

Between Heaven and Earth: Book Two - A Cross to Bear - Chapter Twenty - A Hill to Die On

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The drive from Seoul through the mountainous country of Kangwon province was spectacular. They had departed Seoul just before three in the afternoon. Although the mountains were covered with snow, the roads were dry and clear. That morning shortly before ten Jeong Sook had called him and to his surprise proposed a road trip to the east coast. He didn't quite believe that she would actually make the trip since it was like her to back out of plans at the last minute. But sure enough when he picked her up after her shift at the eatery she was ready and enthusiastic to go.

"We got a lot to talk about," she informed him. Guy had pretty much forgotten the previous night's request for help.

Along the way Jeong Sook cracked peanuts and peeled oranges to pop into Guy's mouth. They avoided talking about what lay ahead but Jeong Sook nervously chatted about everything else under the sun.

"Tell me about your school days. Did you study well?" she wanted to know.

Guy didn't feel as chatty and he recalled telling her this story sometime before. "Ah yes, I was a brilliant student-athlete. The envy of all who knew me," was his reply.

Jeong Sook threw an orange segment and hit him in the ear. "Don't lie!" she advised him. "Come on, tell me," she cooed.

Guy relented under the threat of another fruit onslaught. He told her about growing up in a large Irish Catholic family in Michigan. Going to Mass on Sunday and attending the local parochial school. She wanted to know about Catholic school and the nuns. She had heard it all before but she liked the stories he told.

"Who was your first love?" she liked this story a lot.

"That would have been Sister Mary Francine. She was just off the boat from Ireland, eighteen years old and my first grade teacher."

"No, no, no, that wasn't her name," she insisted.

"How do you know? Were you there?" Guy teased her.

"I know this story. Don't tell a lie. Tell it right way."

Guy told the story again and sparred with Jeong Sook over the accuracy of the details. Sometimes it seemed that she remembered the details better than he did.

"Hey baby, I'm a fiction writer. I'm allowed to change the details to make the story better," he let her know.

"I hate liars," was her smug reply.

Guy rolled his eyes for the fourteenth million time since meeting this woman. And so they passed the time. They arrived in Sokcho a little after dark.

Sokcho was one of Guy's favorite getaways in Korea. It was only a few hours drive from Seoul but was a world away from the bustling metropolis in sights and ambience. It was originally a fishing village

located on the East Sea just above the 38th parallel giving it the unique distinction of having been part of both North and South Korea as the borders were drawn and redrawn. Fifty yards off the waterfront is the small island of Abaee village (아바이 마을). The name comes from the North Korean dialect and means father's village. The island was settled by refugees from the north during the 1950-53 Korean War. It can be reached by a small ferry boat that is propelled by underwater cables that tourists delight in pulling across the deck of the vessel.

After checking into a room facing the harbor at the Blue Moon Hotel they took the ferry across to Abaee village for a romantic walk along the beach and dinner at one of the numerous seafood specialty restaurants in the village. So late in the year, the beach was practically deserted; and for good reason. It was in the upper thirties and the wind was blowing the chill factor down. But they toughed it out for awhile. The moon was bright yellow and hung low in the sky like a lantern lighting their way down the white sand beach. Off shore the lights of the squid boats were clearly visible working back and forth. One vessel moved in close, Guy estimated it was less than a thousand yards, working a school of the little monsters. They could hear the fishermen calling out to each other. Eventually the wind drove them inside.

The grilled fish joint was rustic and right on the beach. They had the place almost to themselves. Jeong Sook chatted with the older couple who ran the place; getting their hometowns, a brief history of their enterprise, and the current accomplishments of their three grown kids.

As they ate the house specialty, whole mackerel grilled over coals at the table, Jeong Sook practically gushed over the proprietors' wonderful life.

"They so happy. They got their business, their kids, and each other. It's almost like a dream, right?"

"Sure, I guess so." Guy was definitely noncommittal.

"Wouldn't you like to have a quiet safe life like them?" Jeong Sook was dreaming.

"Oh, I don't know. Running a restaurant has got to be hard work with long hours. It wouldn't be my dream."

"You not good at dreaming probably. I just like to dream of a different life sometimes."

"I know, you've had a tough life. It's good to be happy."

"Guy, are you happy? Really happy?"

"What kind of question is that? I'm happy enough. Sometimes I'm happy and sometimes I'm not. How about you?"

"I used to think I wanted to be happy but now I think that's not so important. Happy comes and goes."

"So what is it that you want now?"

"I want my life to mean something. I need my life to mean something."

"Mean what?" he wanted to know.

"Life has to mean enough make all the heartache, sorry, and suffering worth it."

Guy didn't say anything. For several minutes he just looked at her and thought about all she had been through. He slowly came to get what she was trying to say and couldn't help wondering what his own life meant, if anything.

"Yeah, you're probably right," he needed time to figure out what this was about. "Let's get out of here."

Guy paid the check and they walked arm in arm back to the hotel. Both were in a quiet reflective mood. They drank only one bottle of soju between them with their meal and so their love making was unusually subdued. Guy thought he detected almost a reluctance on her part. Not to worry Guy told himself; it was a woman's prerogative to be fickle.

Before sleeping, Jeong Sook rolled onto her side with her head propped up on a hand.

"Do you really love me Guy?"

"You bet I do," he replied. In fact the sight of her next to him on the bed was inciting thoughts of round

two.

Jeong Sook had something else on her mind. "I believe you. You remember you said you would do anything for me? That mean you really love me?"

"Yes, of course. What is it? What's on your mind?"

"I said I want my life to mean something."

"Yup, what is it?"

"I have to do something that means a lot. It's not an easy thing. It's something I am called to do."

"Called, who called you? Has this got something to do with Rev. Kim?"

"No. Not him."

"Who then?"

"I don't know, maybe God is calling me. Maybe it's my father, maybe both."

She took time to explain about the small quiet voice. More surprises for Guy.

Hearing voices; is this a psychotic incident caused by the horrific things she had seen and done, like PTSD? Entirely possible he knew. What Jeong Sook said next just about convinced him that she was indeed out of her mind

"Now I know that I will never know peace as long as my family and especially my father remain in that kingdom of hell up north. I have to bring them out."

Guy was stunned. Where did she get such an idea? Everyone knew that North Korea was the most isolated and dangerous country on earth. Wasn't it the job of diplomats, secretaries of state, and even presidents to use the power of their offices to negotiate and leverage the release of unfortunates who fell into the clutches of such tyrants? How is this single refugee woman gonna pull something like that off?

"Oh really, how are you gonna do something like that. Sounds like you need the help of the government, the United Nations, or somebody like that."

"Those guys not gonna help me. Nobody gonna care about my father or daughters. Only I care. I gotta do it. This is my cross and I gotta pick it up."

"Alone?"

"You said you loved me and would do anything for me. I need your help. Somebody who believes me and really loves me have to help me."

"I really love you and want to do anything for you but this is crazy. Have you thought this through? How are you going to get them out? Is it even possible?"

"I don't know how. I know I have to try. If you won't help me, I'll do it alone."

Take up your cross and follow me? Why is this my cross? This is crazy. I don't need this. My life is good. I'm free. It's just tilting at windmills. It's a fool's errand and a very dangerous one at that. All these thoughts flooded his mind but he couldn't sort them out for himself and so couldn't explain them to this woman.

Instead, "I'll do anything for you but this is too sudden. It's a huge thing. I have to think it through. I can't say yes or no tonight. Let's sleep on it and talk again in the morning." Guy was exhausted and couldn't even think about brushing his teeth let alone this thing.

"You think but don't forget you promised."

Jeong Sook curled up and quickly fell asleep. She had finished her night's task. The rest was up to this man.

Guy slept fitfully and upon awakening in the morning he recalled that he had had a dream. Looking out the curtains he watched the movement of the boats up and down the ship channel and tried to remember the details of his dream. The beginning and end were foggy but the middle was crystal clear.

He was talking with his older brother Ron. They were two years apart and the older boy was Guy's mentor and competition. When Ron graduated from high school he immediately enlisted in the Marine Corps and within six months was sent to Vietnam. When they learned he had been killed in action it understandably became a seminal event in his younger brother's life. Guy just couldn't understand why; why such tragedy could exist and more important why it could happen to his own brother.

In the dream he asked his brother directly why he had to go off to the Marine Corps, that far away land, and that fate.

"Why did you choose that hill to die on?" Guy had to know.

"Everyone has to choose. There are many hills so ya just gotta choose the one that has the most meaning for you. I never wanted to die in Vietnam. More than anything I wanted to come home but it wasn't in the cards. I was a United States Marine and I believed in the cause. In the end I laid down my life."

Not much of the rest of the dream remained but the voice of his brother continued to call out to him from over the years and it deeply impacted him. He had no doubt that this was his answer.

And so he made up his mind without another thought or even another reason. He would do this thing and he went to wake up the sleeping beauty.

"Hey wake up, I'll do it. We'll do it together."

She did wake up and she looked at him and said, "Are you sure Guy?"

"Sure, why not? We all need a hill to die on."

"Oh, I knew you would!"

She clung to him and cried. From that moment he became her champion and she loved him with all her heart and soul.