

Jung Yun

Excerpt of O BEAUTIFUL

Chapter 1

Men talk to her on planes. She doesn't invite it anymore; it's just something that happens. Usually, she travels with things to armor herself against unwanted conversation. Headphones. A sleeping mask. An oversized sweatshirt with a hood. But there was no time to pack today, only a few frantic minutes to throw clean clothes into a bag. She doesn't remember bringing the Restoril—she doesn't even remember having a prescription for Restoril—but thank God, she thinks. Thank God. Elinor shakes a capsule loose and examines the strange combination of colors pinched between her fingers—half calming blue, half urgent red—with the words FOR SLEEP etched on the blue half. Across the side of the bottle are the usual warnings, small icons with lines drawn through them, telling her not to drink, drive, or operate heavy machinery. She taps her empty plastic cup on the tray table, trying to reconstitute a full sip of Bloody Mary from the thin ring on the bottom. The capsule is horse sized, too big to be swallowed dry.

The man in the window seat looks at her. He's been looking at her every few minutes since takeoff.

“Will someone be waiting for you when we land?” he asks. “Or were you planning to rent a car?”

It's the third or fourth time he's tried making conversation. She presses her call button for a flight attendant.

“I don't need a ride, thanks.”

“No, I just meant—you know we're only like two hours away, right?” He motions toward the pill with his chin. “My ex used to take those. They're really strong.”

Elinor doesn't know what to do with this information except pretend that she didn't hear it. She scans the nearby rows, wishing there was an empty one she could move to, but the plane is small and full. Someone at the magazine made all her travel arrangements. If it had been up to her, she would have chosen another flight, another carrier. Anything to avoid flying in such a small plane. There are only forty or fifty seats in the cabin. Four per row, two on each side of a narrow aisle, a low ceiling that slopes even lower at the edges, as if the walls are curling in on them. Elinor is tall, a hair shy of five foot ten. She wonders how this man, who's at least a head taller and pressed up against his window, can stand it.

"I don't mean to pry," he says. "I just remember trying to wake her in the mornings. She'd be completely knocked out."

"I'd prefer that right now."

"Oh, sure." He laughs. "But what happens after we land?"

Sleeping pills rarely work for her. She's cycled through enough prescriptions to know. The ones that actually make her fall asleep never keep her in that state for long. But even a restless half hour would be better than fending off a conversation that she doesn't want to have. She flicks the man a tepid smile.

"I won't be able to get out of this row if you're passed out." Now he's smiling back.

"You'll have to climb over me then." She pauses, second-guessing her choice of words, which she worries he'll interpret as playful, maybe even flirtatious. She puts the capsule on her tray table, wondering when the flight attendant will notice her call button so she can order another drink. She can feel the man looking at her again—staring this time, she thinks.

"You have some interesting tattoos. I don't see a lot of Asian women with tattoos usually, not like that, at least."

Elinor has been freezing since takeoff. Because of the cold, because of him, she's been sitting with her arms crossed for most of the flight. But even this position can't hide the abstract patterns that extend from her shoulders to wrists, the dark black ink alternating with the negative space of her skin.

"I have a couple too." The man pulls up his sleeve, revealing a skull wearing a red beret, with two rifles crossed underneath like pirate bones. The banner above the skull reads 187TH INFANTRY DIVISION, DESERT STORM. Farther up his arm are three women's names, centered and stacked on top of one another in ornate cursive font: AMANDA. ASHLEY. ALYSSA. Ex-wives or daughters, she imagines. She dislikes tattoos that function as biography. She doesn't think people should talk about them—their own or anyone else's. She rubs her arms again, standing the fine hairs on end.

"Are you cold?" He unzips his jacket. "Here . . ."

"It's fine, really. I don't need it."

"But I'm actually getting hot in this."

In his rush to take off the jacket, he pulls his elbow back too far and knocks it against the window. His face stiffens for a moment, and then recovers with a tight smile. When he finally offers her the jacket, she decides it's too cold to refuse. She drapes the soft black fleece over herself like a blanket, grateful for the warmth but not certain how to avoid talking to someone when she's wearing his clothes.

"So . . ." He pumps his elbow back and forth. "Are you from Chicago, or did you just connect in O'Hare?"

"I'm from New York."

“Ah. Fun city. You must be like an artist or a musician,” he says, glancing at her tattoos again.

In her late teens and twenties, men usually assumed that she was a model. The polite ones plied her with drinks and conversation before asking the question outright, while others simply cornered her in crowded nightclubs and bars, shouting things like “You! Don’t I know you?” They didn’t, of course. By industry standards, she had a prettier-than-average face, but not a well-known one. Not the kind that could fetch ten grand a day just for getting out of bed. She had over fifteen years of steady catalog work and the occasional print ad. Once, she shot a commercial for suntan lotion that never aired but for which she still got paid. Toward the end of her career, her main source of income was a company that made sewing patterns. She appeared on the front of their pattern envelopes, modeling the finished products—matronly, shapeless clothes that resembled colorful sacks. It’s been years since Elinor had any work, but she still has difficulty presenting herself as something other than what she was.

“I write,” she says, rolling the Restoril back and forth between her fingers. She considers just swallowing the capsule dry, but worries it will lodge in her throat.

“You mean like Stephen King?”

“No. I write nonfiction.”

“Oh, so you’re a journalist.” This seems to impress him even more. “What newspaper do you work for?”

She’s not a journalist, not in the way that he probably means it, with a beat to cover and a daily filing deadline. Elinor glances across the aisle at a middle-aged redhead playing a card game on her phone. They make eye contact for a moment and the woman smiles at her as if to say *God, I’m so sorry*.

“I write for magazines, not newspapers . . .” Elinor realizes this makes her sound more successful than she really is. “As a freelancer.”

After a moment in which no question is asked, the man says, “I’m in finance.”

This strikes her as untrue. He’s a salesman of some sort. A salesman flying coach. She can tell by the jacket he loaned her, the black canvas bag at his feet, the notepad wedged into his seat pocket. They all have the same circular logo with a white letter H drawn inside. Haines, she thinks. *Businessweek* recently did a feature on their CEO, a smug-looking man who’d allowed himself to be photographed in a Stetson, standing akimbo in a field of pumpjacks and staring dreamily into the horizon.

“So are you headed to North Dakota to write an article about the oil boom? Because I work in the industry, you know, in case you have any questions.”

“I actually grew up in the area, so I already—”

“My company manufactures hydraulic drills. We were one of the first to focus on sales and service in the Bakken.” He exhales sharply. His breath still smells like the Jack and Cokes he drank earlier. “I’ve been making this trip to Avery at least once a month since 2006. It was pretty much a ghost town back then, but six years later and I hardly recognize the place. Nothing but roughnecks and field reps everywhere you look now.”

It’s not clear if he heard her say that she grew up in North Dakota, or whether he even cares. What is clear is that the polite shrugs and disinterested smiles aren’t working. Even her curt, unfriendly replies have failed to shut him up. Directness, she suspects, might be her only hope.

“I’m sorry, but these small planes make me nervous, so I was just hoping to get some sleep on this flight.”

“You think this is small? You should have seen the vomit comets we used to fly in before everyone and their mother started coming to the Bakken.”

“Yes, well . . . I’d really like to sleep for a few hours before we land.”

“Oh, sure.” He pauses. “But you know that pill’s probably going to knock you out for longer, right?”

She leans into the aisle, wondering where the flight attendants have gone.

“Whenever my ex took one of those—” He whistles and swings his forearm down, felling an imaginary tree. “Eventually, she had to switch prescriptions because she’d wake up so groggy, she wouldn’t be able to take the kids to school.”

“Look . . .” She tells herself to end it finally. Be kind but unambiguous. He’s tested her patience long enough. “I appreciate your concern, but I’m not in the mood to talk right now. I hope you understand.”

He nods a few times, as if he needs a moment to process. “Okay then. No problem.” He picks up the unopened bottle of water from his tray table and places it on hers. It’s the miniature kind, shaped like a hand grenade. “Here. You can have this. To take your pill with.”

“You don’t want it?”

He shakes his head.

“Would you like your jacket back?”

“No. You hang on to it. I wasn’t lying when I said it was getting too hot.”

She can tell that he’s trying to sound casual and obliging, but his cheeks are a bright, mortified shade of red. He rifles through his bag and removes a magazine, tearing the plastic wrapper off with his nails. Just when she thinks their exchange is over, he turns to her again.

“I was only making conversation, you know. I don’t pick up random women on planes, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“I didn’t think you were trying to pick—”

“Yeah, well, don’t flatter yourself. You’re not my type.”

His anger seems disproportionate to what she said and how she said it, but Elinor decides not to worry about this now. She cracks the seal on the bottle’s cap and swallows the Restoril with some water. The capsule goes down slowly, leaving behind a bitter, unpleasant aftertaste. She finishes off the rest of the bottle and sits back in her seat, burrowing under the heavy fleece. From the corner of her eye, she watches the man flip through his magazine, which appears to be about motorcycles. The way he flicks his wrist, so quickly and forcefully, causes some of the pages to tear.

“Thank you for the water,” she says.

“You’re welcome.”

He turns off her call button and returns to his magazine, still red-faced and tearing pages. Under different circumstances, she might worry that she came off as rude, but he’s a stranger, she thinks—someone she’ll never see again after they land, no different from the other men on the other trips whose names she can’t remember or never really knew. It used to seem adventurous, meeting someone on a flight, deciding if she liked him enough to give him her number or even follow him back to his hotel. If she were a couple of decades younger, she probably would have been more receptive to this one. She used to revel in attention, good or bad, but forty-two and twenty-two are so different. She’s not the same stupid girl she used to be.

Elinor sinks into her seat and feels herself slipping, giving in to the startling efficiency of the pill as a heaviness spreads through her body. She tries to brush a stray hair from her face, but

lifting her hand suddenly requires both thought and effort, more effort than her muscles are capable of now. The loss of control frightens her; a beat of panic flutters through her chest. She reminds herself that this is how sleeping pills are supposed to work—the exhausted body giving in before the restless mind. The white noise of the plane thickens, a whirl of gears and fans and metal. She blinks back sleep, struggling to keep her eyes open until she can't anymore. Then the dark tide drags her out.

Chapter 2

A crowd is forming in front of her. People she doesn't know. They rush past without excusing themselves and assemble shoulder to shoulder. She stares at their backs, a high wall of black—black hair, black overcoats, black suits. Elinor can't get around them, but she senses that she has to. They're hiding something. She wants to know what. She moves toward the edge where the crowd is thinnest and wriggles through the wall of bodies, her fear of tight spaces momentarily suspended.

No one in the crowd wants her there. Someone steps on her foot. Someone else brushes roughly against her side. There's a pulling sensation, and then a grabbing, like people are closing in on her, not letting her through. Elinor tries to push forward, resisting the onslaught until she can't anymore. When she turns to leave, the sensation stops for a moment. Then it starts again, crawling slowly up her hip. But this isn't some ragged dream, is it? And it isn't a crowd of strangers with outstretched hands. Is she touching herself, she wonders? Pressure registers against her skin, urgent and firm. It travels down her chest and between her thighs, the same path she sometimes traces at night. She's touching herself. Or someone is touching her. Someone is groping the space between her legs, spreading them open, massaging her there. Is the man—is the man sitting next to her doing this? Groping her beneath the jacket? Is he the warmth she feels on the side of her face, breathing against her skin?

Elinor sits up with a start, clutching her armrests. Her eyes are slow to adjust to the dim cabin. Everything around her looks and feels warped. The woman across the aisle is asleep, her chin tucked tightly against her chest. A few rows ahead, someone's reading light casts a halo

over his silver hair. She wants to turn and look at the man sitting next to her, but she's terrified of what she might see, what he might do. Elinor pulls forward on the armrests and launches herself into the aisle, stumbling toward one of the flight attendants in the back of the plane. Her vision is clouded at the edges, as if she's walking through a poorly lit tunnel. She grips every headrest she passes, putting one tentative foot in front of the other. Twice, she stumbles into someone's arm or leg, provoking irritated, half-asleep glances.

The flight attendant in the galley is snapping a trash bag off the end of a roll. Elinor reaches out and catches her by the sleeve.

"Ma'am?" she says, not looking at Elinor's face but her offending hand. "What is it that you need?"

It was so clear to her a few seconds ago. But now the doubt begins to settle in. What should she say? How does she know it was real? What if it was just the pill and the alcohol, making her imagine?

"*Ma'am?* You need to take your hand off me, do you understand?"

Elinor stares at her, trying to focus. The contents of her stomach begin to bubble up toward her throat. "The bathroom," she says hoarsely. "It's where?"

The flight attendant frowns. She doesn't look angry or annoyed so much as confused. "It's behind you. Literally two steps behind you. Is there any . . ."

Before she can hear the end of the question, Elinor locks herself in the bathroom.

"We'll be landing soon," the flight attendant says loudly.

"What's the matter?" a man asks.

"Oh, I have no idea." The flight attendant lowers her voice, still audible through the closed door. "Some woman just went in there looking all crazy."

“Crazy’s going around on this flight. The guy in 9C wanted another whiskey. I’m like, ‘*Sir*, we’re about to land and you’ve already had five.’ I swear, we go through more booze on this route . . .”

Elinor stares at her reflection in the mirror. She does look crazy. Wild, almost. Her long black hair is matted from leaning against the headrest. Her forehead and upper lip are beaded with sweat, and a line of dried white spit streaks diagonally across her chin. She tries to wash her face, but the sink basin is too shallow and the water that trickles from the tap is warm. The effect isn’t bracing; it doesn’t shock her awake. All it does is smear her mascara, which she rubs off with shaking hands and paper towels along with the rest of her makeup. Elinor leans toward the mirror, trying to focus on her pupils, which are severely constricted, no bigger than the tip of a pencil. She tells herself it was just the pill, it was just the pill, it was just the pill.

The plane hits a patch of rough air and pitches sharply off to the side. She puts her hands out to steady herself, unnerved that she can touch both walls. The bright blue chemicals in the toilet, sloshed around by the sudden rocking motion, sting her nostrils with the scent of ammonia, mixed with something that reminds her of dirty diapers. She can’t be in this bathroom much longer, not with these walls, this smell. When the plane rocks again, more violently than it did before, she opens the door an inch and looks outside. The cabin lights and fasten seat belt signs are on. Everyone is waking and preparing to land. The captain is making an announcement about turbulence, only half of which she can hear through a thin crackle of static. Elinor walks slowly, watching the back of the man’s head as she approaches their row. She takes her seat again, barely hovering over the edge of it, and leaves her seat belt unbuckled. He ignores her, yawning into his fist as if he’s tired or bored. He makes no comments about her nap, asks no questions about how she feels, which seems odd to her. She wants to look at him now, to read his

face and see what it says. Elinor turns as dots of amber appear outside his window, the beginnings of Avery's sparsely lit grid.

"What—what did you do?" she asks.

"Huh?" His voice has lost all the coaxing charm it had before.

"Did you . . ."

"Please put your seat belt on, ma'am." The flight attendant, the same one from the galley, stops and watches Elinor until she does as she's told.

The descent makes her nauseous again. Every air pocket lifts and lowers them, as if the plane is made of paper. Elinor tries to brace herself on the armrests but grazes the man's elbow and recoils. She shuts her eyes and sits compactly for the rest of the landing, elbows propped on knees, forehead cupped in hands. Somewhere, not far from where she's sitting, a little girl's voice rises with curiosity.

"What's wrong with that lady?"

Elinor doesn't need to look up to know that she's the lady. The girl's mother shushes her as the nose of the plane drops toward the ground and the landing gear extends into place beneath them, the discomfiting sound of metal grinding against metal. Elinor rummages through the seat pocket for an air sickness bag, but finds only a safety card and a sticky candy bar wrapper left behind from a previous flight. She leans forward again, squeezing her eyes shut as the plane hits the tarmac too hard and bounces. Once, twice. It touches down the third time and every mechanized part in the engine roars in deafening unison. The plane continues to speed, much longer and faster than it should, on and on until she thinks there can't possibly be any runway left. As soon as she's convinced of this, as soon as she imagines the plane careening into a barrier wall and bursting into flames, it's over.

Bells ring. Metal buckles release. People shift and gather their things. Elinor sits up, blinking back spots, her teeth sore from the set of her jaw.

“Hope you had a nice nap,” the man says.

There’s something in his voice now, something both menacing and slightly mocking. It infuriates her. She grabs her bag and pushes into the aisle, cutting ahead of people who mutter under their breath as she moves toward the front of the plane. A flight attendant stands beside the cockpit door with a brittle smile.

“Have a good evening,” he says.

Elinor stops in front of him. “I think I might have been . . .” Why can’t she just say it? What is she even trying to describe? It felt real to her, but not exactly.

“Did you forget something?”

A man squeezes past, bumping Elinor in the back with his suitcase.

“Ma’am, would you please move out of the aisle? People need to get by.” The flight attendant steers Elinor into the galley by the elbows, startling her with his icy hands. “If you forgot something in your seat area, you’ll just have to wait here until everyone deplanes.”

Elinor is so aware of her breathing, the hummingbird-fast beat of her heart. She can’t be in this narrow space while a surge of people comes at her. She can’t be here when the man eventually catches up. She steps around the flight attendant and pushes her way onto the jet bridge. Her legs feel stiff and heavy at first, but the more she focuses on distancing herself from the plane, the more she regains control of them. She walks faster and faster, passing people on conveyer belts, eventually speeding through the terminal as if she’s late for a connection. The airport is much bigger than she expected. It stretches on and on, all kiosks and newsstands and gleaming new glass and metal. She follows the signs toward baggage claim and the exit, her

calves knotted with cramps from pounding against the white marble floors. As she steps onto the escalator, she looks up at a large banner hanging overhead. It welcomes her and her fellow passengers to Avery, North Dakota.