

**P** *RINCESS*

**A** *UNE*



*A Novel by*

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# *Part I*

# *The First Birthday*

**M**ARY was fast asleep in her little crib, with her head cocked to the right and her thumb in her mouth. A wisp of her golden hair was resting on her forehead. Her tiny hand, curled up on her chest, was bobbing up and down to the gentle rhythm of her heart.

Junee bent over the crib and reached out for her baby. But the moment her fingertips touched Mary's tender baby skin, she knew she'd made a mistake. She felt a sting in her eyes and a flutter on her eyelids.

She wheeled away from her baby at once, but the muscles on her face were already twitching and writhing. Her lips quivered, as a mushy heat wave gushed up from her chest, squeezed through her burning throat and threatened to pry open her jaws. Junee put both hands over her mouth and held her breath.

She had to stop her cry. She couldn't wake up her baby on this crucial day. She braced herself still and shut her eyes tight. One, two, three, four, five long seconds passed.

Everything began to subside. Junee carefully lowered herself to the floor and sat down, with her back to the wall. She kept her

mouth covered and her eyes closed. She was still holding her breath. She was afraid to let go.

She had to find something to focus her attention on. The clock. Yes, the sound of the clock. She would let her breath out, a little bit at a time, to the sound of tick-tocks. Slow and easy. Slow and easy.

Breathe out.... *Tick-tock. Tick-tock.* Hold.... *Tick-tock. Tick-tock.* Breathe out some more.... *Tick-tock. Tick-tock.* Hold....

Now inhale, in twos.... *Tick-tock. Tick-tock.* Exhale.... *Tick-tock. Tick-tock.* Inhale.... *Tick-tock. Tick-tock.* Exhale.... *Tick-tock. Tick-tock.*....

It was four o'clock in the morning. Just two more hours to go now. She just had to hold herself together for two more hours—and then for five more minutes. She had to stay strong for her baby. She couldn't cry. She couldn't fall apart. For her baby's sake.

"Oh, please, God. Please let her sleep on. Please don't let her wake up.... Oh, my baby, sleep on. Sleep, my baby. Sleep."

Two more hours. Only two more hours. And then, five minutes. Then, it would be over.



At six o'clock sharp, she heard it—the pattering and cranking of a car engine outside her apartment. Then she saw the reflection from headlights sweeping across the window curtains as the taxi made a U-turn.

She bolted straight up, rigid and tight. She was all ears. The taxi door opening with a creak, and then closing with a heavy thunk. The footsteps on the pavement. The keys jangling and clanging. She saw the doorknob turning. Then they were there in front of her, her friend Sparky and a woman from the adoption agency.

June heard a command in her head, "Go over to your baby and scoop her up."

Her body obeyed, but she didn't feel Mary's weight on her arms as she picked her up and held her. Sparky was walking toward her with his arms open. June thrust her baby at him. She saw his face.

She saw him holding Mary. She saw his lips move, but she didn't hear anything.

"The bag. Over there," she heard herself saying and saw her finger pointing.

Sparky stepped up closer to her and said something again, but all she heard was a rumble.

"Go," she mouthed.

Sparky looked at the agency lady, turned and gazed back at Junee, down at the baby, back up at her again. Then, he nodded and slowly backed away from her. The three quietly left the apartment.

Junee stood there motionless, plastered to the floor like a statue—on the very spot where she held her baby for the last time. For how long? She could not tell. By the time she managed to lurch her way to the windows and peek out, the city of Seoul was waking up to a frosty pink dawn of another winter day. Junee opened the door and looked out. She let her eyes crawl up the road, all the way to where it ended in a dot. There was no trace of the taxi that took her baby away. And there were no tears in her eyes.



There were still no tears in her eyes when Sparky came back to her later that morning.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" he asked, as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

"The crib. And the toys." Junee heard herself saying. The voice sounded foreign to her ears as if it were coming out of someone else's mouth.

"No problem. Consider it done," he answered.

Her eyes remained dry, even as she sat and watched the baby furniture and toys being taken away.

Sparky brought in some food and a drink. Junee took a sip of the drink, but wouldn't touch the food.

"Let's go for a short drive, June," he coaxed her. "It'll be good to get some fresh air, out in the open."

She shook her head.

“There’s one more thing.... The baby pictures.... Pack the photos for me.”

“Pack the photos? What...what’re you going to do with the photos? If you don’t mind my asking.”

There was a long pause. Her mind wasn’t working well yet.

“You’re not going to throw them away, I hope,” Sparky spoke first.

“No.... I’m just going to put them away for a while. For a year. Until her second birthday.”

Mary’s first birthday was just two weeks away. The agency was willing to wait until after her birthday, but Junee had said no. The sooner, the better, she’d said.

Sparky spent the rest of that afternoon with her. He’d already re-scheduled all his English classes he was supposed to teach that day. He moved the TV, the radio, and the phone out to the kitchen for Junee, so that she wouldn’t have to go into the bedroom for the time being. He also tried to convince her to spend the night in his apartment.

“You won’t be able to sleep much anyway. We both know that. So we can just stay up together, you know, talking and stuff,” he said.

She shook her head.

“I have to stay here. I don’t want to lose this place. I don’t want to move. I have to learn.”

“Will you at least let me come and stay here with you, then? Just for a few nights? You shouldn’t be here alone, you know. Not right now.”

“No. No. I have to learn to be alone. I have to...I’m going to be working anyway. Yes, tonight. I have to.”

Junee was a bartender, but she didn’t really have to work that night. Mr. Chang, her boss, had already told her to take off as much time as she needed. But she insisted on going to work.

“I have to keep busy. That’s the best way.”

In the end, Sparky had to give up.

“All right, all right,” he said, shaking his head. “But just remember. I’m just over in the next block. You call me, okay, June? If you

start to feel anything funny, call me right away. Okay?”

“Okay.”

He searched her face for a while. “You seem to be taking all this real well, but...I’m still not sure. Just don’t try to deal with this all by yourself, June. I worry about that with you.”



For two weeks after Mary’s departure, Junee’s friends and co-workers at the bar watched her cleaning frenzy with wary eyes. Every bottle, every glass, every window, every chair and every table got a thorough cleaning five times over, so that they gleamed and sparkled even in the dark.

Back at home, she sewed new curtains. She knitted new sweaters. She hung new wallpapers. She relined every drawer and shelf. She cleaned out closets and fussed over her plants. One thing she didn’t do was sleep, except for some fitful dozing off here and there.

Finally, Mary’s first birthday came and went without an incident, and everyone around her let out a sigh of relief. Junee herself believed that the worst was behind her. So she pushed Sparky to go ahead with his long-planned fishing trip.

*I’ll be fine. I am fine. It’s a short trip anyway. What can happen in five days? Don’t worry. I have plenty of people keeping an eye on me.*

But even in her fuzzy state of mind, she was aware that there was something different about this episode. Even as she went about her business as usual, she still couldn’t shake an eerie sensation of watching herself from a distance, as if she were an actress in a movie.

During her past incidents, she always felt as if she were drowning. She was overwhelmed with too much stuff welling up inside. This time, it was just the opposite. She felt nothing. She felt like a stranger to herself. She wasn’t really living, but she wasn’t dead, either. Being trapped in an arid no-man’s land was even worse than being caught in a flash flood. She longed to pop free to either the world of the living or the world of the dead.

But she wasn't sure what she should try to fix herself. This was something new. She'd have to figure something out. But when she tried to think, she drew a blank. She sat down with her journal and a pen. Nothing. She put on her favorite 45s. Nothing. She tried singing. All the correct notes and words came out of her mouth, but it was no longer a song. She couldn't even whistle. She called out to her spiritual friends, to her God. No one came. No voice. No image.

A week after Mary's birthday and two days after Sparky left for the fishing trip, Juneec took a day off from work, the first in three weeks. Solitude was something she always relished. Whenever she felt scattered in too many places, she spent a quiet day all by herself. It worked every time. By the end of the day, everyone came home, and she felt whole and alive again. So she decided to try it. She had no other option left.

It wasn't easy to go into the room that she had avoided for three weeks. Once there, she sat on the floor and struggled to concentrate on her breathing. Gradually, she began to feel herself back under her skin.

First, she heard the tick-tock sound of the clock. Next, she felt the warmth of the sunrays on her face. She opened her eyes and saw how bright and blue the sky looked. She watched groups of dust particles square-dancing in the beam. She looked around. The room felt cozy and peaceful to her. Toward the end of the day, she even felt the urge to cook. So, she went to the market for groceries. Everything went fine.

When it finally came, she was in the kitchen preparing her dinner, slicing a packet of tofu into little squares. A pot of soup was simmering on the stove, and the rice cooker was rattling to vent steam. It was good to have her senses back once again. The chop-chop rhythm of a knife meeting the cutting board. The pungent smell of *kimchee* playing in her nostrils. The peppery taste of red bean paste zinging her tongue.

Then, without a warning, the long-forgotten words of Grandma echoed in her ears:

“Your mother...she just up and vanished one day. Just like that, no word, no letter, no nothing. Who could blame her, the way that son of a bitch was treating her? But you were not even one yet. You poor little thing! Your mother must have been twenty-three at the time. Maybe even twenty-two...was such a beautiful girl, your mother. You look just like her.”

Something snapped inside her. She was disoriented and dizzy for a second, as if she were tossed up into the air. Then, she was just an empty shell. She was tumbling down inside, falling and falling.

*Junee as a baby, not quite one. Her mother, twenty-three or twenty-two. Her Mary, not quite one. Junee herself, twenty-two.*

In the end, all her struggles to escape her lot in life came to nothing, zilch. Her life was a total loss. She'd become an exact carbon copy of her mother. She'd become the kind of mother who abandoned her own daughter. In spite of all her mighty efforts, the only thing she managed in the end was to repeat her mother's life. She took on the fight against fate, only to play into its hands in the end, right down to its numbering game. Twenty-two. Not quite one. Twenty-two. Not quite one.

Junee descended onto the floor like a popped balloon, and the tears bubbled out of her eyes. Still no sound out of her mouth. She couldn't make any part of her body move, so she just sat there on the kitchen floor. The tears flowed freely, down her cheeks, down her neck, through the valley in her chest—just like that water flowing freely from the faucet all night long.



The next several weeks were one big blob in her memory. She remembered bits and pieces of images, but no thread that connected them.

She remembered hearing the phone ringing and ringing. Then

later, the doorbell, the banging on the door, someone breaking the windows to get in. She remembered seeing her boss rushing into her kitchen. That should have surprised her, but it didn't. Mr. Chang, as silent and unflappable as a statue of Buddha, wasn't the type to get sucked into the personal matters of his employees. But there he was, bright and early in the morning, checking up on her, hours before Junee was even due back in the bar.

Then, she remembered being in a hospital where there were bars on the windows. There was always someone watching her like a hawk. They never left her alone.

After she came back home, Sparky and her other friends were constantly in and out of her apartment. There was an American priest who spoke fluent Korean. There were medics and nurses from the nearby U.S. Army base. There were visits to a clinic and pills that she was told to take.



Two months after the breakdown, Junee went back to work. But the worst wasn't over yet. She ran hot and cold. One moment, she was her old strong self. The next, she was a teary mess. Her grip on life was still slippery. She still hadn't found a firm foothold. So often, she felt as if she were thrashing and flailing, barely hanging on.

There were so many bad thoughts that she had to fight, not just the guilt. She went over her past in her mind a thousand times. Where did she go wrong? What did she do wrong? What could she have done differently? But the answer was always the same. Not a whole lot. She really did her very best to build a better life, to live her life the right way.

But what did she have to show for all her efforts? What had she really accomplished? Nothing, she kept hearing in her head. So if her best efforts weren't good enough to overcome her obstacles, what made her think that the future would be any different? Why keep trying? Why bother to go on?

But even that nagging sense of failure and futility wasn't the worst part. The memories, the images, as vivid as ever. All those menacing

characters from her past that she'd worked so hard for so long to banish from her head were now back with her. It was as if they took up a permanent residence in her head, while she was out reeling, half out of her mind, unable to mind the store. They were there all the time, day and night, wherever she went, taunting her and messing with her. For the first time in her life, she had to admit it to herself. She was helpless against these creatures in her head this time around.

Sparky happened to drop by her apartment one day, during one of her bad times. The moment he saw the dirty dishes piled up high in the kitchen sink without a drop of water in them, he declared.

"That's it! You are going back to Dr. Lee."

Dr. Lee was one of the two doctors who treated her in the clinic.

"He already offered to see you for free. So you have no excuse," Sparky said.

"I don't want to be anybody's charity case," Junee countered.

Within twenty-four hours, Sparky was back with a plan. Dr. Lee had agreed to charge her, but at half the rate. She could see him after-hours once a week. Sparky himself would cover half of the counseling cost. Junee was reluctant to accept his help, but he was relentless.

"This is no charity case. The way I see it, you have a right to at least half of my income. Because you're a partner in my business."

"I'm a partner? How can that be? You teach those classes all by yourself."

"But whose idea was it to begin with?" he argued. "I never even thought of teaching English, since I don't have a college degree. But you suggested the conversation classes. You told me to specialize in the street language, the real English, you know. Four-letter words and all. You said that a lot of people are curious about that kind of thing.

"Hell, I even remember the exact words you used. 'A college degree won't make you swear any better. You do that just fine as is. All you need is a big mouth, and God knows you have one on you.' Remember that?"

A flicker of a smile tugged at her lips, "Yeah, I remember. But so what? That was just an idea. That doesn't give me a right to your money."

“Like hell, it doesn’t. An idea is everything! That’s how everything gets started. I tell you. Back in my country? If you just have one brilliant idea, you can be a millionaire. Just one idea, you can be fixed for life. It’s true! It can be anything really. An idea for a new product, for a movie, a slogan, an advertisement, anything. Honest to God. I swear...hey, hey! Don’t give me that face. You go ask other Americans, if you don’t believe me. They’ll tell ya.”

Junee still wouldn’t buy his argument.

“Look here, June,” he got serious, gathering up her hands and holding them in his. “Listen to me. What I’m trying to point out is that you did a lot for me over these years. You’re the one who taught me Korean. I owe you a big one just for that. How much money would I be making now, if I couldn’t speak Korean? Nada. Not a penny, that’s for sure. Running all over this country on my own without my Korean? No way, man. You see my point?”

“And look how much money I’m making because of your advice. Christ, I’ve got money coming out of my ears, out of my assho— Oh, well, forget that one. But you know what I mean. And that’s not all. Look at the way I’m being treated here. Like a king! Because I’m a teacher! Nobody, I mean nobody, ever paid me that kind of respect before. And you, my friend. You’re the one who made all this possible. All I’m trying to do here is to return a small favor. That’s not such a terrible thing, is it? It’ll make me feel so great, if I can just do that, June. Would you let me do that, please? Pay you back, just this one time? Would you do that for me? As a friend? Please?”

Junee was silent for a while, “...I, I don’t know.... It’s not just the money.... This whole psychiatrist thing. I don’t need that. I’m just going through a rough time. That’s all. It’s going to fix itself...in time. I’m not crazy, you know.”

“No one’s suggesting that you are. You don’t have to be crazy to see a shrink. And another thing. It’s not going to fix itself, and you know it. You’re not fooling me. You’re scared, too.”

Junee looked away.

“Listen to me, June,” he tried again. “There’s a limit to what you can handle by yourself. It’s no crime to ask for some help. It’s good to get things off your chest sometimes. I know all about that, because

you helped me to do that. Many times. That's one of the things you do so well. You know how to listen. You know how to make people feel safe so that they can open up to you. Why shouldn't you be able to do the same, when you're in a jam? Believe me, I'd be glad to lend you my ears. But I don't have the chops to help you. I can clearly see that. What you need right now is a pro."

"Well, I just don't feel like...I don't feel comfortable to...I, I just don't understand what it is that they do. That kind of doctor."

"Oh, I understand what you're trying to say. I'm no fan of shrinks, myself. But this guy, Dr. Lee. He's all right. I had a chance to get to know him a little, you know, and he's a good guy. He really is. I really believe that. If there's anyone who can help you now, it's him."

Junee still didn't act right away. She kept hoping that she wouldn't need to see Dr. Lee, any doctor. She kept hoping that the problems would go away by themselves. She kept putting it off—until she ran out of the pills. The pharmacy wouldn't let her buy any more, unless she saw a doctor first. She now faced the nights without the help of the pills. Just one such night was enough to force the issue. The morning after, Junee got on the horn and made an appointment to see Dr. Lee.