

*UNDER THE LAWS OF
LOVE & JUSTICE*

Chapter 1

“Name, please?”

“Dae Lucas Chen.”

“For how long are you planning to stay in the US?” The immigration officer's husky voice sends a shiver down the young man's spine.

“Three months,” he replies before looking around. The walls are gray, and the ceilings hang low, reinforcing the oppressive feeling weighing on Dae. The young man even wonders if the place was designed to amplify travelers' stress or to dissuade them from coming altogether. Dae studies the faces around him, unable to miss the heavy mood and the cold, frozen expressions on everyone. Like him, others are being questioned, scrutinized from head to toe. On some faces, it's clear this is their first time passing through the immigration gates. He watches an elderly lady lose her temper in front of an officer with a bald head and a stern expression—nothing about the man suggests sympathy, and Dae can't help but wonder if that's exactly why he was chosen for the job.

“Where are you staying?” As the agent scans his fingerprints, Dae does his best to withstand the icy blue gaze fixed on him. He studies him a little bit, he doesn't seem unfriendly, but he doesn't seem horrible either.

“New York.” The words come out of the young man's mouth mechanically. Stress is present, and the fear of doing something wrong tightens in his throat. Just like every time he attended English class in high school, panic sets in, chipping away at his composure. The only solution is to be prepared—ready for anything. Long before coming, he practiced endlessly in front of his bathroom mirror. His pronunciation had to be as perfect as possible; he couldn't afford any mistakes. Should the "O" in New York be emphasized, or not? How exactly should he explain why he's coming to the USA? What are the right words to avoid

being misinterpreted? Dae thought about all these questions, , the inspector gives him a suspicious look, making him hold his breath even tighter.

“Why?” Looking at his papers, the officer seems to be searching for something—a flaw, a problem, anything that could send him home. Dae rubs his sweaty hands mechanically before answering.

“S-sorry what?” A lump of stress forms in the young man's throat, and without meaning to, he stutters. Questions pile up in his head, and he knows a panic attack is coming if this doesn't stop soon. Did he not answer the question well? What is the problem?

“What are you planning on doing in New York?” The immigration inspector looks at Dae in the eye through the plexiglass, without any ounce of empathy emanating from him. The information takes a moment to register in Dae's brain, and before he can fully translate the man's question, he responds with an accent so thick he wishes he could bury himself alive.

“O-oh just visiting the *liberty statue*, you know. Dae mimes the posture of the statue, along with the other monuments he mentions, to the point where he loses his words. “*The tall tall building Empire...* something and Chinatown obviously.” He gives him a small grin that he hopes would make him believe his *little lost Asian* cliché.

“Go ahead,” with a hand gesture clearly showing boredom and disinterest, the officer waves Dae through. The young man swallows his bile and finally exhales, before moving. Glancing behind him, he sees the travelers lined up as if in a prison or controlled by some unseen force, each waiting their turn. To keep them occupied, TVs hang high above, playing advertisements of happy families or promoting a new scent of perfume. Without subtitles, most of it is hard to understand, but the images speak for themselves. The only moment subtitles are used —likely in Spanish—is when the infamous immigration video plays,

featuring a lawyer or government representative outlining the risks for immigration fraud.

What a welcome.

About fifty gray, impersonal counters line the long hall, and like in a doctor's office, lights and numbers flash when a counter opens. Like a robot, a man steps forward and places himself exactly where Dae had been minutes earlier, before the officer asks him the same questions again. The mechanical routine sends a shiver down Dae's spine, and he hurries out, following the other travelers, unsure of where he's going.

Finally free, in the corridor, the young man grabs his water bottle and chugs it down in seconds. The liquid flows down his throat and soothes the burning feeling his anxiety had caused him. (Ajouter que tout le monde semblait blanc américain et qu'il semblait être le seul asiatique) While waiting for his suitcase, Dae tries to book a cab. He copies and pastes the address he was given but nothing comes up. He tries again, several times—still no match. So when his luggage arrives he decides to try in person.

With a distracted glance, he looked at the passengers as they passed, and decide to follow them again. Free at last, he thought to himself, but what a surprise when he realizes that he'll have to take a bus and then a train to get to the cab rank. Even if he'd taken 10 years of English, or even if he was a native speaker, he's sure plenty of people could have lost their way with the airport indications. Only three languages are available and lots of colors to indicate places. He tries to look on google maps to see if there are any signs. After all, having such a large airport, he's sure it works. But no, no sign, no network, and worst of all, no employee to give him any information. So once again he follows the crowd and even recognizes the old lady who was panicking at the immigration counter. She gave him a small smile, which he returned before boarding the train he'd finally found and admiring the countryside. At night and high above the ground, the train passes over the airport, giving the opportunity to see the lights of the many buildings for which New York is renowned. In the

distance, he sees several garlands and Christmas decorations, and it's not until the train stops at the station that he realizes the advertising screens showing children unwrapping their presents. It is indeed Christmas time here. The music, the noise, the decorations, the over-the-top markets, everything is done to make New York seem like the best place to spend Christmas. Dae smiles discreetly and thinks of going to see the RockFeller before he's pulled out of his thoughts by everyone jostling him to get off the train. That's right, they've stopped.

He stands at the pickup area for about 10 minutes before one of the famous yellow cars decides to stop.

“Where are you headed, man?” asks the taxi driver. “(Look for an invalid address),” he replied confidently. “This number doesn’t exist,” the taxi driver says dismissively. Dae looks at his phone confused. “But this is the address that was given to me,” he retorts in a voice that is almost inaudible as the wind is blowing. There is a storm in New York and the rain is getting worse. The unfortunate trees around the airport sway wildly, as if they could be uprooted at any moment. What a great idea to come to the Big Apple in December.

“Maybe, but I’m telling you that it doesn’t exist.” Clutching the edge of the car door, Dae realizes he never actually checked the address. Perhaps, it wasn’t his best idea either to find accommodation on Reddit. “Well, either you get in or leave, 'cause right now the cold air's seeping in, and you're not paying for the gas, are you?” the driver says. Technically, yes, but Dae stays quiet and slides into the backseat. “So where should I drop you off?”

“Please, take me to 1234 East 175th Street.” Dae sighs, resigned. Either way, he doesn't really have a choice.

Arriving in front of the building, the young man takes a deep breath before pressing the doorbell. The old ringtone echoes all around him, followed by the sound of what he

assumed to be a staircase creaked. From where he stands he is able to hear the couple across the street arguing over dishes, or see flashing lights, either from fire trucks or police cars—who knows—blinking from the other end of the neighborhood. Trash bags, opaque and transparent, line the fence of the housing around him and the light a few meters away flickers so much that he is starting to believe he is in a bad horror movie. And it's finally when a rat steps over his *Adidas Gazelle* that he realizes where he is.

“No doubt, I’m in New York,” he sighs, just as the door to the building opens ajar. Through the sliver of light allowed by the door’s security system, it is possible to make out an old lady with dark skin, a pink nightgown and slippers.

"Who is it ?!" she shouts, her glasses almost falling off her nose.

“Madam Mary, I’m Dae, the Singaporean from Omegle,” he says weakly.

“Of what?” she shouts even louder. Dae is red with shame.

“Omegle, the app for meeting people, remember? You offered to accommodate me, but I declined,” he replies softly, even more embarrassed by the situation.

“Aaaah yes the little Asian! I remember you, you know how to cook perfectly,” she says with a big smile, as if she was imagining a beautiful dish right in front of her. “What brings you? What are you doing here?” she finally asks.

Dae cracks his fingers nervously, and avoids her gaze for a good minute before finally revealing the cause of his visit. “I was wondering if you still had the room you told me about last time.” A moment of silence passes between them before she opens the door wider. “Do you still know how to make ramen?” she asks loudly. “Yes ma’am,” Dae replies hastily, nodding. “Then come in, boy,” she waves at him and he grabs his big suitcase before rushing up the stairs.

Slowly but surely Mary takes the steps leading to the 5th floor while asking Dae various questions. How his family, his work, his loves and many others are doing. The young

man is even confused by them, but one thing he is sure of is that his owner loves to talk. In fact, this is one of the reasons why he chose the other accommodation. Supposedly roommates with 4 guys studying medicine, Dae could already see the silence and peace he was going to have. The owner of the accommodation was also a student, and he had sold him a dream with people who worked all day but were also super friendly. He was supposed to be able to work seriously on his affair while still having the fun side of camaraderie. This is how he found himself paying half a year's rent amounting to more than \$3,000 for a ghost apartment. Surely, he should have been more suspicious when the guy made excuses not to show his face or the place in videos. It was the classic "too good to be true" situation, a notion that Mary, whom he met just minutes ago, was planning to drill into his head until the day she dies, because after showing him the apartment in which he will live for the next 3 months, she took him over for a glass of wine so that he could tell her what happened.

Now it's been a good fifteen minutes that she's been lecturing him about the scam. The old lady finally laughs off the whole story and Dae does the same before realizing that she is not wrong though. The whole situation is ridiculous. He's not in New York to have fun but to find Ae Ri, his missing little sister.

Chapter 2

Light seeps through the shutters of Dae's bedroom window. It has been many days since he has been able to sleep past 8am as the room he sleeps in grows hot under the sun's rays. With a big sigh, the young man stands up, and the floorboards, no longer young, begin to creak.

"*Lucas*, are you awake?" his roommate shouts from the kitchen. If he wants to have a little privacy, it isn't even worth it. "Finally! I need to shower. I didn't want to wake you, but work called me, haha." The fierce footsteps of his roommate get closer, and once again Dae sighs, moving away from the door before, as usual, his roommate sends it flying against the wall.

"Larry, the door!" shouts Mary.

"Sorryyyy," he replies just as strongly before whispering to Dae, "She's crazy I swear." Then he locks himself in the micro bathroom of their room with the same energy.

As the expression goes, never two without three, Dae sighs again and sits down on the tiny bed assigned to him. The springs squeak so much that they even wake him up at night. As for his roommate's snoring, let's not even talk about it.

Upon Dae's arrival, Larry was already in the room. He had taken the available queen bed and faced with the immensity of clothes placed on the furniture, Dae had no other choice but to take the single bed. But being 6,2 feet tall, sleeping is nothing but painful; his feet protrude from the box spring, and more than once, he almost falls out of bed.

In the bedroom, the two beds are placed on either side of the room, yet Dae has no privacy because he is near both the bedroom door and the bathroom door. It's the perfect spot to hear both the heated discussions in the kitchen and the amateur singing talents of Larry. When his roommate introduced himself, that was one of the first things he mentioned, along with how strange the name "Dae" is—not a common first name according to him. So, he

settled on Dae's middle name, "Lucas," which he said sounds much better and is more "awesome" to pronounce. Pure pleasure...

When Dae leaves the room, he comes face to face with Tom coming out of the bathroom. His other roommate gives him a shy smile before heading to lock himself in his room. As the place is free, Dae heads toward the bathroom, hoping to take advantage of a few minutes under the hot water to wake up and start his long day. Yet, he barely opens the door when a pungent smell emanating from the toilet stuns him. He wrinkles his nose and quickly closes it. He will shower this evening.

He saunters into the kitchen, and as he enters the room, he immediately smells the comforting scent of scrambled eggs and toast, accompanied by the sweet aroma of coffee steaming in a small cup on the table. Mary sits at the table, hands clasped around a cup of tea, calmly observing the world through the window. She turns to him with a kind smile.

"Slept well, Dae?" she asks in a soft voice.

"Better than usual, thank you," he replies with a small lie. He sits down at the table, his stomach already growling.

Every morning, Mary prepares small dishes for him. It is an agreement they have in place since he started working. Working more than 10 hours a day and doing two shifts to make ends meet: one in the Bronx, and the other in Soho, he is exhausted. So, the kind lady offered to cook for him in the morning if on Sundays he prepared the meals for the week and cleaned the apartment thoroughly. After she found him a job and let him live with her for free, there was nothing he could do other than acquiesce. Actually, that's all he can do in general; he needs the money. That's why when he applied as a cook and was relegated to the position of waiter, he accepted without flinching. His qualifications don't matter, nor does his passion.

“Two shifts because that’s what they asked for,” Dae mutters as he puts the rest of his food into a small plastic box.

“Don’t forget to have your coffee; you’ll need it to get through today,” Mary tells him. Dae nods and drinks the coffee in one gulp before rushing off to brush his teeth. He greets Mary before leaving the apartment with his hoodie and flannel on.

The rain has started to fall as he steps out from the building. A fine drizzle soaks the streets. He raises the hood of his hoodie, tightening the drawstrings to protect himself from the cold wind, and heads toward the subway. The Bronx comes to life in its chaotic way. The most daring sellers set up their stalls while a few early workers rush past. The entrance to the station is, as is often the case, in poor condition. Rainwater floods the steps leading to the platforms, turning the staircase into a slippery and dangerous descent. Dae has gotten used to it. He carefully steps over the puddles and their waste before hurrying down to take the green line going to Flatbush Ave-Brooklyn College. Compared to Singapore, where there is a zero tolerance for trash, New York is anything but an obstacle course, with the familiar smell of wet concrete and rusty metal floating in the air.

The one and a half-hour subway ride to Soho is long and monotonous. Dae leans his head against the window, allowing himself a moment of reflection. He thinks of Ae Ri, his sister. She occupies his thoughts a lot lately, more than usual. Maybe it’s the rain—it reminds him of their childhood in China, the monsoon seasons when they stayed indoors, watching the city drown in water from their windows.

The train finally pulls into the station, and Dae stands up, preparing for the transition from the Bronx to Soho. As he exits the subway, the familiar streets of Manhattan stretch out before him, elegant and neat, but still so foreign to him. The rain has followed him there, falling in thin, steady drops, but Dae lowers his head and continues forward.

Just the grind of another day.

“Table 8 would like some refills! Dae, can you take care of it?” his manager calls out to him while the young man is taking off his apron to clock out. “I guess so,” he mutters before grabbing the pitcher of ice water from the counter. With a fake smile, he serves the customers and then returns to the kitchen before rushing to get out of this place. Since his service in the Bronx has been canceled, he has been there for at least 11 hours, and the customers have only become more execrable one after the other. In Soho, the pace is different. The clientele, made up of well-dressed and often wealthy people, seems to live in another world. The orders are more sophisticated and demanding, and customers do not hesitate to let him know if even one detail bothers them.

Leaving the restaurant, Dae’s thoughts are already focused on the subway that will take him home, far from the tumult of the restaurant service. However, his eyes are caught by a young woman, visibly drunk, staggering near the franchise's group of trash cans. Her heels wobble dangerously under her weight, and her once-elegant dress is now wrinkled and affected by the light rain that is beginning to fall, as usual, in this city. Dae sighs, ready to look away and continue on his way. But as he passes by her, she completely loses her balance and almost collapses against a pile of trash cans. Instinctively, Dae reaches out and catches her before she crashes onto the wet ground.

“Hey, are you okay?” he asks, gently straightening her. The young woman mutters something unintelligible while trying to get to her feet alone, her movements clumsy and disorganized.

“I... I’m fine on my own, okay? I don’t need your help.” Her voice, although weak and hesitant, still exudes a certain arrogance despite the evidence of her vulnerable state.

“Look,” he says calmly, “you're not going to make it home like this. Give me your address; I'll take you home.” the girl in the alley behind the restaurant, curled up against the wall.

She looks up at him, her eyes glassy and distant. A curve right at her eyebrows show her surprise regarding his accent and the softness of his tone. A long moment passes before he lets out a resigned sigh.

“ Sorry this isn't the right way for you to trust me,” Dae says after realizing what he was implying. “ Let me at least bring you somewhere safe,” he tries again, giving out his hand.

She analyzed it before responding back with a broken voice, “**adress of the coffee shop**”

“What? This place is open at this time?!” surprise fills Dae's voice.

“ It's New-York (nickname),” says the girl as she stood up, helping herself to the wall.

The pink neon lights of a nearby coffee shop flicker against the glass window, its warmth seeping into the brisk night. Dae holds the door open for her, offering a weak smile and she enters without a glance. She hasn't spoken a word since they left the restaurant, and the silence between them has grown heavy. She looks around the shop, as if she was looking for someone.

“You good?” Dae asks softly as they reach the counter. She looks up at him, startled, then shrugs, her eyes avoiding his gaze. “Yeah, I... I'm okay.” He's not sure what to say next. After a long pause, he steps forward and goes to order two coffees, before she cuts him and asks for a **(complicated recipe of latte)**. When they sit down at a small, baby pink, round table near the window, she doesn't meet his eyes, her hands wrapped around her cup as if it's a lifeline.

Dae shifts in his seat, unsure how to navigate this unexpected situation. He doesn't know her name yet, doesn't know anything about her. But the way she holds herself so tightly, as if the world might come crashing down at any moment feels too familiar. He clears his throat, trying to break the ice. "So... what happened back there? You, uh, seemed... out of it," he tries as hard as he can to be natural, even though he doesn't know half of these American expressions. He should have listened to Larry, he thinks.

Her head snaps up, her eyes wide as she stares at him. There's a moment of silence before she lets out a shaky laugh, a bitter sound that doesn't quite match the softness of her voice. "Out of it? That's one way to put it, she mumbles, shaking her head. "I guess you could say I had a bit too much to drink."

"Yeah," Dae says slowly. "But I mean, it's pretty late for you to be out there, you know? In that condition, I mean. What... what happened?"

She looks at him suspicious and he feels his heartbeats racing. Maybe he shouldn't have said that. But after a moment she hesitates, her fingers tapping lightly against the coffee cup. He can see she's struggling with the words, like they're stuck in her throat.

"You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," he says, trying to make her feel at ease. He has no idea what she's going through, but there's a tenderness in his tone. "But, you know... maybe it'll help."

After a long moment, she exhales sharply, rubbing the back of her neck. Her eyes glaze over, and for a second, Dae thinks she might cry. Instead, she blinks rapidly, wiping at her face with the back of her hand. Dae stays quiet, watching her, his hands wrapped around his own coffee cup.

"I just... I thought maybe I could go out, drink, forget it for a bit. You know?" she continues, her words tumbling out more quickly now. "But it doesn't work. Nothing works."

And then I ended up... there. In that alley. I don't even know how I got there, to be honest. Just... kind of wandered."

He can hear the pain in her voice, the cracks in her facade. Dae nods slowly, feeling the weight of her words, without even knowing the full story.

"I get it," he says finally, his voice quieter now, more understanding. She looks up at him, eyes wide, as if she hadn't expected him to say that. For a moment, she's quiet, just staring at him, like she's trying to figure out if he's serious.

"You think a lot of people feel that way?" she asks after a pause, her voice softer, more curious now.

"To be honest I don't know," Dae says with a slight shake of his head. "I just... you know, I understand. "He pauses, looking down at his cup. "But the thing is... you don't have to let it control you. You can get away from it, even if it's just for a little while."

Her lips part, as if she's about to say something, but then stops. She seems to be thinking, her gaze unfocused.

"I don't know how," she whispers after a long silence. "I feel like I can't. Like everything's just... too much. And then, I end up doing stupid things, like drinking too much. Running away from it."

Dae exhales slowly. He's not sure what to say to that. But he can feel that the tension in her shoulders is starting to ease, even just a little. Maybe this is a start. Though she looks at him with watery eyes and he can feel that there is more. She takes a sip of her coffee and stares at it for a moment.

"West Broadway... number 512," she finally whispers. Dae takes time to register the information and then nods. They go to the counter, pay, and finally when they step out of the place he puts her arm through his to support her. They walk slowly down the street under the flickering light of the street lamps as the rain becomes a little more insistent. Each step seems

to require immense effort, but Dae holds her steady despite his own fatigue. They finally arrive in front of her building, a luxurious structure with a uniformed doorman who gives them a suspicious look before opening the door. Dae leaves the young woman in his hands, making sure she is safe before slipping away into the night.

Chapter 3

Once again, and just like every other day, Dae wakes up this morning to go to work, having done so for nearly 3 weeks now. It's always the same routine: he goes to the Bronx, then takes an hour and a half to get to Soho. He finishes at eleven and his other shift starts at twelve-thirty. No time to waste. In between, he rarely takes the time to relax or even eat. In fact, he didn't even eat at all, as he was repulsed by the filth of New York's transport system. Rats and crackheads were a constant feature of the city, but still Dae couldn't get used to them. However, today was different. The young man took the time to prepare himself, which was quite unusual. He shaved his beard, put gel in his hair and put on perfume. Several times already, his roommate Larry looked at him mockingly, asking why he had dressed up so much, but Dae had managed to avoid the question every time, until Mary made him spill the truth.

Today, he might finally have some information about the disappearance of his sister, Ae Ri. In fact, he was going to meet the person who had encountered the person with knowledge of his sister's disappearance. It might sound complicated, but it was the only lead he had, and he had no choice but to follow it, and get ready to make a good impression. Hastily, he puts on a white shirt and checkered pants, neat but discreet. In his room, he checks his administrative documents for the umpteenth time: visa, passport, ESTA, family record book, and the few photos he has of his sister. He feels he's never prepared enough, so he checks countless more times before leaving his room. Tom, usually locked in his own room, watches him more closely than usual.

“What's wrong with you?” asks Dae, confused by this sudden attention.

“Nothing, you smell good it's changing,” he replies with a shrug before locking himself back in his den. Dae couldn't believe it, there was a big difference between him and Tom. Yes, he might have smelled like fries and grease a lot of the time, but at least he had a

reason. Tom could stay in his room for at least 4 days without coming out to shower. The few times his door was open, Dae could see the various pieces of garbage lining the floor. Dae sighs before heading for the front door.

“Good luck, I'm sure it'll be fine,” Mary says to him as she sits in the rocking chair opposite the TV.

“Thanks Ma-” he's interrupted by his phone ringing. “It's the restaurant,” he informs her in a not-too-serene voice.

“Better answer it,” she tells him.

Feeling sick to his stomach, he picks up the phone. He's dreading this call. He knows that unscheduled calls from the restaurant are never a good sign.

“Hello?” he answers in a hesitant voice. He listens to the voice of Cedric, his manager, on the other end of the line. His stomach clenched as the words rang out.

“Hi Dae, we've got a big problem. There's been a mistake with the schedule. We're really short-staffed today, I need you to come in,” he announces to him. Dae's heart sinks. Not today. Not this very day. He's been looking forward to this encounter for weeks. He closes his eyes, searching for words.

“I took the day off today...” says Dae, trying to keep his voice composed.

“I know, man. It's my fault, but we're in a bind. Can you cover the shift or not?”

A silence settled in. Dae grits his teeth, weighing up the pros and cons. He glances at his watch, knowing full well that he has to meet the contact in a few minutes, but the urgency in the Cedric's voice puts him in an awkward position. He looks at Mary and she beckons him to accept. He takes a deep breath and responds positively to his manager's request. He can't afford to lose this job, especially with everything he's dealing with at the moment.

“I'll come, but I'll have to leave early. I've got something important later today,” he says firmly.

“Thanks, buddy. I'll make sure someone replaces you,” he assures him before hanging up. Dae sighs again as the sound of the telephone fades.

Staring at his phone screen, his thumb hangs over the keypad. He quickly composes a message for the contact, hesitating how to phrase his request. He knows the situation is delicate and that he doesn't have much room for maneuver. After a moment's hesitation, he finally presses “send” and bites his lip, nervous. The minutes pass slowly, each vibration or notification making the wait more unbearable. Finally, his phone vibrates. He glances quickly at the answer. Relieved, he taps out a quick reply before tucking his phone away in his pocket, his mind already focused on what lies ahead.

As Dae arrives at the restaurant, he notices many of his colleagues glaring at him, yes he's not used to being dressed like that but still. He bows his head slightly, adjusting his bag on his shoulder, trying to convince himself that maybe it's just his imagination. Yet even the customers on the patio, particularly a group of young women, cast furtive glances at him, giggling as he passes by them. He keeps moving, his gaze discreetly scanning the inner terrace with annoyance before he notices her. The young woman from last time is there. Headphones on and computer in front of her, her brown head seems absorbed by her work, her fingers running rapidly over the keyboard.

Dae hurries past before she notices and goes to the back kitchen. The relative silence of the place brings him a little relief, away from the inquisitive glances. He takes a deep breath and puts on his uniform, taking great care to tuck his shirt and pants deep into his bag. He can't risk staining them or anything. He looks at the clock fixed above the large kitchen sink. It's 10 am and he finishes at 3 pm. A straight shift without breaks or moving, shouldn't be too complicated.

Only two tables left to serve, and that's the end of it. Dae glances at his watch: 2:43pm, that should do it. If all goes according to plan, he'll be able to finish his service in time for his appointment. His fatigue is palpable, but the prospect of this meeting with his informant gives him renewed energy.

He grabs two trays from the kitchen, loaded with still-steaming waffles, and exits with a polite smile hanging on his lips. The first table, a couple deep in animated conversation, greets him with a smile. He sets the plates down carefully and exchanges a few words of courtesy before moving on to the last table.

As he approaches, he realizes that the last customer is the same young woman he spotted earlier. She's still there, wearing her headphones, but this time she seems slightly less focused. She's taken off one side of her headset, her ear free, as if she's trying to listen to what's going on around her. All the same, she seems calmer and nicer than when they first met. Her eyes aren't blackened by mascara or her clothes stained by alcohol, given the smell of vodka that emanated from her last time. Dae has a mixture of apprehension and curiosity at the idea of seeing her again. He places the dish on her table without a word, and just as he straightens up to leave, she looks up at him. Their eyes meet. The young woman's face express slight surprise, as if she hadn't expected to run into him. She watches him for a few seconds longer, as if trying to remember something.

"Thank you," she finally says in a soft but confident voice. Dae nods, then turns quickly on his heels, without seeking to prolong the exchange. He puts away the last tray, gets rid of his apron, and picks up his bag. 2:55pm, he's right on time. He has 5 minutes to change into his clothes. His white shirt is a little wrinkled, but he doesn't really have time to worry about it. It should suffice for this appointment. He quickly puts on his more formal outfit, adjusts the collar of his shirt, and heads for the exit. On the way, he greets his

colleagues with a tired smile, taking one last look at the kitchen before pushing open the store's pink door.

“Dae, wait a second.” The voice of Cedric, his manager, echoes behind him. The young man stops confused. He turns to see Cedric, looking embarrassed, approaching him quickly. “Sandy hasn't arrived yet, do you think you can stay a few more minutes?”

Dae sighs inwardly, his shoulders tensing slightly. “I really have to go Cedric.”

“I know, I know, just a few minutes, she's in traffic but she's coming.”

Dae rubs his temples, pondering the situation. “Yes b-”

Before he can finish his sentence, Cedric cuts him off. “I'll pay you double for this extra hour,” he says with a smile that betrays a little desperation.

Dae is more than surprised and it takes a good minute before he realizes what he's told him. He takes a look at the restaurant - it's true that it's peak time again. Located on (name of street) and the school exit, many people flock to (name of restaurant), looking for something sweet to eat. Many come to relax over a pastry, hot chocolate or gourmet coffee. The indoor terrace, usually quiet in the morning, is now full of life, with laughter and chatter echoing. His colleagues are already swamped, juggling orders, while new customers continue to arrive. Dae hesitates again, his thoughts racing.

He finally looks up at Cedric, a few minutes might not be the end of the world. “Okay, fine. But no more than twenty minutes. I really do have an appointment later.”

Cedric nods, relieved, and Dae returns to the room, catching his breath. He doesn't have time to change so he just slips one of the pink aprons around his waist, and off he goes again.

Dae weaves in and out of tables, juggling trays laden with steaming plates, arms outstretched, dodging customers who jump to their feet or children running between tables. He moves between the dining room and the back kitchen. The clatter of utensils, the crackle

of pans and short orders from the cooks create a well-practiced ballet, and as soon as he places an order, Dae leaves with another.

Concentrating on completing his last orders, Dae senses a small figure speeding past him as he prepares to serve the table. A child, no doubt one of those who have come with their parents after school, zigzags between the tables, laughing out loud. Dae tries to avoid him, but the movement is too sudden. His feet get caught in the child's, and before he can react, he stumbles slightly. The tray he's holding tips over, and one of the little saucers filled with chocolate slips dangerously and, in a brown splash, spills directly onto his white shirt.

Dae remains frozen, his eyes lowered to the stain spreading rapidly across the fabric. The sauce seeps into the fibers, creating a large, bright, almost grotesque stain. He can't help but sigh inwardly. It's not the first time an accident like this has happened in the middle of a rush, but today is different. Now it's ruined.

The child, realizing what has just happened, stops dead in his tracks, eyes wide open, a half guilty, half worried expression on his face. He looks at Dae as if expecting a reprimand.

"I... I'm sorry, sir," the boy stammers, tugging nervously at the edge of his jacket. Dae forces himself to smile, despite the annoyance rising inside him. "It's okay," he murmurs, trying to keep his composure. "Just be careful next time." The boy nods quickly before fleeing back to his table, presumably to avoid any follow-up to this incident.

Dae straightens up, sighing heavily as he looks at the clock. 3.34pm, his extra twenty minutes are finished, and now he's late.

He quickly wipes himself with a tea towel, trying his best to soften the stain, but it's no use. The amber-brown color of the sauce remains anchored in the cloth. Resigned to the situation, Dae signals to Cedric that he must leave and heads for the exit. He looks at the itinerary on his phone and swears when he realizes that he'll arrive 30 minutes so 1 hour late by taking public transportation. He starts to panic.

What's he going to do? They've been planning this meeting for weeks; he can't miss it. Dae feels his breath shorten with every thought.

"You should've known..." His father's words creep into his mind, making it even harder to breathe. A dull ache settles in his chest, and his breathing becomes rapid and uneven. He places a trembling hand right on his heart, hoping to calm his frantic heartbeat. But the grip on him tightens. His vision blurs, and his legs threaten to give out beneath him.

"You're nothing but a failure..." The words echo relentlessly, hammered by an inner voice that offers no respite. Dae clenches his teeth, trying to push them away. But each thought triggers a sharper, louder echo. Memories rush in, flashing back to sleepless nights in business school, moments when he felt paralyzed, unable to move forward. The perfectionism his father instilled in him weighs heavily, and the words his father once said run through his mind on an endless loop during those first months at school. He remembers the hours spent staring at his laptop screen, paralyzed by fear of failure, always haunted by the same internal mantra:

"You must succeed. If you don't, you're nothing."

His father had always been clear: Dae was the prodigy, the chosen one carrying the family's hopes—the one for whom they had sacrificed everything. *"Your name means victory,"* his father once told him, as if it were both a blessing and a curse. But how was Dae supposed to live up to this perfect life, continue his studies, sports, and routine, when his sister wasn't there anymore?

He leans heavily against the white railing just outside the restaurant. His limbs tremble uncontrollably, and a pounding headache settles at the back of his skull. Vertigo strikes him, as if the ground beneath his feet is about to crumble.

"Stop this nonsense. Panic attacks or whatever they call it—it's just weakness. A societal indulgence," his father had said that night, the first time Dae broke down after his

sister's disappearance. *"She's dead, Dae. She's not coming back. Thinking about her won't change that."*

A metallic taste floods his mouth. The weight of his father's words crushes him, each one hitting harder, like blows from a hammer.

"Hey." Dae feels a light touch on his shoulder, but his mind is too far gone to respond.

"I should have known..." he murmurs to himself, eyes locked on the ground.

"Hey, are you okay?" The pressure on his shoulder intensifies, and Dae turns slowly toward the voice. The girl from last time is standing in front of him, but he doesn't move. His gaze floats above her, lost in the distance. She waves her hand in front of him, and at last, Dae focuses on her. She has freckles and light brown eyes—something he hadn't noticed in the dark before. They are a familiar shade to him, one that reminds him of his little sister. After she disappeared, Dae dreamed of her eyes often—soft, warm, and comforting, evoking the old furniture from their childhood home. But the girl in front of him doesn't carry that same warmth. Instead, her expression is laced with concern, even worry.

Realizing how he must look, Dae straightens himself.

"I'm fine, why do you ask?" he says, his voice a bit hoarse.

"You looked a little lost. I thought you might need help," the girl replies, her tone friendly.

Dae studies her in silence for several moments, wondering if she approached him out of obligation. But as the seconds tick by, he senses her genuine concern. Her hand remains on his shoulder, and although she tries to appear casual, her furrowed brow betrays her worry.

"Uh, no... Well, yes... Not really—I mean..." Dae stammers, his thoughts still tangled. The girl chuckles softly at his awkwardness, and he takes a deep breath before explaining.

“I have an appointment, and thanks to that stupid Stacy, I’m going to miss it—sorry, I mean, my colleague.”

When he glances back at her, she’s covering her mouth, trying—and failing—to stifle a laugh. They exchange looks for a moment before both burst out laughing.

“Sorry, but you reminded me of myself just now,” she says, clearing her throat to compose herself. Dae smiles back at her.

“Where are you headed?” she asks.

“Chinatown.” A grin lights up the young woman’s face.

“Perfect! I’m headed there too. Want me to give you a ride?”

Dae hesitates, taken aback by her unexpected offer. Then, slowly, he nods, still at a loss for words after everything that just happened.

They walk side by side to what Dae thinks is her car, a small silver Honda parked on the sidewalk, before the girl calls someone to ask to be picked up. Her tone is quite formal. When she hangs up, they wait in silence while many questions race through Dae’s head. He’s as puzzled by his appointment as he is by this woman’s attitude. How is he supposed to rule? And the question becomes even more acute when a Bentley Mulliner Batur, one of the most expensive cars in the world, pulls up in front of them. It’s not the first time he’s seen one of these, as he did when (name of celebrity in Singapore) came to visit, but still. He remembers that it made the headlines. A man, who appears to be a butler, steps around the car and comes to open the door.

“Miss Miller,” he says, as the young woman at Dae’s side steps forward confidently. She greets the clerk and steps into the car’s cabin with a grace Dae didn’t think she possessed. The butler closes the door and he steps around again to sit on the driver’s side. Unlike usual, when the busy streets of New York are very noisy with impatient shoe horns, this time it was as if time had stopped and everyone was admiring the car. It’s when the young woman rolls

down her window and nods at him to get in that Dae realizes he's standing in the middle of the sidewalk. He hurried and opened the door cautiously. As he settles into the passenger seat, he feels the strange comfort of being in someone else's space, as if he's emerging from the heavy armor of his thoughts, if only for a moment, and allows himself a sigh of relief.

The man starts the engine, the hum of the car filling the silence between them. For a few minutes, neither of them speaks. Dae is too lost in thought, still picking up the emotional pieces of his panic attack. The effect the car had on him has faded, and he's back to rehashing the words his father has spoken to him over the years. With his head resting on the car's armrest, he let himself sink as he watched New York's many buildings overtake him.

