

Between Heaven and Earth: Book Two - A Cross to Bear - Chapter Eighteen - A Second Front

Michael Downey
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It was only a short flight from Seoul's Incheon airport into Beijing. In fact it had taken him longer to get from his home to the airport than the flight's duration. In Beijing he'd changed planes after an hour wait and was off to Harbin. The winter months in Harbin are brutally cold and mid-November was as close you can get to it and still pretend it was autumn. Most folks were already wearing padded clothing, hats, and gloves. He had been gone for two weeks and he had a hundred things to attend to. On the flight he had thought about his wife and kids. It was always an emotional affair to leave them again. As the kids got older they were more accepting of their father's absences or was it resignation.

The short flight into Harbin brought Jeong Sook and her struggles to mind. He believed that she would find her way and that through her victory may well become one of the world's great souls. He had a lot of skin, emotional and intellectual, in the game. He didn't know what exactly to make of her boyfriend. He had reasons to be prejudice against boyfriends from the git go. He had no reason to doubt the American's motives but still he was watchful. He reminded himself that every individual had the potential to step up and do the right thing. He hoped that Guy would turn out to be the partner that Jeong Sook was going to need.

Nick Shin was at the Harbin airport to pick him up. Over the years since the rescue of Hyojin they had pulled off together Nick had become Kim's number

two guy both at the church and also in the ongoing mission to rescue women trapped in deplorable situations. Nick had recently tied the knot with Hyojin and they were expecting their first child. It was a success story that Kim was proud of.

"Welcome back older brother. Everyone is waiting for you."

He used the standard term, hyung, that men used to address an older brother or senior. He called Kim older brother naturally and warmly indicating their close relationship but not as equals.

"I've been thinking of and praying for you all. Hope everyone is well."

"That we are sure of, but in addition to your prayers, there are things that need your direct attention. It's good that you're back now." The younger man had his talents but their operations and ministry required the hand of the pastor.

"What's going on?" The pastor knew in detail what was going on but he needed to get an update so he could prioritize and decide what had to be dealt with first.

"Things with the CCP crack down is getting worse. A lot of folks are scared and don't know what to do." Nick himself was worried about the increasingly dangerous predicament of their flock.

The CCP was the Chinese Communist Party and they ruled the huge nation with an iron fist. The past twenty years of liberalization of economic policy produced a rising wealth in the coastal cities and the face of a new China to show to the world but anyone who lived in China was not fooled. A leopard doesn't change its spots and the CCP hadn't changed its ways. You crossed them at your peril.

The crackdown was a tightening of control of any group that was perceived as a threat to the absolute control structure of the CCP. In particular, religious groups, including Buddhist, Taoist, meditationists

like Falun Gong, and especially the Christian house church movement. The continuing crackdown was particularly dangerous for the ethnic Korean churches that were primarily composed of refugees from North Korea. Those caught in any general roundup faced the catastrophe of being deported back into the despotic arms of the North's security services to be interrogated, tortured, and imprisoned.

The CCP maintained its control of the huge Chinese population through a network of regional, local, and down to the neighborhood level system of security services. This system had been in place since the early days of the Communist Party under Mao. At every level folks were encouraged, no, required, to watch their neighbors and family members and report them to local cadres for any anti Party or anti social activities. Believers had been interrogated, arrested, and imprisoned. Buildings used for meetings and worship had been closed, confiscated, and demolished. North Korean refugees, with no legal status, were extremely vulnerable and couldn't trust anybody. It was a major headache for Kim Soo Beak.

Of course there were no official statistics but it was estimated that there were between twenty and thirty thousand North Koreans living underground in China. More than seventy percent were women. Most had become victims of human trafficking of one sort or another. Many had been 'sold' to Chinese men as unofficial wives. Without any legal recourse they were trapped in China and often in abusive relationships. Children born into such families were subject to abuse and discrimination at many levels.

For the most part these people were Rev. Kim's flock. It was his calling to rescue as many as possible by getting them out of China and into a third country. It was often simply a matter of money. The cost to get one woman out was about two thousand dollars. It was a herculean task to raise that amount in their indentured circumstances and usually their only hope was for good Samaritans like Kim to help them out. It was not only a money problem. Those who had been sold into relationships often gave birth to children who greatly complicated the equation. In addition, these women often carried with them the guilt of having left families in the north. Kim did his best to get as many as possible out. He had saved three hundred women but there were many more waiting. In the meantime it was also his job to minister to them. Jeong Sook's case had been simpler because she had been fresh from the north and thus relatively unencumbered.

Their first stop on the way from the airport was to visit Meehan, one of these unfortunates. Once they were in the neighborhood, Shin made a call and learned that the coast was clear. Meehan's husband was a degenerate gambler, an alcoholic, and a small time hood who would beat her if he knew she was in contact with anyone from the church. Fortunately he was away as usual and would probably be gone till his money and luck ran out.

The apartment building was old, run down, and in one of the oldest neighborhoods in the city. It was just around the corner from the church and was home to a lot of the refugees. It was a slum.

Meehan's place was on the third floor. Kim and Shin trudged up the worn linoleum stair case because the elevator was out of order.

"Oh please come in. Welcome pastor," Meehan greeted them when she opened the door.

On the door was a notice in Chinese announcing the eminent eviction of the tenant for nonpayment of rent. It was nothing new for this neighborhood. Meehan often moved for this reason. Money was always somewhere between tight and nonexistent. The apartment itself was small and shabby but orderly and clean. Meehan had first escaped from the north eight years ago and had been arrested and sent back once. She had been sold twice and was desperately unhappy. Her six year old son, Heang-in, sat slumped on the couch and intently played a smart phone game. It was a school day but as a nonperson the boy couldn't attend. His mother insisted that he stand up and greet their guests. On the third request he reluctantly got to his feet and said hello in Chinese. Then he took his phone off to the bathroom.

"I don't know what to do with him. He is always angry and has no manners. He doesn't like to go out cause the other kids call him names and worse," she was almost in tears as she talked about her troubles.

Kim was already familiar with her situation and the miserable prospects for her and her son to have any future in China. There was only one solution but it was a thorny problem.

"How about the boy's father," Nick Shin inquired?

"When he comes around he's usually drunk and often hits Heang-in. He waits for the bum and really wants his dad's love and attention but is always disappointed."

Meehan herself was sporting the remnants of a black eye and a split lip. They looked to be about a week old. After a prayer by Nick for a blessing on the house, tea was served.

"Meehan, your name has come to the top of the waiting list to get out. We will be going soon. I know it is

difficult but this may be your only chance. Things aren't going to get better here," Rev. Kim told her sincerely.

"I know but how can I do this. It would mean leaving Heang-in behind. I have no problem leaving his dog of a father. You know I left two kids in the north and I can hardly live with that. I can't see how I can abandon this one here."

"Yes I know but his future depends on you. Once you are resettled in the south you can work and save your money. You'll have a passport and you can come back here to retrieve your son. He can make a new life. He can go to school and even to college. Lots of folks have been able to do it. Nothing is easy but if you set your sites on making a life for your son you can do it," Rev. Kim encouraged her.

She had stopped weeping and her eyes were shining.

"Yes maybe I can. How long would it take to come back for my boy?"

She had escaped from North Korea not once but twice. Kim knew she had the grit to try. She just needed to be given the chance.

"I can't say how long, maybe a couple of years. Just think, by then he'll be ready to start school. You can think about it like this; sometimes you have to do the difficult thing now to make a better future. Remember Our Lord sacrificed his own life to make a way for the rest of us. We should live our life in imitation of Christ." Although she was a 'baby' Christian, she surely could understand the value of sacrificing something now and hoping for the future.

She did understand but she also had another thing on her mind. "More than anything in this world I long to get my kids out of that hell hole in the north. Is such a thing possible?"

"I've heard of such things. It's said that with enough money you can buy anything in North Korea today," was Kim's response to her plea.

"Oh please help me." She was in tears again.

Before they left, Kim handed Meehan an envelope stuffed with Chinese currency. Then he opened his wallet and gave her everything in it, about eighty thousand Korean won. Shin also emptied his wallet. At the door Kim promised he would send someone tomorrow for her answer. She should make up her mind. There was no time now.

Back in the van on the way to the church the older man asked his assistant,

"Well what do you think, is it possible to rescue her children from the north?"

"All things are possible with God." Shin was sure it was the correct answer.

"Ah yes, but in my experience, on this earth God's work must truly be our own. See what you can learn about a way to get kids out of North Korea."

"Sure boss. It'll be like opening a second front for us," Shin said with his characteristic enthusiasm for a new adventure.