

Hye-Jin's Tale

Chapter One

May 1, 2046 Samjiyon, Korea

Hye-Jin's granddaughter, Jie-Hye, arrived for her week's vacation. She came to this northern Korean city from Pusan to visit her grandmother, but also to get some good, quality snowboarding at the local mountain resorts. In the last decade or so, the area's tourist industry had been booming, thanks to all the new ski resorts that were popping up seemingly everywhere there was a mountain. The newest technology of micro-climate control and the longer winters were providing resort operators with better snow conditions, thus allowing them to stay open longer. In fact, some of them would move their operations up onto the permanent glaciers and remain in business well into July. So, Northern Korea's attractions for this 21-year-old were indeed strong.

Of course, having a grandmother who owned and operated a resort hotel was helpful for Jie-Hye's annual visits. In 2011, Hye-Jin and her husband had purchased the Pegaebong Hotel, which was located 2 kilometers outside Samjiyon. It was popular with downhill specialists in the winter, and in the short, warm summers, mountain climbers and wedding couples arrived in large numbers to enjoy active vacations or honeymoons of mountain climbing, golf, and whitewater kayaking. The influx of tourists had kept Hye-Jin and her husband very busy for 35 years. Even now, at 76, Hye-Jin was busily occupied by hiring summer help and book keeping. The day to day operations of the hotel, however, were left in the capable hands of the recently-hired hotel manager.



The journey from Pusan to Samjiyon usually took Jie-Hye less than 6 hours. The bullet train from Pusan to Hyesan was 4 hours, and then a quick but expensive helicopter ride to Samjiyon was less than 30 minutes. If she planned her itinerary well, Jie-Hye would not have to spend too long in the train stations, as they were noisy and crowded. She much preferred the quiet slopes of Mt. Paekdu where it was just her and her snowboard.

Hye-Jin was at the Samjiyon heliport to greet her granddaughter. They hadn't seen each other for a year, so it was a wonderful reunion. The two joyfully hugged.

"Grandma, it's so good to see you! And you look well, as usual."

"It's the clean, mountain air, for sure. And you look beautiful, as always. And all grown up!"

"You say that every year, Grandma! Anyway, how's the hotel? Keeping you busy?"

"Not as much as before. Young-Cheol is a wonderful manager, though. He doesn't leave me much to do. And he is very interested in seeing you again!"

"Grandma, that's because you keep telling him all about me! You must stop your gossiping!"

"Well, he's a good looking man, and he's a great asset to the hotel. You can't do much better than him, in my opinion."



"I do have a certain special someone in Pusan, so it's not like I'm looking for a date while I'm here, you know. I'm here to snowboard and visit with you, nothing more."

"OK, but don't blame me for trying! Grandmothers are supposed to match their granddaughters with the best available bachelors, you know."

The two women collected Jie-Hye's bags and off they went to Hye-Jin's all-wheel drive electric truck. They put the luggage in

the back, hopped in and took off for the hotel, which was only a few minutes' ride away. As usual, Hye-Jin had lots of questions for her granddaughter.

"So, tell me about your job... how's it going with your promotion? Any news?"

"Nothing yet, though I have had two interviews for sales manager. There are plenty of candidates, but I think I have a good shot at it. If I do get the position, it will mean a move to Japan, probably Fukuoka, where *you* used to work."

"Yes, but that was a long time ago. I haven't returned, you know, not since..." She stopped speaking.

"What is it Grandma? Since what?" Jie-Hye was curious.

"Well, it was back in 1996, but I won't get into any details. At least not now... ah, here we are. I'll get one of the porters to bring up your bags. We'll put your snowboard and equipment into one of the storage lockers, OK?"

"OK, but I'd still like to hear about you and your time in Fukuoka. You've got my curiosity up now."

"Yes, all right. How about after dinner? We'll sit by the fire and I'll tell you all about it. I should warn you, it's a long story."

"How come I've never heard it before? It sounds intriguing."

"Well, I was planning on letting you know sometime. Your mother knows it well, but she's been quiet about it, obviously. And you have a right to know for sure. It's part of your family history. And it's a story that you should be able to pass on to your children someday."

It was now late afternoon, and Hye-Jin busied herself with settling in her granddaughter and preparing a wonderful meal for just the two of them. There was no question of visiting a restaurant that night, not even the one in the hotel, as the two women wanted privacy for their annual visit. Over dinner they would catch up on all the family news, and then after would come the mystery story.

It was well after nine o'clock when Hye-Jin and Jie-Hye settled onto the sofa in front of the fireplace. Young-Cheol had made sure one of the hotel staff had stoked the fire, so the room was both private *and* cozy. Jie-Hye had met Young-Cheol at dinner, and he had expressed an obvious interest in her. They had arranged for a snowboarding afternoon the day after next, and Jie-Hye was looking forward to exploring the mountain with a local expert.

"So, Grandma, we've said all that can be said about the family, and my 'not-so-clear' marriage plans, but now it's time for you to tell your tale."

"Yes, it is time. Well, where should I begin?"

"You said it was in 1996... wow, that was before Mom was born, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was. It was before Reunification too. It was during perhaps the worst of the more than 50 years of separation. At least, the worst time for those in North Korea."

"Why's that, Grandma?"

"There had been floods, droughts, and famine. People were starving. Some even left the country for China and beyond. It was a tough time for everyone."

"Wow! Was there no international aid? Was the whole country like that?"

"Unfortunately, any food and medical supplies sent to North Korea through the United Nations were siphoned off by the army or some other criminals, so the people who needed the supplies never received them. And at the same time, South Korea wasn't really allowed to help in any way. It was quite bleak. I wasn't affected directly, as I was living in Fukuoka at the time, but I knew people who were."



"I did study some of this in high school history class, but the textbook was a bit thin on details."

"Yes, I'm sure... everyone would like to forget that time in our history... anyway, it was in Kangnung where my story really begins."

"That's where the Kangnung Tanoje Festival takes place, isn't it?"





“Yes, it was designated as our ‘important intangible cultural property No. 13’. Anyway, it was September 18th I think, at night, when the North Korean submarine ran aground just offshore near Kangnung. There were 27 on board, and after swimming to shore, they were supposedly making their way back to the border between



North and South Korea.”

“You mean they were in South Korea illegally?”

“Yes, of course. They were spies, or trained military officers, fully armed. Their intent was to infiltrate military installations in South Korea.”

“Were they successful?”

“I don’t think so. When they were discovered, they were apparently attempting a landing near Kangnung. And several of them were wearing South Korean army uniforms. Anyway, the submarine broke down, and they were all caught and killed, except for two of them. One was an officer, who was caught and questioned by the South Korean army, and the other one got away.”

“You mean he escaped?”

“Yes, with the help of a South Korean woman, he got away.”

“Well, Grandma, if he got away, how do you know all this about him?”

“I know all about him because that South Korean woman was me!”

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