising that she wants to act like a child.”

Lawyer Park looked at his watch.

“Do you have anything to do after the shoot?”

“No.”

“Really? Then why don’t you have dinner with me?”

“Weren’t you going to eat with your child?”

“She already rejected me saying that she already has an appointment with her friends. When you get married in the future, get a son, not a daughter. At least you get to drink together when he grows up. I have time left over, and I don’t want to eat by myself, so I think I’ll borrow you. You have my number, don’t you? Call me once it’s over.”

It was a rather sudden invitation, but there was no reason to refuse. He was a person that would benefit Maru greatly if he could get close to him, so it was Maru who wanted to ask him out instead.

“Then I’ll call you once the shoot is over.”

“Alright, alright. But hey, are you good with drinking?”

“I’m okay.”

“Good, as expected of a guy Lee Junmin has under his wing.”

Lawyer Park turned around while showing a refreshing smile. Maru bowed to him before returning to the cafeteria.

### Chapter 305

“So we have to go with this small-claims filing?”

“Before that, you should make a call one last time.”

“There’s no way that man will pay us just because we call him. He practically wants us to do it.”

“We can negotiate now, so it’s better if you try anyway. He’ll probably change his mind if you bring up the word court. Also, the fact that someone got paid means that they still have some budget left over, so if you act strongly, he’ll probably pay the overdue wages. He might act like that again, but you’ll be able to make up some money for immediate bills, so you’ll have to go on a strike or something like that if he does that again.”

Maru finished speaking and had a look at the staff. They all looked hesitant. Mr. Kim also fell into thought as he put his hand against his chin.

“That lawyer back there told you that?”

“Yes.”

“Do you think you can ask him to help us if something goes wrong?”

“That probably won’t be possible. He just gave me advice for this, not a proper consultation. If you want him to help us, you’ll have to pay him, so I don’t think that will work out.”

“Why? He sounds like a good man from how he’s helping us out. I think you can ask him.”

“Being a good man and free service are two different things. Also, I’m not that close to him, so I’m not comfortable with asking him for something like that.”

“Then I guess we’ll hire him officially once things go bad. He’ll help us more if he’s doing it for someone he knows.”

“That... probably won’t work out either.”

“Why’s that?”

“As far as I know, you might have to pay him what you get paid for the case.”

“...Looks like he’s someone famous.”

“Yeah, well. He does belong to Lee & Kang Law Firm.”

“Lee & Kang Law Firm? I’m not knowledgeable about things like that. Is that like some super corporation or something?”

Someone told him that it was the number one law firm in the country.

“Then I guess it’s not happening. But it’s good that we now know a way. People like us don’t know how to stare into books and only know how to work to get paid. Since he said it’s not hard, let’s make the



call. If he still feigns ignorance, then I guess we can only do this the hard way. Is everyone okay with that?"

The staff nodded at Mr. Kim's words. It seemed that everyone gained the courage when they found out that they didn't need to go to court. The scary thing about going to court was that being called there and doing that required time. An ordinary person's life would crumble with one lawsuit. Being required to show up to court, calls telling them to negotiate, and the energy and money required if the lawsuit drags out long enough. This was why most ordinary people could not win against companies. If the companies decide to hire lawyers and drag things out indefinitely, the plaintiff would be exhausted and end up negotiating even if it's the company that's clearly in the wrong. This was common.

Mr. Kim called the president of the subcontractor company with his phone. Perhaps thanks to having found a way out, he did not get agitated and started with the greeting. As the conversation continued, he exercised more effort into his words and mentioned the lawsuit: that they were prepared to do it as a group, and that they had already talked to a lawyer about it. There was a little lie mixed in, but it probably did not matter. After all, the subcontractor was the one holding their money.

"Today's shoot finished without a hitch, but I don't think I can say the same thing for tomorrow as well. I have made our intentions clear. If you do not send us the overdue wages before tomorrow's shoot... we'll go to the KPU and go on a strike. I plan to drag this out until the end, so think about it carefully. Also, the lawyer that's helping us says he belongs to Lee & Kang Law Firm. So think about that carefully as well."

Mr. Kim hung up with a smile on his face.

"Do you think that will do?"

"I guess we'll have to wait to find out."

At that moment, director Lee, who was watching from afar, picked up his phone.

"Yes, president."

Director Lee approached them slowly. He took the phone off of his ears and switched on the speaker mode to make the other party's voice clearer.

-I got a call just now, and he told me something about talking to a lawyer. Is this true?

"Ah, yes. I was next to him."

-Wait, so you just watched him do so without taking any action?

"What power do I have to stop him? He says he's a famous lawyer."

-Why is there a lawyer at the shooting location? Is it really true? Are you sure he didn't make something up?

"This is an independent school you know? It's the school where all the rich kids go to. Maybe that lawyer's child goes to this school."

At the beginning, Mr. Kim watched the two make a call with a sour face, but his expression loosened the more he listened to it. Director Lee started leading the conversation so that he was inducing the president to pay the staff, and the president eventually had to accept before ending the call.

“Producer Lee. Why are you changing your attitude now?”

“Director Kim. I have a family to feed just like you. I have kids at home nagging me to pay their school tuition, and my wife tells me that she has to pay interest for the loan. I can’t not receive the money that the president is giving me. And also, it’s not like I treated you badly, did I? You watched me as I asked the president to solve the wage issue several times.”

Director Lee apologized in a small voice. Mr. Kim sighed and turned around.

“I understand your situation. But know that I only understand it.”

Director Lee no longer said anything and turned back around with a bitter expression.

“Are you going to continue shooting now that your wage issue is solved?” Maru asked.

“I will. They’re the kind of people that will nag at us to do work since they paid. Well, it’s not like we’re doing this because we don’t like the drama. As long as they pay us properly, we should do our work properly as well.”

Mr. Kim thanked Maru as he stood up. The other staff members expressed their appreciation as well. Director Lee told everyone to pull out since it looked like they wouldn’t be getting any more work done today. The main actors weren’t waiting at the set either. They were probably waiting inside their cars or something.

The managers, who had been keeping the actor’s places, bid farewell to the staff and quickly left. The people from the TV station also started packing up the equipment. Some of them even told the other staff members to cheer up. They just worked for different entities and in actuality, were just laborers who earned daily wages just like them.

“Go back home. I’ll send you all a message after I look at the time schedule, so send a reply if you want in. Also, you should tell me beforehand if you woke up late. I’ll have to find replacements.”

The leader scattered everyone after thanking them. Maru took off the gym uniform and gave it back. The staff bid him farewell as he gave it back. Although it was for just one day, it seemed like they’d taken a liking to him. Maru smiled back. He hoped that everything went well.

“Hey, over there!”

Mr. Kim approached him. He was inviting Maru to an afterparty for giving the subcontractor a blow. Although Maru was thankful, he had a prior engagement.

“Sorry about that. I have someone I have to meet.”

“Is it that lawyer from before?”

“Yes.”

“I guess it can’t be helped then. But hey, you are a student, right?”

"I'm in my 2nd year of high school."

"It won't be easy living in this industry. Though, from the way you act, I guess you'll cope with it better than me. Are you going to come again? If you are, I'll talk to the leader and have you come next time."

"I'll definitely contact you if I need to."

"Alright, alright. Be careful on your way. Anyway, thanks for today, for helping us out even though we're complete strangers."

"My wage depends on it as well. I hope we can meet each other on set more often."

"Alright. Oh, I'm Kim Jangsoo."

"My name is Han Maru, sir."

Jangsoo patted his shoulders and told him that he did well. Maru then bid farewell to the other supplementary actors he had been spending his time with for the day.

"Well done. Also... thanks for provoking me back there," Woojoo spoke awkwardly.

Maru shook his head.

"I'm sorry. I think I did take it a step too far."

"No. It wasn't that surprising that you did. I should have been more calm about it, but it looks like I took it too easy. It's a bit embarrassing but, I feel like I realized something thanks to you."

"Well, I'll be thankful if you think about it that way."

"Are you going to come for the next shoot?"

"I'm not sure."

"Come if you can make it."

"Okay, I will."

Maru left amidst the people that were carrying equipment. The sun was going down already. He took out his phone and called lawyer Park. When he told him that the shoot was over, he replied that he should wait there for a moment.

Just as he was watching the people that were pulling out, he saw students rushing out of the main building of the school. Many of them were wearing backpacks. This was a rare scene in an academic-focused school on a weekday. Maru wondered if they didn't have any self-study sessions after school. He walked a little so that he was in front of the main building. He saw cram school vans lined up outside the school gates. Students got on those vans. The vans then disappeared off into the distance. That scene was repeated several times. It was like they were carrying off all the students in the school.

"Incredible, isn't it? They say cram schools are all the rage these days, rather than schools."

Lawyer Park had appeared behind him. His eyes were very complicated as he looked at the students.

"Your daughter must be going to one as well, is she?"

“She’ll probably go after dinner. Don’t you go to one?”

“I seem to have no fate with studying.”

“Why? You seem smart.”

“I am smart, but not in an academic kind of way.”

“Is that so?”

Suddenly, lawyer Park raised his right hand nervously. One girl, who was walking out of the school door with her arms locked around other girls, looked at lawyer Park before pouting at him. The girl changed her shoes before walking towards the school gates. The girls that were locking arms with the pouting girl looked back at him.

“So she’s your daughter.”

“She’s one impetuous girl. She’ll never listen to my words.”

“Perhaps she’s mad at you because you won’t let her become a celebrity?”

“Do you think just anyone can be a celebrity? You need talent to be one. Rather than that, that girl won’t even greet her father, huh.”

“Well, that’s what father-daughter relationships are mostly like. She’ll cling to you like you’re the only one in her world when she’s young, but once she starts wearing school uniforms, she won’t even look at you in the face.”

“...Hey, why do you know all this?”

“Ah, well, my father sighs all the time.”

Maru just laughed it over. Lawyer Park said that fathers must be similar across the board and nodded.

“Let’s just get something to eat. My girl says she likes her friends more than her dad, so I guess I can’t help it.”

“She’ll open up to you once she matures.”

“She does open up to me from time to time. Though, that’s when she wants me to buy her something. At times like those, she’s like a deceiving fox just like her mother, geez.”

Although lawyer Park was complaining about his daughter, he had a smile on his face the entire time. Maru understood how he felt. Parents felt satisfied with their kids just growing up safely.

Maru updated him on the overdue wages matter as they walked to the parking lot. Lawyer Park stopped walking in front of a rather old car. It looked like quite an old model. It was a middle-class sedan that was produced in the country.

“It looks a little dirty, doesn’t it? I haven’t cleaned it in quite a while.”

“No, that’s not it.”

“Then is it because it looks less expensive than the car next to it?”

“Honestly speaking, it was a little unexpected.”

Maru looked at the other cars parked in the same row as he spoke. The rather old South Korean car looked very out of place like a wrong piece of a puzzle amongst the lineup of cars costing in tens of millions to hundreds of millions of won. It was also unexpected because someone of his financial status could drive a much better car than that.

“I changed my car once and I got into an accident in just two days. It was a big accident as well. I almost died back then. The same thing happened to the next car I bought. I thought I was jinxed so I came back to this one. I got somewhat attached to it as well.”

He got in the car with a smile. Maru nodded his head. Jinx was a rather scary thing. If he got into an accident twice, then he would probably not want to buy another car.

Maru got in the passenger seat as well. The first thing he saw was the prayer beads and a cross hanging off the rear-view mirror. On the right of the dashboard was a family photo. He had to be quite a family man if he had a family photo on a place like that.

“I realized that the one that helps you is the best, whether it be God or Buddha,” said lawyer Park.

He started the car and undid the parking brake. Just as he was about to start driving, a Mercedes-Benz parked right in front of them flashed its rear light before starting to leave its parking space. Although the parking lot’s passage allowed two cars to drive side by side, the Mercedes-Benz was leaving the parking space horizontally, so lawyer Park had to stop.

“Do you think that person’s a beginner?”

“I think so.”

The Mercedes-Benz started repeatedly going forward and backward. Maru kept watching that car as it moved forwards and backwards. Just then,

“Do you want some chewing gum?” Lawyer Park asked.

When Maru replied yes, Lawyer Park told him that there should be some in the glovebox. Maru reached out and opened the glovebox. There were all sorts of things inside.

“Ah, I guess I haven’t cleaned it in a long time.”

Lawyer Park smiled and reached out to the glovebox as well. Maru also looked inside to look for it. Just then, the car shook with a loud bumping sound. Both of them raised their heads to see what was going on and saw that the rear of the Mercedes-Benz was right in front of their vision.

“Geez, I was just worrying about that too....”

Lawyer Park sighed. He waited for the other party to come and apologize. However, there was no response from the other car.

“What the heck?”

Lawyer Park scratched his head and left the car. Maru left the car as well.

I think I mentioned this before, but schools hold self-study lessons after school hours for high school so that they can study. The vast majority of students choose to stay behind for those self-study hours unless they have a separate schedule, like some event or hagwon(cram schools). Some schools also give the option to students to have dinner at school as well.

### **Chapter 306**

Lawyer Park approached the Mercedes-Benz's driver seat and knocked on the window. Only then did the window open. Maru was able to see a middle-aged woman with her hands tightly grabbing the driving wheel. It seemed that she was panicking.

"Uhm, ma'am. Take your foot off the brake pedal for now. As well as the accelerator pedal."

"Wh-why?"

"Because it's dangerous. You must be nervous, but this is not a big accident, so first, calm down and take your hands off the driving wheel. You might end up causing additional accidents if you keep grabbing the wheel tightly like that."

Lawyer Park was very calm as he spoke. The middle-aged woman also obediently followed his words.

"Are you hurt anywhere?"

"N-no."

"Fortunately, I'm not hurt either," said Lawyer Park with a smile.

Gracefulness could be felt from how he talked to others. Although it wouldn't be surprising if he got angry at the other party for her wrongs, he did not do so.

"Would you like to get out of the car and have a look at the collision?"

"Do I have to get out?" The middle aged woman asked back as she flinched back.

"Haha. There's been an accident, so it's better to have a look. It's just a small collision, so there's nothing big, so you don't have to be worried about that. Do you have insurance?"

"Insurance? Probably...."

From the way she answered, it seemed that she drove a car that was under her husband's name. The middle-aged woman told lawyer Park to wait a moment before making a call somewhere. After hanging up, the middle-aged woman just uneasily looked at lawyer Park and sat there obediently.

"Did you call the insurance company?"

"No, I called my sister. She's here at school."

"Ah, alright. That's good."

Lawyer Park treated her nicely this whole time. A few minutes later, a woman appeared at the parking lot. She had a slightly upset face though. Maru clicked his tongue when he saw the familiar face. She was in the group that scolded Woojoo for something that wasn't his fault during the day. She had a big ring

on her finger, and just walked right past lawyer Park, ignoring him and talked to the middle-aged woman for a brief moment. After nodding a few times, she looked at lawyer Park.

“What is going on here?” The woman with the ring asked, clearly on edge.

Lawyer Park replied with a smile.

“There was a collision accident. The driver was driving in reverse when this happened. It’s not a big accident, so if you don’t want to call insurance, I think I’ll end the case here by sending you the invoice for the repair fee.”

“Are you sure it was my sister that drove in reverse and hit your car? Are you sure you didn’t hit her instead?”

“Of course, you might think of it that way, but you can ask the driver and get a grasp on the situation.”

“My sister was panicking though. You didn’t shout at her or something?”

“I wouldn’t dare. I’m a shy man and I don’t even know how to raise my voice.”

Seeing lawyer Park reply to her so proficiently, the woman curled up her lips. Maru wondered if she was just being picky. He shrugged his shoulders while she wasn’t looking. Lawyer Park faintly smiled.

“Even though an accident happened, a woman will get scared if a man is staring at her from outside the car, don’t you think?”

“Hm. I guess that’s a possibility.”

“And also, it doesn’t look like your car costs anything much. You can’t threaten a person just because of some pocket change.”

Pocket change. For some reason, Maru was hearing that word several times today. This woman seemed like she wouldn’t be able to endure not putting her nose into other people’s business. Also, she sounded incredibly offensive with her words. It seemed like she had packed up her manners in a piece of paper and threw it in the trash. Maru wondered where her confidence was coming from. Was she not aware of the fact that it was the middle-aged woman that caused the accident?

“I guess I am a little big. I didn’t think about that,” Lawyer Park apologized with a kind smile.

Maru inwardly applauded. That flexibility was worth learning. The woman with the ring had to be feeling anxious right now. After all, the other party wasn’t being as submissive as she planned.

“Then should we proceed with what I just said?”

“Wait a moment, if you saw my sister driving in reverse, you should have gotten out of her way. Why did you not dodge in time?”

“I was waiting.”

“I don’t care if you were waiting or not. If you saw it, then you should’ve moved out of the way.”

“I thought that she’d take a long time pulling the car out of the parking space, so I stopped and was looking for an item in the glovebox, so I didn’t see her car approaching.”

“Then you admit that you have a share of the blame as well?”

“If this was an ordinary road, then it is most definitely entirely her fault. But I guess this is a school, and it’s near the parking lot. Considering that my car wasn’t in a proper slot, then we can say that I have about 10% of the blame. Then should I proceed with this?”

“Are you sure about that? I mean, you could’ve just gotten out of the way.”

“Hahaha,” lawyer Park laughed out loud. Maru intuitively realized that that laugh was his limit.

“Why don’t we just call insurance and take the easy way out?”

When lawyer Park took out his phone, the woman with the ring approached the lady in the car. After a short conversation, the woman with the ring spoke,

“Insurance is no good.”

She made her intentions clear. It seemed that the woman in the car did not want to call insurance. Perhaps she didn’t want her husband to find out that she caused an accident.

“Fuu, then give me a phone number I can call. I’ll contact you once I get a proper estimate on the repair fee.”

“There’s no need to do that. We’ll just deal with it here. How the hell do I know if it’s safe to give you my number?”

The woman with the ring had a look at the part where the accident happened before suddenly taking out five 10,000 won bills from her wallet.

“This will do, won’t it? It seems second-hand too.”

“I have to replace the front bumper and repaint this part here, so that’s not enough.”

“How much are you planning to spend for a car like this?”

“Even cheap Korean cars need more than 100,000 won if you factor in the labor costs. And that’s not considering the paint job.”

“You’re going too far here. Do you see this car? It’s a Mercedes-Benz. How much do you think the repair is going to cost? I was going to do this the nice way, but I guess I’m at my limit. Be honest here. You thought that you got lucky because the car you saw was a super expensive one, didn’t you? Also, you wanted to rip money off my sister because she looked scared. It’s obvious without even looking. This is why people are no good.”

“What’s no good?”

“Do I have to say it? Anyway, either you take the 50,000 won I’m offering you right now, or else, we’re going to send you the invoice for our repair fee as well.”

The woman was really obstinate and did not listen to words. She even had a smug smile on her face as though she felt that she had won this battle.



Maru had a look at lawyer Park. Lawyer Park sighed and redid his tie. He even redid the top button of his shirt and even put on a necktie pin, cleaning himself up.

To Maru's eyes though, he seemed like a knight from the middle ages putting on his armor. He was preparing for battle. The woman with the ring frowned before taking out another bill from her pocket as though she was being extremely benevolent.

"Here. Let's come to an agreement with this."

Lawyer Park smiled back at her and refused her money. Just then, a group of middle-aged people came to the parking lot. It seemed that the parents were going back as well since the students were leaving school. People gathered around. They all asked the woman with the ring what happened as they seemed acquainted with each other.

"There was a bit of a problem. This dude here treats me like an idiot."

"This dude?"

The man who was looking at the woman with the ring then had a look at lawyer Park. Lawyer Park, who had tidied himself up with his back towards them, turned around. Then, the man visibly brightened up before greeting him.

"Lawyer Park. You couldn't be seen anywhere. So you were in a place like this."

When the man cheerfully greeted lawyer Park, the woman with the ring immediately became uneasy.

"Ah, it's been a long time. We met during a group dinner, didn't we?"

"Yes. So you remember me."

"Of course I do. So your child goes to this school as well?"

"Yes. Yours too?"

"That's a coincidence. My daughter goes to this school."

"I see. Why don't we have dinner together as a family one time? I hope my daughter can befriend your daughter."

"Haha, alright. Let's meet at the restaurant from back then one time."

"My, it's an honor."

The man shook hands with lawyer Park with both of his hands. Maru saw that the woman with the ring was slowly walking backwards.

"But it looks like there was a misunderstanding here. You're not someone that would treat anyone badly, lawyer."

The man tried to resolve the situation in lawyer Park's favor. He knew the woman with the ring, so he didn't want to make a big deal out of this either. Had he come earlier, lawyer Park would have smiled back and have done as the man said, but how about now?

“Oh, no, of course not. It was just an accident.”

“Ah, I see....”

“Looks like I should call insurance then.”

Lawyer Park gave a nod to the woman with the ring before approaching the woman in the car. The woman in the car had left her car. It seemed that she had realized that lawyer Park was not someone to be looked down upon from the attitude of everyone here.

“Uhm, I’m sorry. This is the first time I got into an accident, and this is my husband’s car so I wasn’t used to it. I should’ve apologized immediately. Sorry about that.”

“Not at all. You don’t need to apologize. Insurance will handle everything.”

“S-sir. I’ll pay you all the repair fees, okay? It will be really bad if my husband finds out about this.”

“I see.”

Lawyer Park looked at the woman with the ring as he said that. The driver immediately grabbed the hand of the woman with the ring and made an apologetic expression.

“She didn’t have any bad intentions either. I mean, the world we live in is not safe. That’s why she overreacted a little, so I hope you don’t get mad at her for that.”

The driver jabbed the woman with the ring. The woman with the ring apologized unwillingly.

“I’m sorry, but....”

Before she could continue, the driver cut her off. Lawyer Park also didn’t seem to have any intentions of dragging this out any further, so he relaxed his expression and settled the deal by sending them the repair invoice.

“Sorry for the commotion.”

“Not at all, sir. A skirmish here and a quarrel there is what makes living fun. Don’t worry about this and please take your leave.”

“Then, I shall take my leave first then.”

“Yes, yes. Go ahead.”

Seeing lawyer Park’s signal, Maru got in the car. He saw the group of middle-aged people through the rearview mirror and saw that they were all smiling.

“You must be someone great, lawyer.”

“You should become one too if you feel envious.”

“I told you I’m not good at studying.”

Lawyer Park started driving with a smile.

\* \* \*

Lim Bitna clicked her tongue as she saw the car leave. She didn't like the fact that the man was talking back to her at every turn, but things went in the wrong direction.

"Is that lawyer someone that great?"

Bitna spoke to the man that resolved the situation. She was on close terms with him since they lived in the same apartment building, so she did not like what he did just now.

"Watch your words, lady. If he's just any lawyer, then I wouldn't be like this. He's different."

"Why?"

"Because he's a former prosecutor superintendent. He got that position when he was in his mid forties, so do you get how amazing he is now?"

"Is that something to be so amazed about?" Bitna asked because she didn't know.

The man frowned in frustration.

"Anyway, you don't want to get on his bad side, so smile at him the next time you come across him. You don't know what will happen in life."

"But he's still a mere lawyer. Someone we use our money to hire."

"Oh gosh, don't go saying that to anyone. You might get in big trouble." The reason why lawyers and doctors were respected was because they earned a lot of money. Only peasants without money call them respectfully, and people with money just considered them as someone they could hire. Bitna snorted. She had consulted a lawyer due to some problems with deposit. At that time, the lawyer treated her like a queen. What was so amazing about a job that people could use money to hire?

She ignored the words of the man who told her to be careful and left the place after saying that she'd go over to her sister. She had an appointment.

"Yes, head manager Park."

She got a call when she stopped in front of the traffic lights. It was from head manager Park who was in charge of managing the 'rooms'. One of the girls who worked there wasn't coming to work because she was sick.

"Go check up on her. They don't even have their periods, they can't be sick. If she really seems bad, then take her to the hospital. But dammit, the rotation rate on the tables is not that high if she's not around. Do we have any others that are on par with her? We do? Then contact her and have her fill the other girl's place. Give all the TC to her as well. But you have to bring a girl that's actually decent, okay? You know that our store is known for being one of the best places that have great girls. Okay, thanks."

Bitna lit up her cigar. When a prominent girl gets sick, they would make a call. Bitna got very angry whenever girls like them got sick leaves when they made dozens of millions of won each month.

"Goddammit. I'm annoyed as it is because of that dude."

Just then, she saw a man staring at her from another car. Bitna opened the window and shouted.

“What? Is it your first time seeing a woman smoking?”

The young man turned his face around. The traffic light changed and Bitna tossed the cigarette outside the window and drove off. She calmed down and checked her face in the mirror. The guest she had to meet today was someone she couldn't show her ugly side to.

After arriving at the store in Cheongdam-dong, Bitna got out of her car and went into the store. It was about time the guest was arriving. She changed her clothes and sprayed some perfume. Her figure in the mirror was still decent to look at despite the fact that she was in her forties.

“Unni, is darling coming today?”

“Girlie. Don't mind me and just manage the table. Also, did you gain weight?”

“I didn't.”

The girl left with a smile. Bitna wore the shirt that the guest bought for her. That man liked shirts for some reason. She was waiting quietly in an empty room until the door opened without a knock. Bitna smiled after looking at the guest, and waved at the head manager to go.

“What brings you here today?”

“I wanted a drink.”

Bitna stood up and received the jacket that the man took off. Then, she undid his tie for him. She brought the man, who seemed tired, to the sofa. The man yawned.

Bitna stroked the man's stubbly beard as she asked,

“Why does my dear Mr. Hong Janghae look so tired today?”

### **Chapter 307**

Bitna accepted a glass of vodka from Janghae. The emerald-colored vodka glistened in the transparent glass. She swung it sideways and smelled the deep fragrance of alcohol before putting it against her lips.

“You should drink some too, oppa.”

Bitna filled Janghae's glass.

“Weren't you going to play golf today?”

They were in a relationship where they had to reserve each other's time to meet, as a form of respect that is. Also, both of them were busy. They couldn't meet whenever they wanted to. But today, Janghae told her one-sidedly that he wanted to meet her. Bitna accepted since she was free at that time, but she was curious. Why did this meticulous man suddenly want to meet her?

“It got canceled.”

“Now that makes me disappointed. So you called me just because your appointment got canceled?”

“Then should I leave?”

“Whatever,” saying those words, Bitna fell over on his lap.

Although she had said those words, she was very happy that he came to meet her while she was free. Janghae stroked her hair.

“We should’ve met somewhere else. I mean, you seem hungry.”

“We can’t be like this in other places.”

“Is that so?”

Bitna ate the grapes that Janghae fed her. Janghae was the type of person who would immediately voice his opinion out loud if his mind was set on it. The fact that he was keeping quiet meant that he was organizing his thoughts. She didn’t need to urge him to speak.

“It’s very interesting when I think of it as a challenge. It hasn’t been a long time since that last happened,” Janghae spoke after a long while.

“A challenge?”

“Yeah.”

“Didn’t you achieve everything you wanted though? Being a senior managing director is a position everyone would be envious of, isn’t it?”

“Still, that’s all I amount to - a senior managing director. I’m also fifty-five this year. I don’t see a way up so it’s about time I switch lanes.”

“You’re fifty-five already, oppa? You’re really old.”

“I have a young-looking face, so it’s okay.”

“That’s true.”

Bitna stroked Janghae’s face and giggled. When she first met this man, she was very scared of him. He looked like he would shoot lasers from his eyes. Though now, she was able to speak to him warmly.

“Does the company want you to leave?”

“I guess it’s something similar.”

Janghae faintly smiled.

“Hm?”

“It’s kinda what I’ve been doing until now, but I’ve been put in charge of something rather vague. There’s a child company that a subsidiary of our corporation made, and I’m planning to work there.”

“Vague? What do you mean vague?”

“It’s distribution work, but I’ll be mostly dealing with people and music. Perhaps celebrities too.”

“What? Music? Celebrities? Haha, that’s so funny. It doesn’t suit you.”

This stiff man and music? Those two didn’t go together at all. Janghae seemed to have found it funny as well. He rarely laughed and he was laughing now.

“So what, you sell albums or the like?”

“I’ll be dealing with web contents and setting up a platform, but I won’t be dealing with any physical media.”

“What the heck is that? That sounds so difficult.”

Bitna shut Janghae up by stuffing a piece of watermelon in his mouth. Janghae quietly ate the watermelon and just stared at her. Just then, the door suddenly swung open and two men entered. There were an uneasy-looking waiter and one little madam behind the two.

“What the heck is this place? Why do you want us to go in here?”

One of the two men entered the room with a disdainful smile on his face. The waiter and the little madam looked at Janghae before bowing their heads.

“Hm, who’s this woman here? Haven’t seen her around here.”

“Uhm, sir....”

The man hit the waiter’s hand away.

“Just wait. I’m a good man here. I don’t do bad things. It’s just that I saw a madam I haven’t seen around here, so I’m just curious.”

“She’s not a madam but....”

“Hm?”

Bitna sighed and stood up to speak in the waiter’s stead.

“Hello? If you entered the wrong room, then just leave quietly.”

“Gee, woman. Look at her mouth. She’s charming.”

The two men giggled. Bitna laughed and walked up to them. She looked at them directly in the eyes and stood there for a while. The two men with bad attitudes suddenly froze stiff.

“What the heck are you doing to your customer?”

“Customer? I don’t need customers like you.”

“Are you fucking crazy, woman? Get the owner here.”

“She’s right in front of you. Go ahead and speak.”

“Wh-what?”

“I said speak. You’re talking to the owner right now.”

Bitna noticed that the little madam standing behind the two men was very uneasy while looking at Janghae. Were these two brought here by Janghae then? When she didn’t say anything, the two men looked at each other before frowning.

“You’re the owner? What about madam Park?”

“That big unni is the big madam of the store, while I own this building.”

Who the heck are you calling madam - Bitna frowned. At that moment, the senior managing director, the head manager and the big madam appeared. The two men looked at both sides before starting to cough awkwardly.

“Big sis. Who are these two? You know them?” She asked the big madam.

Before the big madam even spoke, someone else replied.

“Manager Lee, Manager Cha.”

The two men became shocked out of their wits when they heard Janghae’s voice.

“S-senior director Hong?”

“So the managers of team 1 and team 3 were out because of work to do, but you two were actually here? You put the little duckling on phone duty, while the assistant manager is at a sauna. That’s a good company right there. Don’t you think?”

“S-senior director....”

“Fellas, I told you, didn’t I? That you should stay quiet until I leave? Why do you give menial work to someone who’s about to leave on a good note? The newbie in team 3 of store business doesn’t know my face either. Also, when I asked him where the rest of the team went, that newbie asked me ‘who are you’. Also, he blatantly said that some went to the sauna during work. Haa, that was a week ago. Did you know that?”

“W-we didn’t.”

“ARE YOU FUCKING PROUD OF THAT NOW?”

Janghae picked up some watermelon peels and threw them at the two men. A peel hit one man’s head before falling down on the ground.

“Fucking pricks.”

“S-sorry, sir!”

The two men lowered their heads.

Janghae heaved a deep sigh before speaking.

“You don’t have to be sorry. Oh, and I want to say this. I was going to play golf with the president and general manager Kim, but I told them that I canceled it because of two certain people. How’s that, interesting, isn’t it? Why don’t you go to work tomorrow and have a look at general manager Kim’s face? It’ll be quite fun.”

The two managers left the room in a fluster when Hong Janghae told them to fuck off. The little madam told the waiter to call the parking boy.

“Big unni, are those two regulars?”

“No, they’re just casuals. You don’t need to worry about them.”

“Okay then.”

“Rather than that, president, can I talk to you about the band payment and the prepaid salary for the girls?”

“Talk to the senior director for that. I just manage a couple of our aces for fun, so I don’t know that stuff in detail.”

“Okay, sorry for disturbing you. Please rest.”

“Alright.”

The waiter quickly mopped the floor before leaving.

Bitna approached Janghae who was resting his face on his hand with a tired face.

“I was wondering why you wanted to meet me here, so this was the reason. I knew you aren’t the kind of man who’d look for me for no reason. Also, don’t be so angry. It’s not good for your body.”

“Fuu, those idiots cause me a headache.”

“This won’t do. Get up. You look gloomy, and I think you need to eat.”

Bitna pulled Janghae up. Janghae followed her lead and stood up unwillingly.

“How was my restaurant that we went to last time? Wasn’t the steak decent?”

“You don’t own one or two stores though.”

“I only have one steak restaurant though.”

Bitna hooked arms with Janghae and left the room. The parking boy, who managed the cars that came to the store, immediately brought Janghae’s car.

“I’ll drive.”

Bitna put Janghae into the passenger seat before she sat on the driver’s seat. Janghae leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes.

“How’s it going with your wife these days? You still living separately?”

“We’re always living apart.”

“Then why don’t you just get divorced instead?”

“I need her for class reunions and the like. Women like her shine on those kinds of occasions. We just call each other when we need to. Well, it’s not a bad relationship. I think of her as a good business partner.”

“A good business partner, huh. I guess you and I are like that as well?”

“Want to be in a more emotional relationship?”



“No, I like it this way too. You get fed up if you get too close to people.”

“I wholly agree with you on that matter.”

Bitna smiled when Janghae said those words. It wasn't that she didn't fantasize marrying Janghae. However, problems would obviously occur if she married him, so it was better to maintain the current relationship. Marriage was something that only women who needed rescue from work life needed, and there was no need to be so focused on marriage if one had the financial leeway. This was why people with multiple choices had it good. Above all, marrying a man with two kids under him was just a no-go in her mind as well.

After arriving at the restaurant she owned, Bitna left the car to a store employee before entering the building. She went to the table on the second floor that was always reserved for her and ordered a course menu.

“How long are you gonna keep up the people trade business?”

“Until it no longer makes money, I guess? I mean tenpro is doing quite well these days, aren't they? If I bring some other store's big madam, they have their bands and boys and everything, so I don't need to put in any effort either. Also, being in charge of some of them is quite fun too. But for restaurants like this one, there's no room for me to interfere. I mean, they pay me for rent, and that's about it. But for those stores, should I say that it feels alive? I mean, it's good as a hobby if I don't cross the dirty line. I also get to feel what problems come with management.”

“Geez, you're a peculiar woman.”

“Jewelry shop, hair stylist shop, restaurant, bars, officetels... I'll try my hand at everything until I find the thing I like.”

“You have so much money and you want more?”

“What good is standing around doing nothing? Do you know why people become ahjummas? It's because all they do is look after their kids at home, doing nothing. People need to move around.”

Janghae ate a piece of steak that Bitna cut for him. Playing around with younger people in their twenties was fun, but not thrilling. However, spending time with Janghae, who was in front of her, was thrilling. The profound eyes and the rational gaze was something that young people could never have. Then there are the occasions where he showed his weak side. He was a man she wanted to keep watching for a long time.

“Are your boys doing well? I think you told me that your older one got back at you.”

“He's grown up already, bearing his fangs at his own father.”

Janghae spoke with a sharp gaze. Bitna felt warmth rushing into the part between her thighs when she saw the scary eyes of his. She grinned and took her foot out of her heels and pushed down on the part between Janghae's thighs. Janghae continued eating as though nothing had happened.

“How about your second son?”

"I thought he was becoming an obedient dog, but the first son just took him. Well, it doesn't matter. I'm not interested in broken things."

"How heartless. But aren't you happy that your first son became successful?"

"Happy? No way. His success has got nothing to do with my success, so why would I be?"

"What a petty man."

Bitna sipped on some red wine.

"Oh, reminds me. I have something to ask you, oppa."

"What is it?"

"Is a former superintendent prosecutor amazing for a lawyer? What the heck is a superintendent prosecutor? Is it someone great?"

"Those people answer directly to the one and only Prosecutor General, so it's very high. If he happens to be from Seoul's high prosecutor's office, then large-scale law firms will pay huge money to hire him."

"Hmm, so that's how it works."

"You really are clueless when it comes to this stuff."

"I don't need to know, do I? I mean, I'm a person who's fine without the law. But hm, he actually turned out to be someone amazing."

"What happened?"

"Nah, I got into a quarrel. But wait, why is someone like that driving a shit car? It's confusing."

"Maybe he's a clean lawyer."

"Are you serious?"

Janghae shrugged his shoulders.

"So it's not just attorneys, judges and prosecutors. What the heck? People dealing with the law have hierarchies too?"

"They exist everywhere."

"I don't have one though."

Bitna smiled as she spoke. Just then, a waitress slipped and hit her glass. The round wine glass tilted before returning to its original position. Bitna looked down at her shirt. There was a smudge of red on a shirt that she received as a gift.

"I'm very sorry, customer."

The waitress panicked and took out a napkin. Bitna shook her head and grabbed the waitress' hand that was approaching her.

"Move your hand away from me."

“Wh-what?”

“I think you need to leave this place right now.”

“What?”

“You didn’t hear me? I said leave. You just need to get changed and leave. I’ll have your salary sent to your bank account. Of course, that’s after taking some off for cleaning my clothes. If it were some other clothes, I would’ve just bought a new one, but I have to get this washed.”

“Uhm, what do you....”

“Do you not know who I am? Oh, so that’s it. That’s all the more reason for you to leave.”

Bitna clicked her fingers and called an employee that knew her face. Seeing the new waiter’s face turn deathly pale, she felt better. She told the waitress, who kept apologizing, to leave. She didn’t need girls like her in her store.

“Now I understand how you feel. How can they not know my face?” Bitna smiled as she spoke.

Janghae just sipped some wine.

“Oppa, this place is no good. Let’s leave.”

“How whimsical.”

“That’s what’s charming about me. Also, let’s get you a suit. I found a good place. They have decent ones for 8 million won. Let’s go.”

Bitna stood up with Janghae. When they went to the counter on the first floor, she saw the waitress with a dazed expression.

“You haven’t left yet? What, you want to eat here?”

“I’m sorry. It was all my fault. I will not make such a mistake again, so please forgive me this once,” the waitress took a deep bow as she spoke.

Bitna just snorted back at her.

“Excuse me, you’re no longer an employee, so I’ll be polite here. Do you know why I pay two million won a month to the employees here? It’s because this place is supposed to be a premium restaurant. People that come here have to feel like they’ve become nobles. To do that, I can’t have mistakes on my premises, okay? I’m not paying you two million won a month just to carry around food. I’m paying people two million to sell service, and you obviously don’t fit the criteria. I thought you were educated on this.”

“I’m very sorry.”

“If apologies could solve everything, why would there be problems in the first place? Just take your leave now. Manager, get a new waiter.”

Bitna scanned the woman before leaving the store. She got in the car as she spoke.

"I despise people who try to take shortcuts the most. They want other people's money but don't put in any effort for it."

"Who's the one that said getting angry is not good for the body?"

"Tch, fine. I won't get angry."

Bitna smiled as she stepped on the accelerator pedal.

\* \* \*

Maru blinked several times as he looked at the pitch-black building in front of him. It screamed expensive with just the name of the restaurant, 'H House', written in calligraphy. He was also surprised when he found out that the entire building was just dedicated to the restaurant. Even the carpet at the entrance had an unbelievably smooth texture to it.

"Let me guide you."

They were led to the 2nd floor as though there was a reservation. After sitting down on the seat, he asked lawyer Park.

"You had an appointment with someone else? I mean, from how it was reserved...."

"I told you that I was planning to come with my daughter. But I can't help it when she prefers her friends over me. It's hard to get a reservation at this restaurant so it's a pity to let it go to waste. That's why I brought you."

"You should've brought your wife then."

"She's in Japan right now. She went traveling with her old classmates. My eldest daughter went to Europe. I'm a lonely dad."

"Ah, okay."

Maru nodded his head as he thought that rich people's households had some amazing circumstances.

A Korean-made English word. Combines the words 'office' and 'hotel' together. It's basically an office and residence in one.

### **Chapter 308**

"So, did the matter at your school end well?"

"Yes, thanks to you, it all ended well."

"That's good. Are the bullied kids still going to school like normal?"

"Probably."

"Probably?"

"I haven't talked to them after that. From how I see them from time to time at school, I think they're doing fine."

“That’s a little unexpected. Usually, they’d come up and say thanks.”

“It’s not something I wanted them to thank me for. Neither they nor I have a reason to get close to each other, so it was only a matter of time before we became like strangers.”

“To me, that sounds like you didn’t do all that out of pity.”

“Yeah, well.”

“Did the bullies get on your bad side then? Or did they bully you as well? No wait, you definitely aren’t the type of guy to be bullied.”

“There’s a guy that crossed the line. Honestly speaking, if he didn’t cause any problems for me, I would’ve just let them be.”

“I don’t say this to young people that much, but that’s actually better. You need to draw the line between where you want to interfere and where you don’t. I don’t recommend being kind to everyone to people.”

Maru nodded as he sliced the t-bone steak. His life philosophy was similar to that of lawyer Park’s. Well, many people probably had similar philosophies with minor differences.

“Oh, lawyer Park.”

Just as he was biting into a piece of bread after applying butter on it, a lady who seemed to be in her early forties greeted lawyer Park. Next to her was a pretty child. She seemed to be in elementary school.

“Hello. I didn’t know I’d see you here.”

“The owner of the store is a friend of mine. I came here to visit, but then I saw a familiar face. Yeji, you have to say hello, don’t you?”

The little girl politely greeted lawyer Park. The way she put both of her hands on her belly button and bowed was adorable and cute. She then turned towards Maru and greeted him as well. The girl’s mother looked at her daughter with satisfaction.

The woman faintly smiled and had a look at Maru. When she did, lawyer Park introduced Maru to her.

“He’s someone under a company that a friend of mine runs.”

Since lawyer Park introduced him, Maru couldn’t stay still either. He stood up and greeted the woman.

“Oh, it looks like I interrupted your meal.”

“Not at all. We were feeling desolate since it’s just two men here. Rather than that, Yeji has grown a lot since the last time I saw her. Is she in her 2nd year of elementary school now?”

“Yes.”

“She’s pretty like her mother.”

“Sheesh, there you go again, lawyer.”

The little girl was blinking and staring at the table. She was looking at the piece of bread. She gave a glance to her mother and the lawyer before reaching out to the small piece of bread.

“Yeji.”

Seeing that, the girl’s mother calmly scolded her. The girl made a dejected expression before taking away her hand. The mother crouched down and met her eyes on the same level before stroking her cheeks.

“I told you that you shouldn’t put your hand on other people’s things without permission, didn’t I?”

The girl nodded. Seeing that, lawyer Park smiled and grabbed the bread with a napkin before handing it over to the girl.

“What do you have to say to lawyer Park now?”

“Thank you.”

The girl bowed after receiving the bread. The mother told her ‘good girl’ before patting her head.

“Lawyer, may I treat you to a meal next time? My husband wants to meet you.”

“Sure. Call me any time. I’m quite free.”

“Okay then, I’ll see you at a later date. Enjoy your meal.”

The little girl then bowed again before leaving.

“That’s when girls are the cutest. You have less to care about and they are so adorable. They’re obedient too.”

“That’s true. After a couple more years... gee, I don’t want to even think about it.”

Maru showed an awkward smile to lawyer Park, who was staring at him. He blurted that out loud since he was reminded of his own daughter. After their meal, they went to the counter to pay, and the employee told lawyer Park that their meal was already paid for.

“Oh, is that so?”

Lawyer Park put his credit card back inside his wallet. It seemed that that lady from back then had paid for their meal.

“Looks like I have to go to their next invitation no matter what,” lawyer Park spoke as he walked out of the restaurant.

Maru got in the car when he told him that he’d give him a ride home.

“That was a decent meal, wasn’t it?”

“I really had a nice time. I’m even thinking about bringing my parents here next time.”

“That’s good. The dressing isn’t that strong, so adults like it as well. The steak seasoning is also tailored to fit our taste buds.”

“But how much does it cost to get a course meal like the one we just had?”

“Around 300 thousand.”

“Then that’s 150 thousand per person, huh. How expensive.”

“No, I meant 300 thousand per person.”

“...”

Maru felt as though the food inside his stomach was suddenly expanding in size. He ate 300 thousand won’s worth of food in one sitting? It wasn’t like he drank any alcohol either. All he had were some vegetables, bread, soup, seafood, a steak and some dessert. So even the bread cost five digits?

At the same time, he was reminded of the lady that paid 600 thousand won. Perhaps she asked her friend that she said was the owner of the restaurant?

“Are you thinking about what kind of person she is to pay such a huge sum?”

“Was it that obvious?”

“You’re quite sensitive when it comes to money. You will go bald if you like money too much when you’re still young. Hm, her husband is a managing director at DK, and she herself is the granddaughter of the chairman of the Korea Daily. In one word, chaebols.”

“That’s easy enough to understand. Chaebols, huh.”

Maru remembered the mother and daughter that he saw at the restaurant as he put his seatbelt on. Chaebols. It was a word that appeared very frequently in the news and popular magazine journals. It was also a word that brought the public outrage of the ordinary people. Maru himself did not have any good feelings towards the word chaebol either. It wasn’t a surprise, since all the news about them were about embezzlement, business malpractices to gain illegal profits, secret funds and mostly any crime related to money.

However, a real chaebol he saw for himself was just like anyone else, no in fact, was more polite than most people. Maru wondered if it was because she was talking to a lawyer.

Lawyer Park drove in reverse as he started speaking. Maru just looked forward without showing any expression. He couldn’t say bad things about people who were positively acquainted with lawyer Park.

“Not many people see chaebol families in a good light.”

Maru glanced at him.

“The irony is that everyone wants to become one, yet they despise them. It’s the chaebols themselves that created this contradiction, so they shouldn’t be that surprised. I mean, the chairman of Sungjoo Corp. appeared on TV in a wheelchair. His effort to not get arrested was tear jerking.”

“I’ve seen the news as well. It was about the stocks, wasn’t it?”

“They got caught shooting a movie which they did in order to avoid taxes. It’s interesting. The families that are known as chaebols can dictate a corporation with stocks that often amount to a single digit

percentage. I don't know who came up with the idea of circular shareholding, but I'm sure that person is a genius," lawyer Park chuckled.

"In any case, chaebols have a lot of problems, but they mostly try to stay quiet. When problems surface like that, it's mostly because they didn't do the groundwork properly."

"Groundwork?"

"Whether it's shady deals or market manipulation, they have to cover their tracks, but details that shouldn't get leaked come out anyway, and then the CEOs suddenly come out in wheelchairs. Oh, I'm not saying this as a lawyer, but as an ordinary person."

"Alright."

"Problems do get found because when you're the leader of a super large corporation, you will get exposed to the media one way or the other, but their families usually do their best not to be exposed. Do you know what people in power fear the most?"

"Well, losing their power, probably."

"Yes, it's simple. That's why the people with power watch out for themselves in order to not let go of the power in their hands. The era is changing. The people that supported companies in order to revitalize the country by buying in-house products have started to look for ways to survive on their own. It's especially becoming like that ever since the IMF crisis. Thanks to that, the companies watch out for themselves in order to appease the public and not get on their bad side. They might be able to wield power in places with guaranteed secrecy, but they will have to act very politely in places without it."

Lawyer Park made a very peculiar expression. Maru found out why through the next words he spoke.

"I earn money by going around doing work so that they don't lose any money. I don't like chaebols, but they make up the majority of my clients at our law firm, so I can't exactly hate them. My wife and eldest daughter's travel expenses, as well as my younger daughter's tuition comes from their pocket after all. That's why I really can't scold other people. I'm not in a position where I can speak, so how am I supposed to talk bad about anyone?"

"Everyone has to deal with something like that one way or the other."

Insulting people in better positions, yet dreaming to become one; complaining about society yet doing their best to be a member of one. This couldn't be helped since the world was one where they would starve to death if they were excluded by others. Chaebol was the ultimate objective of people going to good universities and getting good jobs. Of course, some had other objectives as well. These people usually pursued their own unique goals. However, the underlying system of this nation was geared towards producing laborers that were less defiant and more mechanical, and a laborer's dream would be to become the head of laborers.

Maru reminded himself of the celebrity prostitution issue that he saw on RBS. An actress claimed that she was called to a successful CEO to have sexual intercourse. It seemed that businesses and the entertainment industry were actually joined together whether it was the good things or the bad things.



“In dramas, 2nd gen members of chaebols are portrayed as super condescending people, right? Trying to solve everything with money, blackmail, beating people up... There are people like that as well. I can't say that there aren't any people like that. But the people I've met were all nice people. No, going beyond nice, they're naive.”

After stopping in front of a red light, lawyer Park put a cigarette in his mouth. He didn't light it up though. He just held it with his lips like a lollipop.

“I used to be in a prosecutor's office before I entered a law firm. I had to deal with criminal cases like mad. I've seen how malevolent humans can be, numerous times. I can't remember the number of times I shook in rage as I wrote indictment bills. Someone that killed their parents, someone that killed their child, someone that ran over a person in a car, rapists, assailants, etc. From what I saw, people raised in harsher environments tend to commit more extreme crimes. There are exceptions, but they just stop caring since their very reality is hell. Also, in cases of homicides, most non-accidental murders were related to money problems.”

Lawyer Park moved his lower jaw to fidget with the cigarette in his mouth before throwing it on the ashtray. Maru saw that the ashtray was filled with cigarettes that hadn't been burned at all.

“I think I get what you're saying.”

“You do?”

“Yes. Why are the 2nd generation members of rich families pure and naive? They might change once they start learning about business in order to participate in it, but they must be really pure and naive before that. I mean, they get to be raised in the best of environments without lacking anything, right? They would never have to deal with the problems that would be common for people born and raised in ordinary households.”

“Yes, that's what it is. They are people that grew up with the best of everything, including education, so they're fundamentally polite and kind. It's harsh trials that create the flaws in personality, but they don't experience things like that. Though, like I said before, there are those that just act whimsically, but they're immediately put to rest with pressure from their older family members.”

A big wobble could be felt. It seemed that they drove over a speed bump.

“Do you know about the celebrity prostitution story that's in the news these days?”

“Yes. I've seen the news.”

“It's not something I should say to a kid, but I'll say this to you since you're a part of it... don't get involved with people from companies as much as possible. In the entertainment industry, the ones with power are the advertisers, and advertisers belong to businesses. Meeting them for business is okay, but don't get close to them personally.”

“I'll first become famous and then think about it.”

“Haha, I guess that's also true.”

Just then, a phone rang. Lawyer Park answered the call with the hands free mode.

“This fella, you just called at the perfect moment. I’m with Maru right now. Why are we together? Things happened. Why did you call me? You want to drink together? You should really watch out for your health. Why don’t you drink ginseng tea like you always do? Alright, forget booze. Why don’t we go indoor fishing after all this while? You know, like when we were young. Alright, see you then.”

Lawyer Park ended the call. Maru looked outside the window. He saw that he was just passing by a subway station.

“It sounds like you got an appointment, so I’ll get off here. It will be quite a hassle for you to drive to Suwon and then back to Seoul.”

“I wish I could drive you home, but I guess it will be quite hard on me once it starts getting congested.”

Lawyer Park stopped the car at the edge. Maru got out of the car and said goodbye. He was thankful to him since he had a nice meal and got some help from him as well.

“Good luck with acting.”

“Thank you. Be careful on your way.”

Maru turned around after watching the car drive off for a while. He got on the subway and leaned against a pole. He was slicing steak in Cheongdam-dong less than an hour ago, but right now, he was in a crowd of people who were going home from work. He experienced for himself that people could be so physically separated in this small land of South Korea.

‘What chaebols. I’m fine as long as I can feed my wife and my child.’

He thought that he would have no relations with them. They lived in a different world after all. Maru thought about the future as he looked outside the subway. The acting competition was about to begin, so he had to concentrate on that. The play was looking much more complete than before, so they would be able to get a prize as long as they did well on the big day.

The subway shook according to a certain rhythm.

Most K-drama fans will know that chaebols refer to extremely rich families that run super large companies as ‘family business’.

## **Chapter 309**

Maru heard the news that the shoot had finished. After putting down his phone, he smiled and looked up at the ceiling. It was all over now. Though, there was still the post-production left which was more important than the shoot itself, meaning that there was still quite a lot of time until the release, but it still meant that the rough sketch was done. He was quite proud of the fact that his first work was finished being shot without a hitch. He looked forward to how he would appear in the movie in that short scene he had put all his effort into.

“Did something good happen?” Daemyung asked from the side.

“The shoot is over, apparently.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Congratulations.”

“I’m not the one that’s supposed to be congratulated.”

“But still, you participated in the movie. I think you’re worth congratulating,” Daemyung made a V with his fingers.

“Then you’ve done a movie, and now it’s a drama?”

“Both as extras though.”

“Hey, you still get to appear in them. It’s proof that you’re working your way up. Oh yeah, when’s the drama episode you shot before going on air?”

“They said that it’s done in a two-week interval, so probably today.”

“Looks like I should watch it then.”

“You don’t have to go out of your way to watch it. It’ll only be a brief appearance anyway.”

“You said you get hit, right?”

“Yup.”

Dojin, who was listening to the conversation from the side, spoke,

“First it’s a delinquent, and now you’re getting hit. When are you going to be the cool character?”

“I don’t know.”

While they were chatting, the class president entered the classroom and told everyone that there was no homeroom at the end of the day. As tomorrow was a full club activities day, there was no acting club practice today either. It was the perfect day to go home early and daze out while lying on his bed. Just as they left the classroom, a girl wearing a school uniform was waiting for them. It was none other than Yoojin. The boys in the class started whispering among themselves.

Maru approached Yoojin.

“There’s no practice today.”

“I know.”

“Then why are you here? Looking like that too.”

“Help us out a little.”

“With what?”

“The acting club at my school is practicing, and I want you to help. I’ve left the acting club, but I’m still their senior.”

“Now you’re confusing me even more. We don’t have anything to teach you guys. I mean, you guys are better than us.”

“No, for this specific instance, you guys are the perfect people for the job.”

What was this about? Maru tilted his head and stared at Yoojin.

“The play my school is preparing is ‘I’ve been really wronged’.”

\* \* \*

Maru had a look at the time. It was five o’clock. Usually at this time, he would’ve arrived at home, had a shower, and would be eating dinner with the side dishes in the fridge. After that, he would be lying on his bed, reading a book or something. Yet right now, he was standing inside the train.

“I told you. Isn’t that funny?”

A high-pitched tone entered his ears. Maru glanced at Yoojin, who was holding hands with Aram and Jiyoong with a bright smile on her face. This girl’s friendliness was fatal.

She had gotten close to the members of the acting club during the times she came to his school to watch them practice. The kind Jiyoong was the first one to be poached by her. Following that, Aram, who was on close terms with Jiyoong, went over to her side as well. Naturally, the only remaining first year, Bangjoo, started hanging out with her as well, and eventually, she was at the point where she was practically a member of their acting club.

Yoojin pinched Aram’s thighs while giggling. In front of them were Daemyung and Dowook. The entire acting club was going over to Bosung Girl’s High School right now. No, this was kidnapping. Maru thought that everyone here was having signs of Stockholm syndrome.

Maru shook his head when Yoojin grinned at him. An hour ago, when Yoojin asked him to come with her, he told her that he couldn’t be bothered. Indeed, he couldn’t be bothered. Actually, a bigger reason that he didn’t want to go was because of the fact that they were preparing the same play.

If two schools decided to do the same play in the acting competition, the judges would definitely drop one of them. The acting competition first held regional preliminaries and then finals in Seoul. If there were two of the same pieces, they would definitely drop one of them during the preliminaries. Was there a reason to help a competitor? Of course not. He was about to refuse Yoojin’s request but she turned to Daemyung for help instead.

Maru sighed as he looked outside the subway. He had taken Daemyung and ran for his life at that moment. Daemyung, who was grabbed by Yoojin, ended up accepting after hearing her story. A competition in good faith, he said; beautiful rivals, he said. Maru clutched his head and shook his head when Daemyung came to him with those words. He then looked towards Dowook, who hated doing things that he didn’t want to do, but he showed interest in the fact that Yoojin’s high school was Bosung ‘Girls’ High. Maru thought that he had to take a picture of him at that moment and send it to his sister, telling her that this was the true face of the boy she liked.

The first years accepted without any complaints at all. Maru clicked his tongue when the first years replied with the words ‘of course!’ in a cheerful voice when Yoojin asked them for help. It felt like the guest had become the master.

He told Daemyung that helping them might bring losses to their own acting club, but he replied that helping them out will be an opportunity to study as well, and that there wouldn't be any problems. Following that, he confidently said that he had the confidence to win if they were doing the same play. Maru liked his ambitiousness, but he didn't like variables, so he thought that Daemyung was a little complacent.

Despite that, he also smiled in one corner of his heart. This was what youth was about. How could he not smile when they helped out their friends just because they're friends rather than considering the benefits?

That was why he raised the white flag and tagged along. He would be the one to slap them back into shape if they lost to Bosung Girls High during the competition itself.

\* \* \*

"But are us boys allowed into a girls high school?" This question came up on Maru's mind as he got off the subway. He looked at Yoojin.

"We'll have to go in in secret."

"What?"

"So, the fences next to the school gates are slightly lower than the fences in other places. We'll go through there, so that we don't get caught."

"Hey hey. Pack up, everyone. Let's go back."

"I was joking! I already got permission."

"How did you know if we'd be coming or not?"

"You're here so that's not a meaningful question!"

Yoojin smiled suspiciously. Maru decided to call her the mini-Miso from today onwards.

They got on the bus near the subway station.

"Over here."

Bosung Girls High stood tall right next to the apartment complex. Unlike Woosung High, which was an engineering high school, lights were still on in class thanks to the presence of students studying after school. Girls were leaving through the front gates. It seemed that they were going to the nearby restaurants to have dinner. They walked past some girls that were walking arm-in-arm, arriving at the entrance. Aram and Jiyeon were able to walk past the school gates without any feeling of rejection, but the rest couldn't.

Were they supposed to rejoice at the fact that they could enter a no-boys zone? Maru crossed the entrance after seeing Yoojin waving at him to come. The girls glanced at him once before just going their ways. Perhaps it was the fact that he wasn't wearing a school uniform that made them disinterested.

However, the situation changed after entering the school building. The girls all stared at the boys in the corridor. Their gazes were quite sharp. Yoojin had to explain several times to the teachers they met

along the way. Most of the time, the teachers cheered her on, saying that she could go. The reaction was completely opposite to how it would be in Woosung High. If it was Woosung High, the teachers would've told them not to cause any trouble after hearing that it was for the acting club.

They walked upstairs to the fourth floor and walked to the end of the corridor when they were greeted with a passageway to another building.

"The entrance to the annex building is under construction, so we need to go through here."

They followed Yoojin through the passage. The walls of the annex had paint that was still shiny. It seemed that it hadn't been that long since it was built.

"Are the schools in Seoul all this good financially?"

He was pondering to himself, but Yoojin replied to him,

"It's the power of independent schools."

They climbed down to the 3rd floor in the annex building, where they could see girls busily moving around. They were also holding a huge banner.

"It's the school festival soon."

It also smelled like some tteokbokki. Now that Maru thought about it, Woosung High also had its own festival before the summer holidays. It was named the Woosung Festival, and it was only held biennially, so there wasn't one last year.

Yoojin heavily pushed on the door on the left wall of the 3rd floor. The girls who were practicing inside blinked their eyes and looked towards the door.

"I'm here!"

Yoojin entered like a general. Maru walked in first to lead the way. Since it was a girls high school, the club members were naturally all girls. Their club room, or perhaps practice room, was half the size of Woosung High's 5th floor hall. It was large enough for all the members to freely run around in, so it looked like a good place to practice. There was a soft mat on the floor, so they had to take their shoes off at the entrance. It was a drastic contrast to their own environment at Woosung High where they were occupying an unused classroom.

"Wow."

The other club members all entered while exclaiming. The members of Bosung High's acting club started cleaning up immediately. It seemed that they were notified of this beforehand.

"These are my juniors."

"Hello."

Over twenty girls greeted at the same time. Maru wondered if they were all first years and had a look at Daemyung. He didn't have a good expression as though he didn't like standing in front of so many girls. Maru pushed his back. He was supposed to be their representative here.

“And he’s Park Daemyung, the club president of the acting club at Woosung High. He’s a 2nd year, and... you told me you didn’t have a girlfriend, right? The girls here are all kind and pretty so take your pick.”

Yoojin smirked. Although she was saying that, she was looking at Jiyeon. This girl clearly knew what was going on and yet was doing this on purpose.

“Hello.”

For some reason, the girls looked very strict. Maru thought that the atmosphere would be more lax and elegant, but they looked like soldiers that just finished boot camp. Their eyes looked like they were about to shout their rank and names.

“Are they usually like this, or are they scared of you?”

“Think of them as being polite,” Yoojin spoke.

And so, they had a brief time for introduction with the ‘polite’ members of Bosung High. 20 girls' names flashed by, and it was honestly impossible to remember them all. After the introduction period, they went into practice immediately. The girls quickly cleaned up the place and started preparing for the play.

“Where are the 2nd years?”

“They probably went home because there’s no practice today.”

“How about them? There are twenty people here even though there’s no practice?”

“The 2nd years and first years that are getting ready for the competition aren’t here, and the girls here today are practicing for the play at the school festival.”

“The school festival?”

“What, you thought I was asking you for help on the play for the competition?”

“You weren’t?”

“We have our pride you know? And do you think I’m that insensitive to ask you to do such a thing? A lot of first years entered this year, leading to the discussion that we should try doing a play for both the competition and the school festival. I originally wanted to go to Myunghwa High, but they’re elites. Meaning, your girlfriend is actually very busy.”

“And that’s why you came to us?”

“Yes.”

Maru smiled bitterly. He was worried for nothing. He felt much better now. Daemyung was smiling as well. Although he had said all those fancy words, he must have felt very worried inside after all.

“But you care about them quite a lot considering that you left the club.”

“Of course. I might have left because I’m busy, but I used to be a member here. For now, watch them do theirs first and show them your version. I think that will give them the general gist of it.”

Practice began under Yoojin's guidance. 6 out of the 20 people came out and started acting. The rest just separated into two groups and sat on each side.

"How about the others?"

"We're gonna pick people to do the play tomorrow. There's team one and team two."

"You really are on a completely different scale to us."

"We're nothing compared to Myunghwa High though. They have actual celebrities in their acting club."

"Really?"

"How else do you think they're sweeping the prizes all over the country? They have several idols there as well, as well as child actors. They even have a separate class that houses all of them. Rather than that, it's starting now. You look at that girl over there. She's the company employee."

Maru nodded before looking at the girl with short hair.

\* \* \*

"Let's stop there for now! We'll take a break."

She nodded her head hearing the club president's words. When *she* looked outside, *she* saw the moon. So much time had passed already. *She* drank some water before heaving out a deep breath. Everyone was nervous since the nation-wide competition was just half a month away. They got the grand prize last year, the year before that, and the year before that as well. There were a flag and several trophies in one corner of the clubroom. The trophy was given to them, but the flag was supposed to be kept by the school that won the competition for just that year, meaning that they would have to return the flag if they didn't win the competition again this summer. The flag had been with them for several years now, so it would be a pity if it disappeared.

This was why the seniors were very strict during practice as well - in order to maintain the tradition of winning the grand prize.

"First years, go buy some kimbap and some snacks."

The club president spoke as she handed out some money. It seemed that she was planning to have a late night meal at the school as well.

She started stretching on the spot. She was the type to cool down if she dazed off. Just as *she* leaned against the wall and stretched *her* legs out, the club president came by and pressed down on *her* back.

"You got your line wrong once back there."

"Urgh, sorry about that."

"The competition is right in front of us, we can't have the main character making mistakes on us."

The club president let go after chuckling. She smiled as *she* looked up at the president.

## Chapter 310



Last year's acting club president was a cool girl. She could still remember. The ex-president was rather tall with short hair. Her colleagues always teased her saying that she looked like a man from afar, but she always smiled back at them. As she had graduated, the position of the president was handed over to the current president. The graduates were all surprised that the acting club had female presidents for two consecutive years.

The current president had a tomboy-style look as well. The difference from last year's president was that she looked a little cuter since she was short. Though, no one said this in front of her. She hated being called cute.

"I heard that Hye-ha-seonbae is participating in the Geochang Theater Festival."

"The Geochang Theater Festival?"

She, who was stretching her waist by putting her chest against the floor, abruptly raised her head. Hye-na seonbae, she was the former club president that graduated. She had heard occasional news about her, but this was the first time she heard that she was participating in a theater festival.

"You mean the international festival?"

"No, the college festival that comes after that. The international festival only allows full theater troupes so college clubs probably aren't allowed."

"Aha."

She nodded. She found out that there were many different theater festivals while researching stuff for her blog. They ranged from college-level theater festivals, city-wide, nation-wide to international festivals. Many such festivals were held within the country every year. Among them, the Geochang International Festival of Theater was a rather famous one. From what she knew, there were only around 60,000 residents in Geochang, but the number of visitors that visited Geochang for the festival was twice that number.

"I would like to go if I have the time."

"It's held in November, so you might be able to go if the schedule allows it?" The president spoke with a smile.

Ex-president Hye-na and the current president were on close terms. They were like real sisters. They were also similar in the fact that they were passionate about acting. There was one difference: the current president did not decide to take acting as her career. She decided to stop after high school. She already declared that she would focus on managing the club once the summer acting competition was over.

"We're back with some food!"

The juniors who had gone out to get food had returned. They sat around the food in a circle. She liked meal time. Being able to share food with people that she got along with was a joyous matter.

'I wonder if Maru had his meal,' *she* thought as she put a piece of kimbap in her mouth.

Maru had become really busy this year. He had told her that he had been to a drama shoot just a short while ago. He was handling both the matters given to him by his agency as well as the club, so he should have it quite hard. Although it had been almost two weeks since they had seen each other, the reason she didn't go further than just calling him was because of that. She wanted Maru to rest a little.

Maru was very talkative, but he never talked about his own worries. She thought in one corner of her heart that Maru was a very sturdy person, and that he'd tackle any obstacles in his way with a smile. However, ever since she saw Maru crying silently at the cinema, *she* felt shock as well as pity for him. *She* never got to know why Maru cried that day. All *she* got back was that Maru cried because the movie was sad when she tried to ask.

After that day, she thought that she should be more considerate of Maru. She understood - that Maru had his weak side. He never talked about his worries, so she had to be considerate of him more.

"Eat to your hearts' content. We'll be staying here until 11 tonight as well."

"...Yes."

The juniors started eating food hurriedly. Her colleagues did the same. She also started drinking the soup for the fishcake. It was likely that they would keep up this schedule until the festival itself. They would get exhausted if they didn't get their fill properly.

After the meal, they did some light exercise before resuming practice. They had set up the stage and were wearing stage costumes as well. This was done in order to let the first years experience what it's like on the stage. After a single run, they gathered around the club president.

"That was good. Let's take a short rest before we start again. I know that it's tiring, but endure it for now. The only way for you to not make any mistakes during the real deal is when you practice enough to the point that you can mutter your lines subconsciously just after waking up. The 2nd years know what I mean, right?"

She nodded at the club president's question. There were occasions where people's heads would go blank on stage. No matter how hard people resolved themselves to not make a mistake, there would be trivial mistakes made on stage. Voices would go hoarse for no reason, and bodies would go stiff without any cause either. The only way to escape that situation was acting that was engraved on the body. Practice was like insurance. It was the best when there was no need for it, yet the 'what-if' situation always comes by all of a sudden, and that's when it shined.

Just as they were enjoying their rest, the door to the practice room opened.

"You guys are still practicing."

A girl entered with coffee in one hand. The man that seemed to be in his mid twenties also entered with coffee in his hands. The coffee was from the store outside the school.

"I was thinking maybe you guys were still practicing, and I guess I was right."

The first and the 2nd years stood up. She did the same. Lee Chaerim. She was one of the many celebrities that commuted to this school. Although she wasn't a member of the acting club, she brought presents from time to time and gave them encouragement, so everyone liked her. She had a thin figure

with a short haircut and was a member of a top-tier idol band that was super popular with the boys. She was also appearing in dramas recently and was becoming more popular by the day.

“Seonbae, didn’t you say you had a shoot?” She asked Chaerim as she accepted a cup of coffee from her.

She had heard that Chaerim had a photoshoot.

“Of course I finished all of it. Everyone sit down, why are you guys all standing up?”

Chaerim sat next to the club president. The man that brought coffee told Chaerim that he would be waiting in the car and left. It seemed like he was her manager.

“Thanks. We just needed some dessert too,” the club president spoke as she bit down on the straw.

It was her favorite type of coffee - café mocha.

“How’s practice?”

“It’s going well. They’re good. How about you? Since you’re here, why don’t you tell us about the drama? I mean, you’re in front of your fans, technically.”

The boys all shouted ‘I’m a fan’ joyously. Chaerim faintly smiled and spoke.

“It’s hard. It wouldn’t be surprising if I got used to it now, but it always feels new every time I go there, and the actors there are so good that I feel like I look good because of them as well. I want to get complimented with my own skills, but it’s difficult. Have you... seen the drama? I look awkward, right?”

“No. I saw you on TV and you didn’t look awkward at all.”

“You were so good.”

“He’s right.”

The juniors all complimented her. Chaerim blushed in joy. She, who was watching her while sipping on her coffee, made the same posture in her mind. Would Maru like it if she acted like that as well? *Her* face became hot immediately and *she* shook her head. Acting cute in front of him was not going to happen.

Every one of Chaerim’s actions looked cute because of her figure. She felt like she knew why she was loved by both men and women. It seemed that not just anyone could become idols after all.

“Oh yeah. Isn’t the drama about to begin? Today’s Friday, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Should we watch together?”

“Don’t. It’s embarrassing.”

Chaerim twisted her body as she said that. The club president turned on the power for the large TV in one corner of the practice room. The TV, which was rarely used outside of watching materials for learning, turned on. She switched the channel using the remote control next to the TV.

"It's on RBS, right?"

"Yeah."

The channel was switched to RBS. It was still on ads. On the top right corner was the logo for 'Youth Generation'.

"Looks like it should begin soon."

"Geez, this is gonna be embarrassing."

"You shouldn't be embarrassed of your own acting."

The club president raised the volume. On TV was a shampoo ad. A long-haired actress was showing off her glistening hair.

"It's Kim Suyeon."

"She's on TV a lot these days."

The juniors' words could be heard.

She actually knew that actress. She had seen her in person. She came to visit Maru when he was hospitalized. Every time she saw her on TV, it felt like the meeting back then was a lie.

'But she didn't look like she was close with Maru. Her first impression... wasn't that good either.'

She knew how foolish it was to judge a person based on first impressions, but the feeling she had when she first saw Suyeon was so vicious that she still didn't have a good impression of her. It even felt somewhat wrong to look at her cheerfully smiling on TV.

No, perhaps *she* was jealous. It wasn't that surprising since she was pretty. She sighed slightly. Thinking back, all the people that came to visit Maru back then had some impressive atmosphere about them. They were all unique and beautiful.

"What are you thinking about?"

Suddenly seeing a face up close, she flinched and let go of her straw. It was Chaerim. Her eyes then looked at the straws with a lot of creases. It felt like it was representative of her mind.

"Just this and that."

She wondered if all this was because they hadn't met in a long time. She felt pathetic. *She* decided not to compare herself to other people. There would be no good in doing so. Also, Maru had said that he would make her only look at him and make her be unable to live without him. That probably implied that he wouldn't look at anyone else either. Her thoughts started shifting towards Maru again. *Her* eyes had a glint in them and *she* chewed on the straw with all her strength.

'Hm.'

It felt like she had lost for some reason. If Maru knew about this, it was obvious that he would have a big grin on his face and tease her all day for it.

“A lover’s quarrel?”

Hearing Chaerim’s question, she coughed awkwardly. The two gathered the attention of the juniors. She continued coughing to avoid her question.

“It’s starting.”

Hearing the president’s words, everyone looked at the TV. The screen darkened for a moment before it showed the whole school in one shot. This was a youth drama with four idols as the main characters. When it first started airing, there were a lot of bad words about it. However, in the third week, people started cheering and encouraging the actors more rather than criticizing them. This could easily be confirmed by looking it up on the internet.

“Oh, there she is.”

“It’s embarrassing, don’t keep saying it,” Chaerim said as she bit her lower lip.

In the drama, Chaerim was portrayed as the bad girl that was the daughter of a chaebol. She blatantly disdained people she didn’t like, and used money to get everyone on her side. She was the stereotypical ‘villainess’ character in Korean dramas.

“Isn’t it awkward?” Chaerim carefully asked.

She shook her head vigorously.

“You don’t look awkward at all.”

“Really? That’s good. The director wanted me to act more evil, but I didn’t really get it. I tried my best, but it looks really strange when I look at it myself.”

“It’s not like that at all. You totally look like an evil girl. You’re really good at acting, seonbae.”

“Hm, really? It doesn’t look that bad after all, right? I-I mean, I’m kind at heart so... huh?” Chaerim asked back with a vague smile.

She tilted her head. When *she* did, Chaerim said ‘no it’s nothing’ before turning around to the TV again. Did *she* make a mistake?

*She* put her knees together and started watching the drama. The full shot of the super large school was on full display.

“I wondered about this the last I saw it, but where the heck is that place? It’s a college, isn’t it?”

“No. It’s a high school in Seoul, named Sangam High.”

“That’s a high school? Looks super fancy.”

“Our school is not that bad either.”

“It’s a drop in the bucket compared to that place.”

The club president and Chaerim exchanged words. Like what the president said, the school in the drama had facilities that were too good to be true for a high school. It actually looked like a school for super rich kids that only appeared in fiction.

The scene changed and a gym appeared. After a short scene of boys doing sports, the main characters appeared. They were playing basketball. The tall actors played basketball and it looked very cool. Their body figure was very good on camera, so just that looked pleasing to the eyes.

Eventually, two of the main characters started fighting. They were fighting over the same girl who was like Cinderella. Chaerim appeared and attempted to stop the fight to no avail. Then, the two main characters got closer to each other. They glared at each other as though they were about to start punching each other at any moment. At that moment, the scene switched and the fist that was being raised into the air was shot close up.

At that moment, *she* was startled as though a block of ice suddenly touched the back of her neck. The boy that fell over from the protagonist's fist was too familiar to *her*. She thought that she was mistaken for a second, but his face was captured in the next scene, albeit for a brief moment. He was clearly Maru.

"So this is that drama."

*She* uttered that out loud subconsciously, but it seemed that she was quite loud. The president, Chaerim, as well as the members of the club all looked at *her*.

"What do you mean, this is that drama?"

"Eh? Oh, a friend of mine told me that he would be appearing in this drama as an extra."

"A friend of yours? Who?"

"The one that fell over just now."

"Ah, really?"

The president looked at the screen and spoke.

"Huh? Isn't that the guy from Woosung High? He is! During the acting festival, Hye-na unni pointed him out, saying that he's the most eye-catching."

The club president spoke as she watched Maru being helped by another to go to the infirmary. Hearing that, the 2nd years also input their own opinions.

"Isn't he the guy that grabbed you and shouted at you? It was back in Ansan, right? His name was... Han Maru, wasn't it? That's right, it was Han Maru."

"Ah, I remember. There was a band performance nearby. That's right, there was that strange kid. The one that said to 'remember him'."

Her friends started giggling as they talked about the story from a year ago. The club president looked at her with a suspicious smile. She lowered her head in order to avoid all the gazes. She was reminded of Maru from back then, when he suddenly came up to her and told her to remember him.

The president and her friends approached her and poked at her and asked if he was *her* boyfriend. She ended up nodding due to the barrage of attacks. With this, her friends at the club found out as well on top of her classmates.

“Now I know the origin of the ring that you were wearing from time to time.”

The club president pried deeper into the matter. She bit *her* lips and did not reply at all, but the president’s stubbornness had no end to it.

Just as she was avoiding the eyes of the president and the rest of the members, she felt a strong gaze hitting the left of her face. That frosty gaze made her turn her head that way. There, she saw Chaerim, who was looking at her with gloomy eyes. However, that gaze soon disappeared. Only the smiling Chaerim was left.

“Aah, I’m on the drama too.”

She was mindful about Chaerim, so she could hear those words. However, it seemed that no one else had heard it. She became absent-minded for a moment. The giggles from the president and her friends felt like they had disappeared.

“Uhm, I’ll get going now. I shouldn’t disturb you for too long.”

Chaerim stood up.

“You’re going?”

“Yeah. Good luck with practice. I’ll visit again next time.”

“Alright. We’ll have fun watching the drama too.”

“Ah, well. Alright, have fun.”

Chaerim left as she waved her hand.

She raised her hand and stroked her left cheeks. It felt numb as though she was slapped.