

The Undoing of July Park

Part 1

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*This book is dedicated to Hyun and Mee.
Thank you for your sacrifice so that we could live.*

Chapter 1

It was 7:03 p.m. on a cool, breezy Friday. July's eyes stung from a long day of reimaging machines at work, followed by a mind-numbing two-hour lecture that could lull a farm to sleep. Now, he sat in his car, staring at the entrance of Beverly Hospice Care, rehearsing the conversation he dreaded having with his dad. After a moment, he exhaled, got out, and trudged toward the doors, his shoulders slumped under the weight of the day and everything else.

"Room 115...room 115, which way was it?" July muttered to himself, his mind foggy despite the familiarity of the place. He'd been here before - too many times - but today, the layout felt like a maze he couldn't navigate.

"Hi, sir, are you here to see someone?" The front desk nurse's tone was clipped, her gaze impassive.

"Yes, my dad. He's in room 115, but I can't seem to remember where it is."

"Name?"

"John Park."

The nurse tapped at her keyboard, her expression unchanged. "Ah, yes. Take the hallway on the left, second right. Signs are posted - you can't miss it."

"Thank you."

Brushing off his momentary confusion, July adjusted his posture and headed down the hall. The air grew heavier with each step, the faint, musty smell pricking at his senses. It was the scent of finality - or maybe, of death itself. At Beverly Hospice Care, no one checked out.

As July approached room 115, he paused at the window, peering through the partially drawn curtains. Inside, he saw his mom sitting beside his dad, carefully hand-feeding him a meal she made earlier in the day. She never trusted the food at the hospice - why serve a dying man something bland and impersonal when he could have the best meal, lovingly made by the woman he had spent years pushing away? Her face betrayed no sadness, or joy - just an unreadable stillness, like a practiced poker player masking their hand. What was she thinking? What could she possibly be feeling as she patiently fed her estranged husband, one spoonful at a time?

July eased the door open, careful not to disturb the quiet moment his parents were sharing. As he approached the bed, his dad didn't turn his head. It wasn't a matter of choice - he was simply too weak.

"Hi Dad, how are you feeling today?" July asked softly, gently taking his father's hand. A slow, deliberate nod was the only response.

"He's losing his ability: his mom said, not looking up as she fed another spoonful. "Soon, he might not be able to speak at all."

July felt words clogging in his throat, his mind swirling too many thoughts. Instead, he reached for the television remote and turned it on.

“Hey, Dad, look! The Dodgers are playing the Giants tonight.”

“Turn that off,” his mom said sharply, her voice cutting through the room.

“Mom, you know Dad loves baseball. The Dodgers are his favorite team.”

She didn’t respond, focused instead on spooning the last bit of food into her husband’s mouth.

Her silence felt heavier than any argument.

“Today was a hard day,” his mom said, her voice almost to herself. “Work was rough, and I had to stop by Grandma’s to make sure she was OK before coming here. I’ve been running around all day.”

July hesitated before speaking again. “Mom, why don’t you go home and rest?” I’ll sit with Dad for a while.”

Still no response. But this time, her silence spoke of exhaustion, of the day’s weight pressing down on her. Without a word, she stood and gathered her things. As she was about to walk out of the room, she turned to her son and husband and only said four words.

“Be here for him.”

The words hung in the air, heavy and final, as she turned and left the room.

July thought he understood what it meant to “be here for him”. Or did he? Wasn’t it enough to sit in the same room, week after week, month after month? But this time, those four words hit differently - like an accusation, or worse, the truth. Had he ever truly been there for his dad? The thought gnawed at him as he turned to his father. Leaning in close, he spoke softly into his ear, recounting stories from the past - mostly good ones. There weren’t many to choose from, but those rare moments of joy and connection felt more important now than ever.

July recounted a fishing trip he’d taken with his father and sister - a memory that had lingered in his mind for years. His dad always loved fishing, especially saltwater fishing.

“Dad, you remember that time you took us on that fishing boat, and I ended up puking over the side?” July chuckled, shaking his head at the memory.

“I had no idea I was seasick until that day. It was awful.” He paused, smiling softly as the scene replayed in his mind.

“You came over with a fishing pole in your hand, patted me on the back, and tried to cheer me up. But right after you did, a fish hit your line, and the pole snapped clean in half!”

July laughed, a warm, genuine sound that seemed to fill the quiet room. His father, unable to show emotion, lay still, but July kept talking, sharing stories with the hope that somewhere deep down, his dad was enjoying every word.

Two hours had slipped by in what felt like moments. The baseball game had ended, and the quiet room signaled it was time to call it a night. July glanced at his watch - it was already a quarter past nine. He turned back to his father, leaning in to kiss his forehead before taking his hand one last time.

“Dad, it’s been a great evening. I need to head home - it’s late, and I’ve got an early start tomorrow.”

He stood, lingering for a moment as if hesitating to leave, before finally walking to the door. But just as he reached for the handle, a wave of unease washed over him.

A thought gripped him: *What if this is it? What if tonight is the night he leaves this earth? Have these past few months been enough?*

The weight of the question hung heavy, but he pushed it aside with a deep breath. Shaking off the thought, July opened the door quietly, stepped into the hallway, and made his way toward the front entrance, the soft click of the closing door echoing behind him.

July waved goodbye to the nurse at the front desk and stepped out into the cool night air. As he walked toward his car, an itchy sensation spread across his left forearm. He paused for a moment, rubbing at the spot, unsure if it was goosebumps or a bug bite, but ultimately brushed it off. Sliding into the driver’s seat, he started the car, the gentle hum of the engine filling the silence. Just as he shifted into gear, the itch returned—this time at the nape of his neck.

A sudden unease crept over him. *What is this?* he thought, glancing at his reflection in the rearview mirror.

It's not a bug bite... and it doesn't feel like an allergic reaction.

Shaking his head, he dismissed the sensation and pulled out of the parking lot. The itch lingered as he drove into the night, gnawing at the edges of his thoughts.

As July pulled into the parking garage of his apartment, he glanced at his watch — 10:03 PM. Exhausted from the day and evening, he skipped his usual bedtime routine and collapsed onto his bed. Sleep came quickly, pulling him into a deep, dream-filled slumber.

Somewhere in the haze of his dreams, his phone began to ring. At first, it blended into the fabric of his subconscious, a sound he easily ignored. But it didn't stop. The persistent buzzing eventually pulled him from sleep. Groggily, he reached over, fumbling for the phone. Without bothering to check the caller ID, he answered.

"Hello?" His voice was thick with sleep.

"July... July, are you there? Your dad is passing away."

The voice on the other end jolted him fully awake.

"Wait... what?" he stammered, still trying to piece together the reality of the moment.

"You need to get here right now. I'm waking up the rest of the family. It's time."

It was his mom. Her words hit like a punch to the gut, and for a moment, he was frozen. His mind struggled to process what she'd said.

He glanced at the clock on his phone — 3:03 AM.

Heart pounding, July threw off the covers, grabbed the first clothes he could find, and rushed out the door.

July stumbled into the apartment elevator, his thoughts racing as he tried to make sense of everything. He jabbed the button for P3, the parking garage, and leaned back against the cool metal wall. As the elevator doors slid shut, the lights flickered overhead, casting brief shadows across the small space.

Am I still dreaming? he wondered, a knot forming in his stomach. *There shouldn't be any power issues here.*

The elevator felt sluggish like it was crawling instead of descending. *Has it always taken this long to get to the garage?* July's pulse quickened, and he tapped his foot impatiently.

At last, the doors opened with a soft chime. He stepped out and quickened his pace toward his car, unlocking it with a press of his key fob. Sliding into the driver's seat, he started the engine, the low rumble filling the silence. Before pulling out, he gripped the steering wheel and exhaled deeply, steadying himself.

OK, you've got this. Stay calm. Drive safe. Don't get into an accident.

With a final breath, July shifted into gear, pulled out of his parking spot, and sped off toward Beverly Hospice Care, the weight of the night pressing on his chest.

As July drove, the phone rang again.

“Hey, Mom, I’m getting there as fast as I can.”

“OK. Your sister should be on his way too. I...I just got here... and it’s not good.”

“Mom, I need to focus on driving, but I’ll be there soon. Please stay with Dad, don’t leave his side. I’m almost there.”

July’s grip tightened on the wheel as he fought the urge to speed. He thought about pushing the pedal to the floor, but the risk of getting caught — of making things worse — wasn’t worth it. Not today. Not on this day of all days.

A swirl of emotions clouded his thoughts: what would he see? What could he do? What could he even say? His mind was a battlefield as he approached a familiar intersection. The street he had driven countless times before now felt... different.

Why does it feel so empty? So dark?

It took a moment for July to realize the light had turned green, and when he looked around, he saw no other cars in sight.

Well, at least no one’s honking at me for sitting at a green light, he thought, the strange quiet only amplifying his unease.

The drive should've taken 25 minutes, but to July, it felt like hours. Time seemed to stretch and drag, each second an eternity as he moved closer to the hospice. Finally, he pulled into the parking lot, relief and dread battling within him. He quickly found a spot near the front entrance, parked, and rushed inside. This time, there was no hesitation, no confusion—he knew exactly where to go. Room 115 awaited.

As July stepped into Room 115, the sight before him was overwhelming. His mother was hunched over his father, tears streaming down her face as she clutched his hand, murmuring words he couldn't quite understand. His dad looked like a shadow of himself—his face twisted in agony, a clear sign that death was near. It was too much for July to bear.

No. This can't be happening.

He froze at the foot of his father's bed, unsure of what to say, how to respond, what to do.

What do I do? What can I even say?

His mind was a torrent of thoughts when suddenly, without warning, the tears came. They welled up in his eyes and spilled over, hot and uncontrollable. He didn't think, didn't hesitate. He simply reached out, took his father's hand, and began to pray.

"Mom... what should I say? What should I pray for?"

"You just pray, pray what's in your heart. Pray for him." With that, July tightened his grip on his dad's hand, closing his eyes as he prayed — his voice shaky but sincere.

A few moments later, July heard the soft creak of the door, and as he turned, he saw his sister, Michelle King, standing frozen in the doorway, her face blank, devoid of tears.

“Hey, we’re praying for Dad. Come on,” July said gently, his voice barely above a whisper.

Without a word, Michelle walked toward him, her steps slow and heavy. Together, they reached their father’s bedside. Both of them took his hand, standing in silence for a moment, each lost in their grief.

What felt like hours passed in a haze, but in reality, it had only been about 20 minutes. July’s father had passed, leaving a strange sense of peace hanging in the air. As he leaned in closer to the bed, he noticed a single tear slipping from his dad’s right eye.

Did Dad pass in peace? What was he feeling? What went through his mind in those final moments?

Some say that a dying person can still hear, and July wondered if the prayers they had offered had reached his father’s thoughts. Holding onto his family for a moment longer, the nurses gave them the space they needed before gently reminding them it was time for the post-mortem procedures.

“I think Dad passed in peace,” July whispered, his voice shaky but certain.

“Yes, I think so too,” Michelle replied, standing still, almost like a statue, her face unreadable.

Their mother remained silent. She didn't speak, didn't move — just stood there, staring at the lifeless body of the man she had loved off and on for so many years. After a few moments, she slowly approached his bedside, kissed his forehead gently, and whispered, "I love you."

July glanced down at his left wrist, instinctively checking the time, only to realize he had left his watch at home. He looked up at the room's clock instead — 5:03 AM. The head nurse approached the family, offering details about the next steps for the funeral services, but the words felt distant and hard to absorb. There was no way they could process all of it right now.

"Hey, I'm going to stay a little longer. Why don't you two head home and get some rest?" their mom said, her voice quiet but steady.

"Yeah, we should go," July replied, his own voice thick with exhaustion.

July and Michelle wrapped their mom in what felt like a bear hug, not wanting to let go. As they turned to leave, they both paused, glancing back at their dad's lifeless body one final time.

"Love you, Dad," July and Michelle whispered together, their voices soft, almost as if they didn't want to disturb the peace in the room.

As July and Michelle walked down the hallway toward the front entrance, the world outside was still shrouded in darkness.

What time was the sunrise? He wondered though the question felt irrelevant at that moment.

They said their goodbyes, and as Michelle drove off toward her car, a strange feeling settled in July's gut. Something wasn't right. A sense of unease lingered, gnawing at him from the inside.

He climbed into his car, and sat in silence for a moment, trying to shake the feeling. But then the familiar itchy sensation returned, this time on his right upper arm.

Okay, what is this? He thought, confusion rising.

He rolled up his sleeve and froze. There, along his arm, was a deep scratch — at least six inches long.

What the hell is this? Who scratched me?

His heart began to race. He quickly pulled off his hoodie and checked his right upper arm. The skin was swollen and a deep red, the scratch almost glowing, and it stretched at least four inches. Panic set in as he reached up to touch his neck. The moment his fingers made contact, a sharp sting shot through him, causing him to quickly retract his hand.

Why are there scratches on my body? What is happening to me?

His mind raced with questions, but before he could process them, his eyes flicked to the rearview mirror. What he saw made his blood run cold.

A dark, shadowy figure was standing near the front entrance of Beverly Hospice Care, unmoving, watching.

Chapter 2

In the year 1973, South Korea was still recovering from the devastation of the Korean War. The country was a patchwork of rebuilding efforts, with ruined cities and scarred landscapes serving as constant reminders of the brutal conflict. Amidst this struggle for recovery, a sense of resilience and determination permeated the air. It was a time of transformation, as the nation sought to rise from the ashes of war.

Busan, the country's second-largest city, stood at the crossroads of history. Located on the southeastern coast, this bustling port city was both a symbol of South Korea's industrial ambitions and a stark reminder of the war's lasting effects. The streets were a cacophony of activity — merchants hawked their goods, children played in alleys, and the distant hum of factories echoed through the air. Yet, for all the progress, many of the city's citizens lived in poverty, their livelihoods a fragile balance between hard work and the harsh realities of the post-war economy.

The presence of American military personnel, a result of ongoing tensions with North Korea, added a layer of complexity to the social fabric. The foreign soldiers were a visible reminder of the country's dependence on its allies, but also a source of resentment for some. While the American presence helped stabilize the region, it also highlighted the growing divide between the affluent and the struggling masses.

In the midst of all this, a young woman named Janet Cho watched the world around her with quiet curiosity. Her family, unlike others during this difficult time, lived in a large home surrounded by comfort, wealth, and love. Her father worked at the local construction company, specializing in building homes, while her mother tended to the household and the children. Their lives were simple, but Janet Cho felt the weight of her country's history bearing down on her.

One day, while wandering the streets near her father's construction company, Janet noticed a group of American soldiers laughing and joking around. Their presence was both fascinating and unsettling to her. She didn't understand their language, but the way they carried themselves — so different from the people she knew — left a lasting impression. It was as if they were from another world entirely.

That afternoon, Janet's curiosity got the better of her. She followed the soldiers from a distance, her heart pounding in her chest as she wondered what life was like for them. Would they stay in Busan forever, or would they eventually leave like so many others who had come and gone over the years?

Her thoughts were interrupted by a sharp voice.

"Hey! What are you doing here?" A soldier, a decade older than Janet herself, had noticed her trailing behind.

The girl froze, unsure of what to say. The soldier's tone was stern, but his eyes were not unkind.

Janet hesitated for a moment, then mumbled something in broken English. The soldier raised an eyebrow but

didn't press further. Instead, he tossed Janet a small coin, a gesture of dismissal that left the girl confused and conflicted. As the soldier walked away, Janet stared at the coin in her hand, the weight of it strange and foreign, as if it represented a world she would never understand.

That night, as Janet lay in bed, the coin pressed tightly in her palm, she couldn't shake the feeling that the world around her was changing, shifting beneath her feet. What did it mean to grow up in a world shaped by war, by foreign powers, by economic disparity? And what role would she play in it at all?

The next morning, Janet's mother called her into the kitchen, her voice unusually stern.

"Your father said you were wandering near the soldiers yesterday. Is that true?"

"I was just curious Mom. These American soldiers are so fascinating to me."

"Stop right there. You are not allowed to go near them, understood?"

"Yes, Mom."

"Good. Now, I need some help with making the breakfast. Go get your sisters."

Janet nodded, but the fascination still burned inside her.

Why were the soldiers so off-limits? What harm could curiosity do?

As the family sat down for breakfast, everyone joined hands to say a prayer — even their dog, Pipi, who rested dutifully at their feet.

“Now, let’s bow our heads and pray,” Janet’s father said with calm authority. “Lord, we thank You for this food on the table, for the roof over our heads, and for the abundance You provide. Bless our home, bless our children, and bless this food to nourish our bodies. Amen.”

As the meal began, the clinking of bowls and chopsticks filled the room. Janet’s sister Jin leaned over and whispered in her ear, “I saw you watching those soldiers yesterday. What’s the matter, Janet? Thinking of running away to America?”

Janet’s face flushed, and she shook her head quickly, though her sister’s words lingered.

Could life really be so different somewhere else?

As she chewed her food, Jin’s teasing question burrowed deeper into her thoughts, planting a seed of curiosity that she couldn’t shake.

Shortly after breakfast, Janet and her sisters pitched in to clear the table, wash the dishes, and put them away. It was the weekend, so their routine was blissfully unstructured. Forbidden from lingering near her father’s construction business or the American soldiers, Janet and her sisters decided to head to Haeundae Beach. The salty breeze and golden sands were always a welcome escape, and perhaps — just maybe — they might spot some of the American soldiers lounging by the water.

As they made their way toward the beach, a familiar voice called out from behind them.

“Hey, Janet!”

Janet froze mid-step. That voice — it couldn’t be him. Hesitating, she turned around to see Jae Sung jogging toward her, his smile as bright as ever.

“Oh... hi, Jae,” Janet replied, a hint of shyness in her voice.

“Are you heading to the beach?” he asked, still catching his breath.

“Yeah, we’re just going to hang out for a bit,” she said, trying to sound casual.

“Mind if I and my friends join you?” Jae Sung’s tone was friendly, but there was an eagerness in his eyes that made Janet’s heart race.

“Umm... I guess that’s okay,” she said, glancing at her sisters for backup.

“Janet! We’re waiting for you! Let’s go!” Jin’s voice rang out from ahead, her hands cupped around her mouth to amplify the shout.

Janet turned back to Jae Sung, feeling her cheeks warm under his gaze. “We’d better get going before Jin starts yelling again.”

Jae Sung laughed. “All right. Let me grab my friends. See you down there!”

Jae Sung was a charming young man with a confident demeanor and an infectious smile. Like Janet, he came from a wealthy family. His father was a respected lawyer, and his mother devoted herself to managing their household. Raised in a home that emphasized the value of education, Jae had spent years excelling in advanced studies, aspiring to follow in his father's footsteps and become a lawyer.

Despite his privilege, Jae was deeply aware of the lingering scars of the Korean War. The conflict's impact on the nation weighed heavily on him, often filling his thoughts with uncertainty about the future. At times, he considered enlisting in the Korean Army to contribute to his country, but his father firmly opposed the idea, insisting that Jae's place was in building a prosperous career.

Ambitious and driven, Jae had always yearned to make something meaningful of his life. He and Janet had grown up together, attending the same school and sharing countless memories. Over the years, Jae's admiration for Janet had blossomed into something more. He often found himself daydreaming about her, but when it came to expressing his feelings, his confidence faltered. Despite his charm and self-assuredness, telling Janet how he truly felt was a challenge he hadn't yet mustered the courage to face.

Haeundae Beach was breathtaking, a slice of paradise along the bustling city of Busan. The golden sand stretched endlessly, warm underfoot, and the ocean shimmered under the bright sun, its waves inviting and gentle. For Janet and her sisters, days like this were an escape—a moment of carefree joy, unburdened by the weight of the world.

“Jin! Let’s get the blankets and umbrella set up!” Janet called out, her voice brimming with excitement.

“Alright, alright, I’m on it!” Jin shouted back, dragging the bundle behind her with exaggerated effort.

From a few steps away, Jae Sung approached, his smile tentative but genuine. “Hey, Janet, is it okay if my friends and I set up next to you?”

Janet hesitated for a moment, her cheeks flushing slightly. “Yeah, that’s fine.”

“It’s such a beautiful, hot day!” one of Jae’s friends exclaimed as he tossed his shirt onto the sand and sprinted toward the water, his laughter trailing behind him.

“Yeah, you go ahead and enjoy!” Jae called after him with a chuckle before turning back to Janet. He hesitated briefly, gathering his thoughts. “Hey, Janet, how’s everything going for you?”

Janet glanced at him, her guard softening at his genuine tone. “Things are good,” she replied. After a pause, she added, “What do you think about all these American soldiers being here?”

The question caught Jae off guard, but he quickly composed himself. “I guess... it’s good, right? America is helping us defend our country. They’ve fought alongside us. Their presence doesn’t really bother me. Why do you ask?”

Janet’s gaze shifted toward the horizon, her expression contemplative. “I don’t know. Sometimes I wonder what

it would be like to live in America. To leave Korea and see what life is like over there.”

Jae frowned slightly, considering her words. “Not really,” he admitted. “I mean, I love it here. This is my home.”

Janet turned to him, her eyes warm with a mix of admiration and curiosity. There was something about his certainty, his deep connection to their shared homeland, that she found comforting. She liked Jae — his charm, his kindness — but as her thoughts wandered beyond the shores of Haeundae, she knew her dreams stretched further than the horizon.

"Janet, wake up!"

The voice broke through the fog of Janet's dreams. It took a moment, but as she gathered her senses, she blinked and slowly became aware of her surroundings.

“What’s... what’s going on? Why is it so windy?” she asked, her voice thick with sleep.

“I don’t know when the wind picked up, but it started a few moments ago. You fell asleep!” Jae replied, urgency in his voice.

Startled, Janet's eyes snapped open, and she quickly sat up, scanning the horizon. Her mind raced. “Jin! Soo! Minyung!” she called out, her voice growing frantic.

“Don’t worry,” Jae said, his hand on her shoulder, trying to calm her down. “My friends got your sisters. They’re already headed home. We need to go now!”

Janet didn’t waste another second. She jumped to her feet, but dizziness hit her, and for a brief moment, the

world seemed to spin. She steadied herself, the lingering effects of her nap clouding her balance.

How long was I out? When did this storm come?

The wind whipped around her, colder now, as she grabbed Jae's hand. "Let's go!" she urged, and they began to run, the urgency in her movements matching the rising chaos around them.

Her house was closer than Jae's, and with the storm barreling down, she didn't want to risk anything. They pushed forward, hearts pounding as the wind howled louder, pushing them back with each gust.

The weather was unpredictable that day. One minute, they were enjoying the sunshine, and the next, wind and rain came crashing in. Janet and her sisters made it safely back home, thanks to Jae and his friends. Janet's father knew the boys well and didn't hesitate to welcome them in. Jae held a special place in Janet's father's eyes; he often hoped that one day, Jae and Janet might marry.

"Is everyone OK?" Janet's father's stern voice echoed through the room.

"Yes, sir. We're all fine. Thank you for taking me and my friends in, and allowing us to stay here for shelter," Jae replied, still catching his breath from the rush.

"Don't worry about it," Janet's father said. "I know your parents. You're safe here until the storm passes." At that moment, Janet's brothers walked into the living room, drenched from head to toe.

“Dad, sorry, we got caught in the rain,” one of them said, wringing out his jacket.

Earlier, Janet’s brothers had been at their father’s construction site securing the equipment.

“Everything’s secured, Dad. We made sure of it.”

“Good. Go get dried off and put on something warm,” Janet’s father ordered. “Girls, it’s time for bed. Jae, you and your friends will sleep in the guest room tonight. I won’t risk you going out in this storm.”

“Thank you, sir,” Jae replied, his gratitude sincere.

The wind howled harder and harder that night, its intensity making sleep impossible. Janet’s sisters, except Jin, had already drifted off into deep sleep.

“Janet, are you awake?” Jin’s voice broke through the stillness.

“Yeah, I’m awake.”

“I can’t sleep. Can you talk with me for a while?”

“Sure. What do you want to talk about?”

“Well,” Jin hesitated before speaking, “I think Jae really likes you, and you know Dad has always liked him too. Do you see a future with him?”

Janet paused, her mind trying to make sense of it all. “I don’t know, Jin. Jae’s a kind and sweet guy, but... I’m not sure I’m ready to commit to something long-term.”

"I get it," Jin replied softly. "But don't wait too long. Guys like Jae will be scooped up faster than you can say 'kimchee.'"

Janet wasn't ready to dive into this conversation. Her mind wasn't aligned with what Jin was saying. She slowly got up from her bed and walked towards the window.

"Hey, where are you going?" Jin asked with concern in her voice.

Janet didn't answer. She just moved quietly to the window, staring out into the stormy night. As she gazed into the darkness, an overwhelming feeling surged within her.

I need to get out of here. I have to find a way.

Her hand instinctively reached into her pocket, and she felt the familiar coin the American soldier had given her the day before. The cold metal brushed against her fingers, a reminder of the world outside and the possibility of something more.

In the dead of night, Janet was startled awake by the sound of the window doors rattling against the frame, the wind howling fiercely outside. The rain hadn't let up; it continued pouring heavily.

I thought I locked these window doors, Janet thought as she pushed herself up from bed. *The wind must've forced them open.*

Janet approached the window and reached for the latch. But just as her hand was about to secure it, her eyes

caught a glimpse of something outside — a black, shadowy figure standing at the entrance to their courtyard. Her breath caught in her throat. Startled, she stumbled back and quickly rushed to wake Jin.

“Jin, wake up! Wake up!” Janet whispered urgently, shaking her sister.

“What is it? Let me sleep...” Jin groaned, pulling the blanket over her head.

“Jin, I’m serious! I saw someone standing outside, right at the front entrance.”

Jin peeked out from under her blanket, her voice groggy and hesitant. “What are you talking about? It’s dark and still raining. You were probably dreaming.”

“No, I wasn’t! Come on, you have to see this!” Janet insisted, pulling at her sister’s arm.

“Fine, fine...” Jin relented, rolling out of bed with a sigh.

The sisters hurriedly grabbed their coats, a flashlight, and braced themselves against the storm as they stepped outside. The wind whipped at their faces, and the rain soaked them instantly.

Janet pointed toward the spot. “The figure was right there, standing under the doorway.”

Jin squinted through the downpour, the flashlight beam cutting through the darkness but revealing nothing. “Are you sure? I don’t see anyone.”

“I swear to you, Jin, I saw someone!” Janet exclaimed, her voice tinged with panic.

“Well, whoever — or whatever — it was, it’s not here now. Come on, let’s go back inside,” Jin replied, shivering and eager to escape the storm.

As they retreated, Janet couldn’t shake the eerie feeling that lingered in the pit of her stomach. She replayed the image in her mind — the figure had looked like someone in a uniform and wearing a long coat.

Was it a soldier? A ghost? Who could it be? And why would they come here?

Back in the safety of their room, Janet slipped under the covers, her thoughts racing. Jin quickly drifted back to sleep, but Janet lay wide awake, her heart still pounding from the unsettling sight. She clutched the coin in her pocket like a talisman, hoping it would bring her clarity — or courage. Eventually, exhaustion overcame her, and she drifted into an uneasy sleep.

Janet woke later than usual that morning, the last one in the house to rise. The events of the night before lingered in her mind, rattling her nerves. She resolved not to bring it up; Jin knowing was enough. After getting ready, Janet made her way to the dining room, where the family was already gathered around the breakfast table.

“Hey, sleepyhead. Looks like someone decided to take their time this morning,” teased her older brother, Sung, a smirk on his face.

Janet sat down quietly, taking her usual place next to Jin. She didn’t respond immediately, instead staring at her bowl for a moment before picking up her spoon and chopsticks.

“Hello? Did you not hear me?” Sung pressed, feigning offense.

“What? Oh... yeah. I didn’t sleep well last night,” Janet mumbled, her voice subdued.

Jin glanced at her sister, their eyes meeting briefly. The look in Jin’s eyes was one of quiet acknowledgment — she knew the real reason behind Janet’s restless night. As the chatter of siblings and parents filled the table,

Janet leaned subtly toward Jin and whispered, “What happened last night stays between us, okay?”

“Yeah,” Jin replied softly, her voice barely audible over the clinking of dishes.

The two sisters returned to their breakfast, Janet trying to focus on the routine of the morning while the weight of her unease clung to her.

“Dad, did Jae and his friends leave?” Asked Janet.

Her father replied, “yes, they left earlier this morning.”

As the meal came to an end, chairs scraped against the floor as everyone began to rise, carrying their plates, cups, and utensils to the kitchen sink. The clatter of dishes was accompanied by the low hum of conversation.

Janet’s father stood, clearing his throat to get everyone’s attention. “Girls, you’ll stay here at the house today to help your mother clean up after that storm last night,” he said, his tone firm but matter-of-fact. “Boys, we’re heading to the construction site to start clearing the mess there. We’ll try and be back by supper.”

A chorus of acknowledgment followed, with nods and murmured “yes, sir” from the siblings as they shuffled off to their respective tasks.

The boys took off with their father, leaving the ladies behind to tend to the house. As Janet stepped into the courtyard, she surveyed the aftermath of the storm — fallen branches, scattered leaves, and debris piled across the yard. There was plenty to do. Janet’s gaze lingered on the doorway, where she had seen the figure the night before. For a brief moment, the memory resurfaced vividly, sending a chill through her. She shook her head, trying to brush the thought away. A light touch on her shoulder brought her back to the present.

“Hey, you OK?” Jin’s voice was soft but filled with concern.

Janet managed a small smile. “Yeah, I’m fine. Just look at this mess. We’ve got a lot to clean up.”

Jin gave a knowing nod. “I’ll grab the brooms and gloves.”

She turned back toward the house to gather supplies, leaving Janet to stand alone momentarily. In the distance, the sound of their younger sisters, Soo and Minyung, laughing as they helped their mother with the dishes drifted through the open window. When Jin returned with the cleaning materials, Janet’s smile grew slightly wider. Together, they rolled up their sleeves and got to work, brushing away the storm’s remnants and, for Janet, the lingering unease.

At the construction site, the Cho brothers — Sung, Kyoung, and Ju-wan — unloaded cleaning supplies from their father's car, ready to tackle the mess left by the storm.

"Looks like all the equipment and tools held up," Sung observed, nodding toward the secured gear.

"Yeah, but the site's a wreck. Branches, leaves, and random scraps everywhere," Kyoung replied, scanning the debris-strewn yard.

Their father interrupted, gesturing toward a stack of lumber. "All right, boys, start picking up and sweeping around here. I'll check on the lumber to make sure it's still in good shape."

As the brothers began their work, a familiar figure approached. It was John Park, a friend of the family and a classmate of the Cho boys.

"Hey, Sung! Kyoung! Ju-wan!" John greeted cheerfully. Sung looked up and smiled. "John! What's going on?"

"I was just in the area," John said. "Looks like you guys could use some extra hands. My brothers and I already cleaned up around our place this morning, so I figured I'd stop by before heading to the store."

"Yeah, we can use all the help we can get. As you can see, it's a disaster," Sung replied with a chuckle, gesturing to the mess.

The Cho family had known John Park for years. Orphaned at the age of five, John had been raised by his two older brothers after losing their parents in a tragic

accident. Despite his hardships, John excelled in school, earning top grades and harboring dreams of one day leaving South Korea for America.

As they worked together to clear the site, John hesitated for a moment before asking, "So, did you guys get hit pretty hard by the storm last night?"

"It was rough," Kyoung said, wiping his brow. "The girls are at home cleaning up the house. It's a mess over there too."

John hesitated again, his voice dropping slightly. "How... how is Janet doing?"

Sung smirked, catching the tone in John's voice. "She's fine. Though she got herself into trouble the other day for following some American soldier around."

John froze mid-motion, his expression unreadable. "Oh, I see," he murmured.

Without saying another word, John grabbed a broom and began sweeping with determination. But in his mind, the question lingered.

Why was Janet with an American soldier?

The thought gnawed at him as he worked, though he pushed it aside, focusing instead on the task at hand.

Back at the house, the girls had finally finished cleaning the storm's remnants and were getting ready for supper. Their mother called from the kitchen, her voice warm but insistent.

“Your father and the boys should be back soon. Hurry up and get cleaned up so you can help me set the table.”

“Yes, Mom!” the girls chorused as they rushed to wash up and change into fresh clothes.

As they returned, the house was filled with the mouthwatering aroma of a traditional Korean meal. Steamed spinach, roasted anchovies, rice, kimchi, eggplant, pickled roots, baked fish, and bulgogi created a symphony of scents that made their stomachs rumble in anticipation. The girls joined their mother in the kitchen to set the table, working efficiently to arrange the dishes just as the rumble of a truck pulling into the driveway signaled the return of the boys and their father.

The girls hurried to the door as their father and brothers stepped out of the truck, dirt-smudged but satisfied with their hard day’s work.

“Welcome back!” the girls chimed, offering hugs all around. Janet, hugging her father last, paused as she noticed someone trailing behind the group. It was John Park, his usual quiet demeanor softened by a shy smile. He adjusted the strap of his worn bag as he stepped closer.

“Hey, Janet, it’s so good to see you,” John said, his voice warm and familiar.

Before Janet could respond, her father interjected, his tone cheerful.

“I invited John to join us for supper. He helped us clean up the construction site today and did a great job. It’s the least we could do to thank him.”

Janet nodded, her smile polite but genuine. “Hi, John. It’s good to see you again too.”

“Come in, come in!” her father urged, gesturing toward the house. “Don’t be shy. The food smells amazing, doesn’t it?”

John hesitated briefly before stepping inside, removing his shoes at the entrance. The warmth of the home, both in atmosphere and aroma, embraced him as he followed the family to the dining table. As they settled down for the meal, the buzz of conversation filled the room, mingling with laughter and the clinking of dishes. Janet glanced at John from across the table, her thoughts briefly flickering back to the figure she had seen the night before. She shook it off, focusing instead on the present and the unexpected company of an old friend.

“How are your brothers doing, John?” Sung asked, leaning back in his chair.

“They’re doing well,” John replied. “But we’ve been thinking about leaving for America. There’s just not much for us here anymore.”

Janet’s father, his expression stern, set his chopsticks down deliberately. “And what kind of life do you think is waiting for you in America?”

John hesitated for a moment, then answered, “The United States Army. I’ve heard they offer a path to U.S. citizenship if you serve.”

As Janet listened, her thoughts began to drift. She imagined John in a military uniform — sharp and composed — much like the American soldier she’d encountered the other day. The image unsettled her,

and she quickly shook it off, jumping into the conversation to distract herself.

“Well, that sounds like quite an adventure,” she said with a small smile. “It’s brave of you to consider it.”

John glanced at her, a faint smile lighting up his face. Before he could respond, Kyoung suddenly slammed his hands on the table, breaking the moment.

“Well, I’m stuffed!” he announced loudly. “Thanks, Mom, for the amazing dinner.”

The family chuckled as they began clearing the table. Afterward, everyone settled into the living room for some quiet family time — everyone except for Janet and John.

John stood, bowing slightly toward Janet’s father. “Mr. Cho, thank you for having me over. It’s time for me to head home to my brothers.”

Janet turned to her father. “Dad, is it alright if I walk John part of the way home?”

Her father paused, then nodded. “Just make sure you come straight back. Be careful.”

“Thank you,” Janet said, grabbing her coat. She followed John out the door, the night air cool against her skin as they stepped into the moonlit road.

The moonlight illuminated their path as they walked down the dirt road, a comfortable silence settling between them at first.

"Thanks for coming over tonight," Janet finally said, breaking the silence. "It's been a while since we've had someone outside the family join us for supper."

John smiled, his hands tucked into his pockets. "Your family is always welcoming. It was nice to be around so much warmth for a change."

Janet glanced sideways at him, studying his face. Despite his usual calm demeanor, there was a certain weight in his expression tonight. "Do you really think America is the answer for you and your brothers?" she asked gently.

John let out a small sigh, his breath visible in the chilly night. "It's not about wanting to leave Korea. It's about needing to. After losing our parents, my brothers sacrificed so much to raise me. They deserve a chance at a better life. And maybe... maybe I do too."

Janet nodded, understanding his perspective. "The U.S. Army, though — it's dangerous. Are you ready for that?"

He chuckled softly. "I've seen enough hardship to know that nothing worth having comes without risk. And besides," he added with a slight grin, "I'd get to wear that uniform you seem to be so curious about."

Janet froze, heat rushing to her face. "What? I — what do you mean?" she stammered.

"I saw the way you spaced out at dinner when your father asked about the Army. You were imagining something, weren't you?" John teased his tone light but not unkind. Janet laughed nervously, shoving him playfully. "You're imagining things. I was just... curious about your plans, that's all."

John shook his head, his grin widening. "Sure, Janet. Whatever you say."

As they approached the edge of the town, John stopped and turned to face her. "Thanks for walking with me. It's nice to have someone to talk to about this stuff."

"You're welcome," Janet replied, smiling up at him. "I hope whatever you decide, it brings you the happiness you're looking for."

"Same for you," John said softly. "Goodnight, Janet."

"Goodnight, John," she replied, watching as he disappeared into the shadows toward his house. She stood there for a moment longer, the chill of the night settling into her skin, before turning and walking back home.

As Janet walked back up the dirt road toward the house, the memory of the shadowy figure at the doorway flashed vividly in her mind. She shook her head, trying to dismiss it, but unease lingered. She closed her eyes briefly, took a steadying breath, and reopened them.

Her heart froze.

There it was again — the figure. Barely 100 feet ahead, a shadowy figure loomed at the top of the street.

Janet blinked rapidly, hoping it was a trick of her imagination, but the figure remained, unmoving, its presence palpable and eerie under the faint light of the moon.

No more running from this. I need to find out who or what this is.

Determined, Janet quickened her pace, her heartbeat thudding in her ears. The shadowy figure stood still as if waiting for her.

As she drew closer, the figure stepped into the light spilling from a nearby streetlamp, revealing their face.

“Hi, Janet,” the person said, their voice calm but knowing.

Chapter 3

July did a double take in the rearview mirror, his heart racing.

Who was that? Was it my dad's ghost? Or just... a ghost?

Before he could get another look, the mysterious figure was gone. Vanished as quickly as it appeared. July shook his head, trying to make sense of what he saw. His pulse was pounding, but he gripped the steering wheel and started the car.

The scratches on his arms and neck stung.

Where did these even come from? I need answers...

As he sped down the road, his knuckles white on the wheel, he fought the urge to pull over and compose himself. But the thought of stopping felt unbearable. There wasn't time. Not tonight.

Stay focused. I'm almost home. I can make it.

His phone rang, cutting through his spiraling thoughts.

The caller ID "Sis" flashed on the screen.

"Hello?" he answered, his voice hoarse.

"Hey, are you almost home?" Michelle's familiar voice brought a small sense of relief.

"Yeah, about five minutes away. Are you okay?"

"Yeah... I guess. I just can't believe Dad's really gone..."
Her voice wavered.

"Me neither," July said softly. "But we'll get through this.

We're family, and family has to stick together, right?
We've got to stay strong."

"You always were the optimistic one. Always seeing the glass half full."

July managed a weak smile. "Someone has to be."

"Have you talked to Mom yet?" Michelle asked.

"Not yet. I'll call her after I get home. You should too, check in on her."

"I will. Take care of yourself, okay?"

"Same to you. Talk later."

"Okay. Bye."

"Bye."

As the call ended, July pulled into his parking spot. He turned off the engine, but he didn't move. He just sat there; the car silent around him. His mind raced. Too many thoughts. Too much weight on his shoulders.

July stepped out of the car slowly, his legs heavy as he trudged toward the apartment elevators. He raised a finger to press the button, but his gaze fell to his watch.
8:23 AM.

How did three hours go by just like that?

The elevator doors slid open, and a tenant rushed out with their dog, barely glancing in his direction. They pushed past him without a word. July didn't have the energy to care. He stepped into the elevator and pressed the button for the fifth floor. The lights flickered.

I should put in a maintenance request about these lights.

The ding of the elevator snapped him back as the doors opened on the fifth floor. July stepped out, his feet dragging toward his apartment. All he could think about was collapsing into bed. As he reached his door and slid the key in, a strange sensation washed over him. It felt like eyes were on him. He whipped his head around, scanning the empty hallway.

Nothing.

He stepped inside and shut the door firmly behind him, twisting the lock. His exhaustion clashed with unease, and instead of heading to bed, his gaze landed on the laptop sitting on the breakfast counter.

Maybe I can figure out what's going on...

He flipped open the laptop and hesitated, unsure where to start. Finally, he typed: **“strange scratches appearing randomly.”**

The results were underwhelming. Most of the links pointed to mundane explanations: allergic reactions, skin irritation, environmental factors.

Not even close.

Just as he was about to give up, a link caught his eye. Something about **“paranormal causes.”** It was enough to spark his curiosity. He refined his search to include words: **“paranormal scratches,” “demons,” “unseen visitors.”**

The flood of results overwhelmed him. Articles, forums, wild stories — it was too much. July snapped the laptop shut, his frustration boiling over. He buried his face in his hands, running his fingers through his hair.

What’s happening to me?

He exhaled, the weight of the night pressing down on him.

I’m done. Time for bed.

Dragging himself to the bedroom, he collapsed face-first onto the mattress, not even bothering to change out of his clothes. His mind raced as sleep clawed at him: the scratches, the shadowy figure, his dad’s death. But exhaustion finally won. His body stilled, though his thoughts continued to haunt him in the growing quiet.

Michelle and July were both born in Los Angeles, California, six years apart, in the vibrant heart of Koreatown. Despite the age gap, July quickly embraced the responsibilities of being an older brother. By the time he turned ten, Janet began teaching him how to clean, manage the kitchen, stay organized, and care for Michelle. John didn’t approve. He resented that his eldest son spent time on house chores instead of focusing on academics and earning straight A’s. But July wasn’t a troublemaker — far from it. He was obedient,

punctual, and diligent in his studies, despite his father's constant criticisms.

Janet, overwhelmed by the demands of running a household and John's long hours at work, had little choice but to rely on July. Hiring help wasn't an option John would entertain, and she needed the support. One evening, as July helped Michelle prepare for her bath, John came home far later than usual.

"John, do you know what time it is?" Janet's voice was firm but edged with worry.

"Yeah, I know," John replied curtly. "I had a lot to do at the office and lost track of time."

"You didn't call ahead. I thought something might have happened to you—an accident, maybe."

John sighed, shaking his head. "I'm sorry I didn't call, okay? Work is getting more demanding every week!" His voice started to rise.

"Don't raise your voice at me!" Janet shot back, her frustration spilling over. "It feels like I'm raising two kids alone! You're never here, and then you criticize me for teaching July to help. What choice do I have?"

John grabbed his coat abruptly, his face tight with anger. "You know what? I'm done. I'm leaving."

He yanked open the door and slammed it shut behind him. The house fell silent except for the sound of Janet's quiet sobs.

Upstairs, July and Michelle sat at the top of the staircase, frozen. July's eyes brimmed with tears, his young mind

struggling to process the scene. Michelle, too young to fully grasp what had happened, clung to him with wide, fearful eyes.

“Mom?” July’s voice trembled as he called out.

There was no answer at first. Janet’s sobs filled the air, raw and unfiltered. After a moment, she looked up and saw her children sitting at the top of the stairs.

“July...” she managed, her voice breaking.
“Michelle...come here.”

Hesitant but compelled, the two made their way down the staircase. They approached their mother slowly, unsure of what to say or do. As they reached her, Janet opened her arms, pulling them close. In that moment, they didn’t need words. Just the embrace of a mother and her children, holding on to each other in the wake of John’s departure.

July woke to the sound of his phone vibrating in his jacket pocket. Groggy and disoriented, he rolled onto his back, fumbling through his pockets until his fingers found the device.

He barely managed to croak out, “Hello?”

“Hey, bro, you sound like you just woke up,” Michelle said on the other end. “I’ve been calling you like a hundred times.”

“Yeah? Sorry, I’m still half-asleep,” he replied, rubbing his face.

"It's fine. I talked to Mom earlier — she says she's okay, but I don't like her being alone right now. Maybe we should go check on her later?"

"Sure. What time were you thinking?"

"It's 12:30. How about 3? Will you be ready by then?"

"Yeah, I'll be ready. I'll come pick you up."

"Okay, sounds good. Later."

"Bye."

July lowered the phone to his chest, staring at the ceiling. The thought of calling his mom flickered through his mind. He hadn't spoken to her since the morning.

I'll call her later. Just need a few more minutes...

His eyes grew heavy again, pulling him toward sleep.
No! Wake up, July! If I fall asleep now, I'll sleep through the whole day.

Summoning what little energy he had, July forced himself out of bed. His feet hit the floor reluctantly as he shuffled toward the bathroom, his body aching for rest but his mind urging him to keep moving.

The warm water cascaded over July's body, soothing his aching muscles and washing away the tension that clung to him. It felt cleansing, almost as if the weight of his troubling thoughts — the scratches, the shadowy figure, his father's death — was slipping down the drain with the water. For a brief moment, the world seemed fresh, new, and liberating.

After toweling off, he slipped into clean clothes and wandered into the kitchen, his mind focused on the next task.

First, coffee. Then, food.

He popped a K-Cup into the Keurig machine, the hum of it brewing filling the quiet kitchen. A glance inside the fridge confirmed what he already suspected — it was nearly empty. A single half-empty carton of milk, a few eggs, and some condiments sat lonely on the shelves.

Great. I should've gone grocery shopping yesterday.

Defeated, he pulled out his phone and opened DoorDash, scrolling through nearby restaurant options. His eyes scanned the menus.

Nope, not American. Not Asian. Not...wait, Greek. That works.

Without a second thought, he ordered a lamb-and-beef gyro for pickup. The Keurig whirled to a stop, signaling the coffee was ready. Grabbing a tumbler, he poured the steaming liquid in, the aroma lifting his spirits slightly.

No time to relax and sip this. Gotta go — food's ready in 15 minutes.

He threw on his coat, grabbed his keys, and stepped out of the apartment. As the door clicked shut behind him, the stillness of the hallway greeted him. He paused for a second, sipping his coffee, before heading for the elevator.

After picking up his order from "Gyro Go," one of the best gyro spots in town, July hopped into his car and

sped off toward Michelle's apartment. As he drove, he reached for his phone to give her a quick heads-up. Michelle answered after a couple of rings. "Hey, how far are you?"

With his mouth full of gyro, July mumbled, "About 20 minutes out. I stopped to grab something to eat."

"Alright, I'll wait outside for you."

"Cool, see you soon," he replied, stuffing the last bite of the gyro into his mouth before tossing the wrapper onto the passenger seat.

July arrived at his sister's apartment three minutes earlier than expected, feeling a small sense of triumph. As Michelle slid into the passenger seat, her expression quickly turned to disapproval.

"Ugh, seriously? What is this?" she said, holding up a gyro wrapper. "Don't you have a trash can?"

"Yeah, yeah, sorry," July muttered, grabbing the wrapper and shoving it into the small garbage bin behind her seat. Michelle sighed but buckled up without further comment. They pulled out of the parking lot and headed toward their mom's house.

As he drove, July debated whether to tell Michelle about the scratches or the shadowy figure he'd seen earlier. In the end, he decided against it. Instead, he steered the conversation toward safer topics — work, weekend plans, and anything that didn't feel heavy.

The scratches on his arms were undeniable, but the figure... maybe that was just a trick of his overtired mind.

He didn't need to worry her, not now. Keeping things normal felt like the right move, even if his thoughts kept circling back to the morning's strange events.

Janet couldn't bear the thought of sleeping alone after John stormed out that night. As the weight of his absence settled over the house, she gathered her two children and brought them into her room. That first night, and every night after, she insisted they stay close. It wasn't just for their comfort—it was for hers, too.

July and Michelle didn't protest. They wanted to be there for her, to ease her pain in any way they could. Janet, however, was a shadow of herself. She barely found the strength to get out of bed, let alone cook or care for the household. Seeing this, 10-year-old July took it upon himself to make meals for the family. Breakfast, lunch, dinner — he prepared it all with whatever he could find in the kitchen. Despite his efforts, Janet barely touched her food, retreating further into her grief.

A week passed before John finally came home. His arrival was marked by silence and a heavy sense of avoidance. He walked into the house like a stranger, offering no words of comfort or explanation to his children or his wife. Janet, though drained, wasn't about to let him off the hook.

She confronted him in the hallway, her voice steady but firm. "Where have you been, John? A whole week without a word?"

John kept his gaze low, his voice barely above a whisper. "I... I stayed with a friend. Just needed some time."

Her arms crossed, Janet wasn't convinced. "We need to sit down and talk. This can't go on."

"Not tonight," John replied quickly, shaking his head. "We'll talk, just... not now. I came back because I had nowhere else to go. My friend had other company over."

Janet's expression hardened. "Fine. You can sleep in the kids' room tonight. They'll stay with me."

July and Michelle ran to their father, wrapping him in a tentative hug. Despite the tension, they missed him. Janet stood back, watching the reunion with conflicted emotions. But something about John felt off. His demeanor carried more than just guilt or frustration. There was a heaviness in the way he moved, an unspoken truth weighing him down. Janet could feel it, like a storm on the horizon. Whatever John was hiding, it was only a matter of time before it came to light.

The next morning, July and Michelle woke up early and joined Janet in the kitchen. The room buzzed with the soft clinking of dishes and the occasional shuffle of feet as they moved about their morning routine.

"Hey Mom, can I take this cup of coffee to Dad upstairs?" Michelle asked, holding the steaming mug.

Janet glanced at her. "No, leave it on the table. If your dad wants coffee, he can come down and drink it here. But can you go check on him and tell him breakfast is ready?"

Already halfway up the stairs, Michelle called back, "Daaaaaaaad! Breakfast is ready!" Her voice echoed through the house.

She knocked on the door to the kids' bedroom and peeked inside. "Dad? Are you awake? Are you here?" The room was empty. The beds were untouched, their blankets still neatly folded. On the floor lay a crumpled pillow and blanket — signs that John had opted for the ground instead of the bed.

Michelle's heart skipped a beat. "Mom! Dad isn't here!" she shouted, running back downstairs.

Janet's face tightened, but she calmly responded, "I heard you, Michelle. Come and eat your breakfast."

"But, Mom—"

"Eat first. I'll check upstairs in a moment," Janet interrupted, gently steering Michelle to her seat. As Michelle reluctantly picked at her food, Janet climbed the stairs, her mind spinning with questions.

So, he left again? Without saying goodbye? When? How?

She pushed open the door to the kids' bedroom and scanned the space. The floor pillow and blanket were the only indicators that John had been there. The beds were undisturbed, and there was no sign of sheets or anything else out of place.

If he didn't sleep in the bed, why? Did he leave in the middle of the night? Or just before we woke up?

Janet let out a sigh and headed back downstairs. As she reached the last step, the phone rang, its sharp sound cutting through the quiet. She quickened her pace to grab it, but July beat her to it.

“Hello?” July answered, holding the receiver to his ear.

“Hello?” he repeated. A few seconds passed before a familiar voice broke through the static.

“Hey, July. It’s your dad. Is Mom there?”

July’s eyes widened. “Dad! Where are you? How come you left without eating breakfast or saying goodbye?”

“I’m sorry, son. I had to leave early for work and didn’t want to wake you all. Can you put your mom on the phone?”

July held out the receiver. “Mom, it’s Dad.”

Janet took the phone, her expression unreadable. “John? Where are you?”

“I left early this morning,” John said quickly, his voice steady but distant. “I didn’t want to disturb anyone.”

Janet’s tone sharpened slightly. “You didn’t think to leave a note? Or call earlier to let me know?”

“I’m calling now, aren’t I? I’m sorry, Janet. I’ll be home early tonight, okay?”

She paused, her instincts telling her there was more he wasn’t saying. “All right. We’ll see you tonight.”

“Okay. Bye.”

“Bye.”

As Janet hung up the phone, she stood there for a moment, staring at it as though it might offer her more

answers. Something was off — she could hear it in John's voice. It wasn't just guilt or stress; it was something deeper, something hidden. Turning back to the table where her children sat, Janet resolved to uncover whatever it was before it tore their family apart.

July pulled into their mom's driveway, the crisp February air hinting at the coming spring. The breeze carried a faint promise of warmer days, but the atmosphere inside the car felt heavy. As soon as the engine was off, Michelle hopped out and knocked on the door. Moments later, Janet opened it, her face lighting up with a tired but genuine smile.

"Hi, my babies, come on in," she said warmly, pulling them into a hug.

"Hey, Mom, how are you holding up?" July asked as they stepped into the house, the familiar scent of their childhood home wrapping around them.

"I'm okay," Janet replied with a small sigh. "I couldn't sleep much, so I stayed up and made a call to the VA office about the funeral arrangements."

John Park, a retired E-8 U.S. Army Reservist, had relied on the Veterans Affairs Office for his medical care, housing needs, and now, the final preparations for his farewell. While the VA often struggled with its processes, they made an earnest effort to support veterans and their families in difficult times. John became a Reservist after serving 4 years Active Duty in the U.S. Army. He loved serving his country.

“Did you manage to get through to someone?” July asked, his voice steady and concerned.

“Yes, but it took a long time. Almost waited 30 minutes before I finally spoke to someone. They said a funeral coordinator would reach out to me in the next couple of days,” Janet explained, her weariness evident.

July placed a hand on her shoulder. “Got it. Mom, you look exhausted. Why don’t you get some rest? Michelle and I will be here and make you something to eat.”

Janet smiled softly. “That sounds good.” She kissed each of them on the cheek and shuffled off to her bedroom, her steps slow and deliberate.

As the door clicked shut behind her, July turned to Michelle. “Let’s see what Mom’s got in her fridge.” They opened the refrigerator, and it was stuffed to the brim with an eclectic mix of ingredients, containers, and jars — more than the small fridge seemed capable of holding.

“Classic Koreans,” July muttered, shaking his head with a grin. “Always have way more than they need.”

Michelle laughed, pulling out a few items. “Seriously, though. Who’s eating all this?”

“I don’t even know what to make. Should we just order something?” July asked, overwhelmed by the sheer number of options.

Michelle shot him a look. “That’s so typical of you. Always looking for the easiest way out when things feel overwhelming.”

She grabbed more ingredients from the fridge with determined hands. "I'll cook. You can help."

July raised an eyebrow. "Help? Like chopping vegetables or just staying out of your way?"

"Both," Michelle said with a smirk. "Now grab a cutting board. Let's make something good for Mom."

Reluctantly, July obliged, knowing that this moment — however ordinary it seemed—was exactly what their mom needed most: her kids coming together, just like old times.

An hour passed as July and Michelle prepared a meal, their laughter and shared memories filling the kitchen. The comforting aroma of cooking brought warmth to the house.

"Remember when you got your driver's license and rear-ended a car the same day?" July teased.

"Oh my God, don't remind me," Michelle groaned.

"That guy was furious! 'Hey! Look what you did! I just got this car out of the shop!'" July mimicked, laughing. "The look on your face was priceless."

"I thought he was going to kill me," Michelle said, shaking her head. "And you trying to 'defuse' the situation? Yeah, that didn't help."

"Hey, I'm not great with confrontation," July admitted.

"Mom was so mad when we got home, but she eventually got over it. Probably hasn't forgotten, though."

With the table set, July debated waking Janet. “Think I should get Mom up? It’s been an hour and a half.”

“Just check if she’s awake,” Michelle suggested.

As July walked to the bedroom, he glanced at the photos lining the hallway — snapshots of their lives together. So many memories of us. Not enough of Dad.

He peeked into Janet’s room. She was sound asleep. Quietly, he closed the door and returned to the kitchen. “She’s still out. Let’s eat and save her some,” he said.

“Good idea. Don’t want it getting cold.”

Before digging in, they said a quiet prayer for their dad, their mom, and the road ahead. Just as they started eating, Janet appeared, looking tired but calm.

“Mom, you’re awake?” Michelle asked, hurrying to help her to the table.

“The smell woke me,” Janet said with a faint smile.

Sitting down, she gazed at her kids. “You two mean the world to me. My babies.”

As they were about to eat, July’s phone rang. The screen showed an unfamiliar number. “Sorry, I’ll take this real quick,” he said, stepping into the living room.

“Hello? Who is this?”

“July, it’s me — Brad. Bradley Gates.”

July froze. He hadn’t heard Brad’s voice in years, not since leaving the Air Force.

How did he find me? Why now?

Janet kept herself busy that day, trying to hold her swirling questions about John at bay. She cleaned the house, took the children to the park, and ran errands. By the time they returned home that afternoon, the routine had softened the edges of her worry. July helped carry the groceries into the kitchen while Michelle, cheery and playful, seemed to have moved on from the tension of the previous night.

“July, can you spend some time with your sister?” Janet asked as she put away the last of the groceries.

“Sure, Mom! Michelle, let’s go upstairs and build something cool with Lego.” He grinned as he led his sister upstairs.

July’s Lego collection was massive, filled with mismatched pieces from countless sets. He never followed instructions, preferring to let his imagination guide him. He built spaceships, towers, and trucks — only to tear them down and start again.

As he pulled out the containers, Michelle plopped down on the floor. “What are we going to build today?” he asked.

“I want to build a castle!” Michelle exclaimed, opening lids with enthusiasm.

“Castle it is!” July poured the Lego pieces onto the floor.

As they worked, the comforting sounds of their mother cooking and the scent of food wafted upstairs, making their stomachs rumble.

“Mom! Is dinner almost ready?” July shouted.

“Almost, honey!” Janet called back.

The phone rang just then. Janet wiped her hands on her apron and answered. As she did, the radio began cutting in and out.

“Hello?” she said.

“Hi, is this Janet Park?” The voice on the other end was unfamiliar.

“Yes, this is Janet.” Her tone shifted, uncertain.

“Is your husband John Park?” A heavy pause followed. Janet hesitated, her heart sinking.

“Yes... he’s my husband. What’s this about?”

“I’m an ER nurse here at Los Angeles General. I’m afraid I have bad news. John was in a serious car accident tonight.”

Janet froze, one hand flying to her mouth as tears welled up.

“Ma’am, are you still there?”

“Yes, yes, I’m here,” she said, her voice shaking. “I’ll be on my way.”

“When you arrive, go straight to the ER and ask for your husband.”

“Is he stable? How bad is it?”

“He’s stable, but the doctor will give you more information.”

Janet hung up and hurried upstairs, emotions from the past two days crashing over her.

“Kids, we have to go. Something happened to your father,” she said, her voice urgent.

“What happened to Dad, Mom?” July asked, his concern immediate.

“There’s no time to explain. He’s in the hospital.”

She rushed the children downstairs, quickly bundling them into jackets and shoes. But as she opened the front door, she froze.

Across the street, by a large tree, stood a familiar figure.

I’ve seen this figure before... where?

And then it hit her — the shadowy figure under the streetlight in Busan back in 1973 and again in the restaurant where John and Janet dined for the first time in 1974.

It can’t be...