

Between Heaven and Earth: Book One - The Cost of Freedom - Chapter Three- Going Up the Country

Michael Downey
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The next morning it was time to say goodbye. They came for Hyo Jin first. At almost ten am two guys arrived looking for all the world like a couple of 1930s gangsters from Chicago. Both were dressed in dark suits, long overcoats, and fedoras. One immediately pulled a short manila envelope from inside his coat. The old woman sat and carefully counted the dollars, the preferred currency of the underworld in these parts.

The two gangsters leaned against a wall and smoked silently eyeing Hyo Jin while the blood money was being counted. She sat with her eyes lowered seemingly resigned to her fate. Jeong Sook was in agony. She wanted to save this girl, to protect her, and keep her from this fate. But there was no way. If she made a fuss the police might be called and it would all have been in vain. But to do nothing was destroying her soul the same way crossing the ice had almost destroyed her body. So she again reached deep inside and found the fortitude to do what she had to do. She would accept the inevitable and promised herself she would find Hyo Jin again and rescue her from this catastrophe.

Once the money was confirmed The two guys picked Hyo Jin up by either arm and propelled her towards the door.

"Please, let us say goodbye," Jeong Sook implored.

The two guys stopped and turned to face Jeong

Sook.

"Make it fast. We ain't got all day."

The refugees embraced and Jeong Sook whispered in the younger woman's ear, "Be strong, never give up, I'll find you and get you out."

Hyo Jin sobbed and said, "Oh yes. I'll wait for you."

Time was up and the guys again took the crying woman by her arms and as they got to the door the taller thug said,

"Be quiet. The cops are everywhere. If you make a sound we'll put you in a bag in the car trunk."

The door slammed and they were gone.

For the next four hours Jeong Sook lay on the floor and wrestled with the turmoil of her emotions. She was filled with despair over the cruelty of how things had turned out. She was almost overcome with a burning rage towards those she had trusted and who had sold her like a pig or a used car. In the end she returned to the same place she had discovered on the ice. She would not be defeated and thrown away like a piece of trash. She would endure, grow stronger, and survive this. She would escape and take Hyo Jin with her. She would, she would, she would; there was no other option.

Jeong Sook fully expected more gangsters to come for her but before sunset there was a knock at the door and three obviously country folk entered the house. The woman was in her mid sixties and seemed to be the mother of the man. He was of indeterminate age, perhaps forty or fifty hard years old. With them was a younger guy that may have been in his mid twenties. All three were dressed in the winter garments of farmers. The old woman greeted them and invited them to sit. She asked if they would have some tea and

when they replied in the affirmative she busied herself preparing the refreshments. The silent man sat silently.

The old woman served the tea and a dozen Ritz crackers on a chipped plate after apologizing for the poor quality. The guests greedily partook as if they hadn't eaten in days. The hostess enquired as to their journey and listened politely to a litany of complaints about the weather, the condition of the roads, and the general corruption of government officials, big and small.

"So, is this the woman?" The dowager opened the negotiations.

She indicated who she was talking about by pointing her chin in the direction of Jeong Sook.

"Oh yes, she just arrived last night. She is from a good family and is ready to start her new life," the old lady said brightly.

"A good family, what is she some kind of princess? We need someone who can work hard and bear a lot of children," the farmer's mother countered.

"How old is she?" the farmer wanted to know.

"She says she is almost thirty," replied the old woman.

"She looks more than that. Is she a liar too?" said mom.

"No, of course not. It was a long journey. She'll soon recover," the old woman assured everyone. "She is still within her childbearing years and will produce grandsons for you."

Jeong Sook listened and bit her lip as they discussed her like she was a farm animal for sale. The preliminaries out of the way, the two older ladies switched to Mandarin Chinese and an offer was made. A counter offer followed and then another. At one point the farmer's mother stood up as if to leave and the old woman quickly let her know that they were close to a deal.

With only a few more minutes of discussion the deal closed and the farmer counted out the cash. This time it was in yuan, the Chinese currency. Jeong watched the money change hands but being unfamiliar with the yuan couldn't determine what she was worth.

"What's your name woman?" Jeong Sook was addressed for the first time by her new mother in law.

"I'm Kim Jeong Sook of the Andong Kim clan."

"Is that right, a princess? Well we'll see about that. From now you are the replacement wife in the Jang family. I require respect, obedience, and male children if your highness can manage."

When grandma stood up and indicated she was ready to go, everyone else followed suit.

"Bring your things woman. We have a ways to go tonight," grandma said.

Having no things to bring Jeon Sook replied, "I'm ready."

She had no hat, no gloves and no overcoat. She wrapped the thin quilt she had been sleeping with around her shoulders and was ready. There were no goodbyes. She followed the farmers out the door and to an old Russian era farm truck parked on the street. The grandson got behind the wheel and cranked the engine. Grandma got in and the bride groom escorted his bride to the tailgate, opened it, and pushed her up into the bed.

"Not a sound woman. Danger is all around. It'll take about six hours. We'll eat when we get home," were his parting words. Jeong Sook wondered if any of them remembered or even cared what her name was.

He returned to the cab, slammed the door, and they started out. Wrapped in the quilt and smelling again the waste of livestock, Jeong Sook settled down for another long winter's night. She may have dozed off several times but was awoken again and again by the banging, bouncing, and the rattling of the truck over the rough roads. Each time she woke up, she crawled to the tailgate and peered out into the dark night. It was bitter cold and the wind blew the cold through the bed of the truck. She could hear the three in the cab conversing, or more like it, shouting, over the roar of the engine in the dialect that was unintelligible to her. Often when she couldn't sleep she sang songs that she remembered from her school days.

Well before dawn the truck jerked off the main road and started up what was probably an old cow path. Soon the truck stopped and the cab doors opened and two faces appeared above the tailgate.

"We are here," her new husband informed her. "Get down."

After spending the better part of the night on the freezing cold floorboards, she was stiff and slow to move. The younger man opened the gate and half helped and half pulled her out of the truck and onto the ground. On her first attempt at standing she failed and it was only with the assistance of the two men that she was finally able to gain her feet.

"This is your new mother boy. Take her to the house."

Without a word the young man took his new mother by the arm and roughly pulled her the ten yards to the house. At first sight, Jeong Sook assumed it was a barn. The interior was dark and cold. The boy fumbled in his pockets and struck a match. Next he found an oil lamp and with another match lit it. He seemed to be good at it. He set the lamp on a round table that stood in the center of the room. Jeong Sook stood at the door and tried to look around by the dim light of the lamp. The room seemed to be twelve feet wide and fifteen feet deep. In a far corner was a black iron stove where the boy was busy building a fire. There were doorways at both side walls that led somewhere. Once the fire in the stove was going the lad went to the front door and summoned his father and grandmother who had wisely been waiting in the truck with its engine running and heater on. Jeong Sook stood near the stove and warmed her hands and bones. As hard as it would be for her to fathom, she was home, at least for the foreseeable future.

With no running water and no electricity the country farm house was as far from reality as Jeong Sook could imagine. The house, she soon learned, had three rooms. The main room was for cooking, eating, and occasionally for sheltering various animals. The boy and his father also slept there. The grandma slept in the larger room with the heated platform called a kang off to the left. Jeong Sook was assigned floor space in the smaller room which she shared with various farm produce in season and the mice.

The boy's name she learned was Hyungsang and he was seventeen years old. It was his heavy burden around the farm and house that she was expected to take over. He became her instructor in the arts of rural farm life like lighting the fire in the morning, lanterns at night, and carrying the water cans to and from the stream as needed. She also took over all the duties associated with feeding both the family, the chickens, and the two pigs, that apparently having arrived earlier than she had, outranked her.

Except for his nocturnal visits to Jeong Sook's room to collect on his marital rights, the boy's father had very little to do with her. He still called her simply woman or hey you and occasionally dealt out kicks and slaps when requested by his mother. Jeong Sook having been married before in Pyongyang, knew all about exacting and demanding mothers in law. But this woman was a vicious witch who seemed to delight in making her life miserable.

The rapes began two weeks after her arrival. At first she only had to endure the quick compulsory onslaughts of her husband. Before long she was fending off the lusty advances of Hyungsang anytime they were alone together. Thing is, he wouldn't take no for an answer and when he entered her room that first time his violent nature, worse than his father and on par with his grandma, made it clear there was another thing she had to accept as inevitable. She often wondered if the other two living close by in the same house knew what was going on and were complicit.

Winter was long in those climes but spring finally came. It would be followed by the unbearable hot humid summer, a short harvest season, and then it would be winter again. The time of day as measured on a clock was no longer important. The time of sunrise and sunset marked the passing of her days. Most important to avoiding the fearful wrath of her mother-in-law was to have meals on time and in the prescribed quantity and form.

Jeong Sook's life continued without much change for almost six months.