

# Hye-Jin's Tale

## Chapter Six

September 25<sup>th</sup>, 1996, Pusan, South Korea

When Kang-Ja Kim answered the doorbell, she knew immediately that Seung-Jae was her relation. He had his mother's features, which were unmistakable. And *he* knew that this old woman was related to his mother, as she looked exactly the same!

"You look exactly like my Mother!"

"Yes, we are twins. Didn't she tell you?"

"No, she only told me that she had a sister in the south. That's all she told me."

After introductions, the three sat in the small living room of the apartment.

"Aunt Kang-Ja, you should know that my Mother is very sick."

"Yes, I know."

"You already know? But how?"

"A twin often can feel what the other is feeling, even when they're far apart. For the last 40 years I have known how your mother was. Even when she was giving birth, I knew what was happening."

"Yes, I've heard of this phenomenon," added Hye-Jin.

"Unfortunately we twins feel more of the pain of the other rather than the joy. But I know that your mother is not in so much pain now, though I still feel it occasionally these past weeks. But I had no idea that her son would be visiting. You must have quite a story to tell of your trip here."

"Yes, I do. But the reason I came can perhaps be explained best by this." Seung-Jae took out the letter and handed it to his Aunt.

Kang-Ja looked at the envelope for a long time. The young couple remained silent as she did so, knowing that she was going through some strong emotions.

"I guess I should open it. It must be important to have you deliver it to Pusan." Kang-Ja had a tear in her eye as she slowly opened the letter. She read silently for a minute and then looked up.

"Your mother wants you to hear what she has to say while I read it aloud."

"If that's all right with you, I'd love to share her message with my aunt."

Kang-Ja paused a second and adjusted her reading glasses. Then she began.



*My Dearest Sister,*

*If you are reading this, it means that my son has arrived safely. I have prayed for Seung-Jae's safe journey. I never would have sent him unless it was important for him to be with you when you read this letter.*

*I know, dear sister, that over the past 40 years you have known of my pain and sorrows, just as I have felt yours across these many miles. And I know that you have felt deeply my sickness this past year. But feel no sadness for me, as I have had a good, full life, with few regrets. But now I must tell you something that you don't know. In fact, no one knows of this, now that our parents have passed on. And that is that we have a brother.*

Kang-Ja looked up at her visitors in shock. She didn't have any inkling that there were more than two children in her parents' family. Kang-Ja had been separated at an early age from the rest of her family, at the age of five, and she hadn't known about her family since then. She continued reading.

*Yes, you and I are not the only siblings. We were not told about our brother. Mom never spoke about him, even after we were trapped in the north and couldn't return to Pusan to be with you. But I should tell you that Mom talked about you always when she was still with us. She passed away in 1992, and Dad followed her several months later. It was only on going through her things after the funeral that I came upon her diary. The diary began just before the end of World War II, and continued up until her death. She wrote more in her little book in the early days, but later on there was barely a paragraph per year. But around 1943 there was a flurry of writing from her. It was mostly about her first born, the son she had before she gave birth to us a couple of years later. He was taken from his parents and was adopted by another family. From what I could understand from our mother's writing, her son was given to a businessman and his wife, who was barren. This was the only way they could obtain a son, and the man most likely paid off the local officials for such a transaction to take place. Mom only found out years later that her son was raised in the northwest part of the country, only about 100 kilometers away.*

*Anyway, our brother grew up and got married to a local girl quite a bit younger than he, and they had a baby girl around 1980, their first and only child.*

*In the past five years or so this part of the country has suffered from drought and flooding, so food production has become dangerously low, and no more so than in our brother's area. Apparently it grew so bad that they were without anything to eat. The army was coming around every week and stealing, at gunpoint, any food they had, including the chickens they were keeping for eggs. Even their gardens weren't worth tending, as all produce was being seized by the scavenging soldiers. Things were obviously desperate, so our brother did what he had to do: he sold his daughter to an agency across the Chinese border for a sack of rice.*

*Now, don't be too shocked over this occurrence, dear sister, as it is still common practice to trade eligible young women to the Chinese. They are in need of wives, and the North Koreans just want to have food. So this trade was not an isolated incident, believe me.*

By now, you must be wondering how I came to know this. Well, our brother, after so many years away, came to visit last year. After his father's funeral, he discovered from his mother that he was an adopted child, and he demanded to know from her who his natural parents were. After several bribes and a lot of detective work, he finally arrived at my door.

He is not in good health from his work in the mines, and actually can't work anymore, so he isn't able to support his mother and wife, who are also desperately sick. But the main purpose of his visit was to tell me of his daughter. She'd be sixteen now, and he wants her back.

We discussed for many hours about how to get her back into Korea safely, but none of our plans was any good. He was too weak and poor to travel to China and pay for her return, and I didn't want to get my sons involved, as crossing the border these days is dangerous. The North Koreans stationed on the border are ruthless, and there are spies everywhere in the Chinese towns ready to turn in the Koreans who arrive. So I wasn't going to put them in any danger to help my brother's child. However, over the months, even through my diminishing health, I thought that there must be a way. . . my brother has since returned to his village to be with his wife and mother.

Anyway, by now you probably see my plan. My son Seung-Jae is now in safe hands with you. And I am going to ask if you and he can help return our niece to Korea. It will be much safer to approach this problem from outside North Korea, and perhaps a trip to China via Russia will be the best way, avoiding North Korea all together.

Dear sister, you know that I cannot help you in this, as I am ailing badly these past few months. But with the information I have included along with this letter, I trust that you and my son will do your best to get our brother's child back where she belongs, with her family.

Seung-Jae will fill you in on all the other news about our lives here in the north. All these years we have thought of you fondly, and finally, I hope, that my son has made contact with you. And what is better, the two of you will have it in your power to reunite our little family even further. I trust you in this, sister.

Love, Young-Soon