

Between Heaven and Earth: Book One - The Cost of Freedom - Chapter Six - The Best Laid Plans

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Now that she had a plan of sorts, Jeong Sook endeavored to make it work. For the rest of the summer and into the fall she went to the market with Hyungsang to deliver the eggs. She always had her own to sell. She carefully gleaned them from those that she had gathered and stored in a cool room under the barn. Her dilemma was that, contrary to the egg lady's confidence in her, she had no experience as a thief. She always worried about getting caught. She had no idea what the hazards were. Did Hyungsang or his father ever count the egg yield and compare it to past months? No idea. She knew she should be careful not to swipe so many that someone was going to notice. She did choose the larger eggs for her escape fund.

Managing Hyunsang was fairly simple. She often painted a picture for him of the idyllic life of love and high living they were destined to share. At night she made what passed for passionate love to him. They did have to be careful. Managing her own emotions was more complicated. In her past life she could have never imagined doing the things she was doing now. Her image of herself as a virtuous wife, mother, and daughter was becoming harder and harder to maintain. Now she couldn't deny that she was a thief, as good as a whore, and a liar; all things she had been taught to abhor. Sure, she told herself she had to do these things to survive and reach freedom, but at what cost? What troubled her most was that she was getting good at it.

Every ten days she and Hyungsang loaded up the truck and headed into town. A couple times the boy's father, her lord and master, went into town with them. On both trips Jeong Sook worried that the regular routine would be interrupted. But her husband didn't say a word on the way in and disappeared as soon as the truck was parked. He had his own fish to fry and Jeong Sook assumed it had something to do with either gambling, which he was crazy about, or whores, which was his hobby; like father like son.

Grandma decided to make the trip on the last market day before the traditional Harvest Moon festival. She had to buy the fixins for the ancestors' memorial ceremonies and Jeong Sook, as daughter in law, was required to do the grunt work. The old lady had a lot to say on the way but Jeong Sook didn't have to listen, since she was riding in the truck bed. Grandma was deposited in a tea shop to sip tea and eat pastries while Hyungsang and Jeong Sook made their way to the poultry street. Jeong Sook met grandma there after her business with the egg lady was concluded and spent the afternoon following her around carrying the many packages that were purchased. It was a long afternoon indeed.

On most market days, Hyungsang sold his eggs as quickly as possible. Sometimes he sold to the Korean egg lady and other times he found a more lucrative deal elsewhere. After Hyungsang took off in pursuit of recreation, Jeong Sook always made her way to Oke Ja, her egg lady's stall. They had quickly become co-conspirators and almost friends.

Usually she could count on three hours of free time once Hyungsang had taken his leave. Most of that time she spent with Oke Ja talking over various exit strategies. As promised, the egg lady exchanged her Chinese money for dollars. It was the egg lady's astute opinion that it would take Jeong Sook more than a year to save up enough to pay a broker to buy her freedom.

"We really don't know how much it is going to cost to buy your release from the Jang family. That will depend on the negotiation. For that you are going to need a good broker. The broker is going to take twenty percent off the top. Minimum you have to think in terms of \$3,000. More would be prudent. At the rate you are stealing that's more like three years."

"Three years, I don't think I can endure that long. Why do I need a broker? I could just approach the Jangs myself once I have enough money." Jeong Sook was grasping at straws.

"That would be the stupidest thing to do. They'd just take your money and then sell you down the road. On top of that they will know you got the money by stealing from them. They might even get the police involved. No, you need to use a go-between."

Over time Oke Ja convinced Jeong Sook to admit that her plans for a quick escape were naive. But three more years drove Jeong Sook into the dumps. The stress of the triangle sexual relationship was becoming more difficult by the day. If not for the copious amounts of alcohol that her husband consumed on most nights, she was sure they would be discovered. In addition, she had several scares the last two months when her periods were late.

"Look lady, I've been here for going on seven years. In the beginning it was hard but with patience you can adapt to just about anything. You just need to settle down and slowly work your way out of this. Make up your mind and you can do it."

"Yeah I guess so. But it could blow up any minute."

"And the sky could fall tomorrow but it probably won't."

From Oke Ja she had learned that there was a large ethnic North Korean population in town. There were a few that were legal but most survived day to day in menial jobs and illegal businesses. The most lucrative were of course gambling and trafficking women. They used the borrowed English word and Jeong Sook asked the more experienced woman what it meant.

"Trafficking means to move people from one place to another for money. Women are trafficked to sell as prostitutes."

"Isn't that illegal?" Jeong Sook was acutely aware that the game she was playing felt to her like prostitution.

"Sure it's illegal but that's what makes it so profitable. Brothels, massage parlors, singing rooms, even coffee shops are places where women can be peddled. How did you become the 'little wife' at the Jangs? You were trafficked. You were sold each step of the way and you are liable to get sold again before you are through with China," the egg lady told her matter of factly, "but you know that."

"Can people get out?" Jeong Sook wanted to hear some good news.

"Sure, folks get out all the time. You need to be tough and most of all lucky. Some give up and find a situation they can live with. I wanted out badly but now I'm content to work this miserable market stall. Who knows, maybe if it goes ok I'll just stay here."

"I want out. Get to South Korea if I can. I think I'm lucky and I'm trying to be tough."

"I know that and I'll help you if I can. I've been here long enough to know about everyone in the community; who you can trust and who you have to beware of. Once you put together enough money I'll introduce you to a broker who can get you free of the farm. Then we have to think about what's next. You'll need other brokers to get you out of China. Don't be in too big of a hurry. That's when you screw up and get caught."

Everywhere she looked, Jeong Sook was experiencing new and unfamiliar things. Since her father was not only a party member but also an official in the ministry of culture, Jeong Sook grew up in Pyongyang in the lap of relative privilege. Their large comfortable apartment was in a building in a desirable part of the city and was provided to them by the ministry. Her mother had a position as a music professor in a large prestigious university. They had two maids and a cook. Maintenance was done by the building staff and Jeong Sook and her parents had only to call. Jeong Sook herself was never required to turn her hand to anything resembling manual labor. Instead her life consisted of her academic, musical, and artistic pursuits.

The closest thing to actual work she ever did were the compulsory group labor projects to build the socialist nation. Sweeping the hallways and sidewalks with family and neighbors didn't seem like labor at all. Excursions to public parks or construction sites to do clean up with school chums were treated like fun outings.

Her life as a farmer's wife was mainly back breaking work and she was awkward and clumsy at it. Getting the water, feeding the chickens and pigs, all exhausted her. The simple tools that she was forced to pick

up were more than a little dangerous in her hands. The axe she used to chop ice nearly chopped her foot off. The broom that she swept the house and small courtyard with raised blisters on her hands that bled.

Over the course of months she began to change. Her blisters calloused over and her hands, with cracked and broken nails, began to take on the appearance of the hands of a farm laborer. With a whole lot of trial and error she became a little better with the axe and other tools. In the kitchen, meals that were at first total disasters, became easier to look at and more palatable.

Life was in no way comfortable but more endurable. What kept her going was her plan to escape and she never forgot about it for a moment.