

STEALING CINDERELLA

HOW I BECAME AN
INTERNATIONAL FUGITIVE FOR LOVE

MARK D. DIEHL

PREVIEW 18

“I was late to my first class again this morning,” I said to the Deadbeat Club. “So, I got to talk to Richard again, today. Apparently, classes are still complaining because I talk to them about real issues instead of relying on the book. He told me that he’d rather have me quit on my own schedule than fire me, because he’s such a kind and understanding guy. I don’t think I’ll be here very long.”

“Oh, no,” Strawberry said. “That’s sad. We will miss you, Mark.”

“You should do like Koreans when there’s a difficult problem,” Groundhog said.

“What’s that?” I asked. “I hope it involves beer rather than soju.”

He said something to his classmates in Korean. The rest of the Deadbeat Club responded enthusiastically.

STEALING CINDERELLA

“We want to take the class out,” Sarah said.

“Oh?” I asked. “And where will we go?”

“Do you know about Korean fortune-tellers?” Paul asked.

“I don’t know anything about Korean fortune-tellers,” I said.

“I heard about a fortune-teller near here, just behind the Grand Hotel,” Groundhog said. “We can go now.”

“If you are all fine with taking our class out of the building, I am, too,” I said. They were already packing up their things.

We passed the American Center on the way. Dozens of student protesters were gathering in the street, all dressed in dark colors with handkerchiefs over their faces. Around sixty riot police had lined up in front of the building. Half of the students were holding broom handles and other weapons. “Many college students do this,” Groundhog said. “Maybe most college students. If they get arrested, then they must become the riot police when it is their time for military service. All the riot police begin as protesters.”

“Wow, look at that!” I said. “At least four big signs that say ‘Yankee Go Home.’ I didn’t know people actually made those.”

We turned a corner, then another. More students passed us on their way to the confrontation. Unlike the usual expressionless, staring crowds on the street, these faces were tinged with worry and excitement, which turned universally to anger when they looked at me. “In Korean history,” Groundhog said, “Korea was invaded over nine hundred times. Japan invaded us to get to China, China invaded to get to Japan. Before that, Mongolians. Always the buildings were burned, always the men were killed, always the women were raped. Now, North Korea is invaded by China, and South Korea is invaded by the U.S. Now your government in Washington, D.C. manipulates

STEALING CINDERELLA

our government and our economy. Our women are prostitutes outside military bases, and American soldiers sometimes rape and kill them. Koreans want to just be Korean.”

“But wouldn’t that mean everyone would be North Korean?” I asked. “They’re very powerful, militarily. If the United States were to leave the peninsula, North Korea would be a huge threat.”

“Because of China,” he said. “This time, two invaders agree with each other to each only take half of Korea. These protest guys want our own land, our own women, our own language.”

We turned down another street and could now see the Grand Hotel. “We’re going behind it,” Groundhog said. “There are two kinds of fortune-teller in Korea. One kind looks up dates in books, like birthdays. The other kind is like this one, with a ghost.”

Gerald said something in Korean, and Ivy replied. The group chatted briefly among itself.

“Hey, folks,” I said. “This is still our class time. I feel I’m not being responsible if you’re all speaking Korean. Let’s practice English, please.”

“I don’t like when the people stare,” Gerald said. “The group of old ladies back there all watched us. The students are looking angry at us.”

“I said Gerald should know this,” Ivy said. “He has been at SNM Academy long enough. He should expect what happens when you walk with foreigners.”

The alley behind the hotel was unpaved and muddy. The towering, gleaming white walls on one side mocked the little corrugated tin shacks on the other. The fortune-teller’s shanty was near the far end of the hotel. Inside sat an *ajuma* in a traditional Korean dress, but not the fancy silk *hanbok* I’d

STEALING CINDERELLA

seen in pictures of weddings and other special events. This *hanbok* was made of some tough, heavy dark green fabric of the type that might be used for work coveralls. The rest of the room, however, was cluttered with traditional silk outfits for children, as well as toys, books, and games.

“She looks too old for kids,” I said quietly to the closest person, who was Sarah.

“These people never have kids,” she said. “Their lives are sad. They never get married, never make any money. It’s like a curse. Every fortune-teller lives like this.”

“So why does she have all this kid stuff?” I asked.

“It’s not for her,” Paul said. “Customers bring these things for the ghost.”

“This one has a ghost of a little boy, so all the gifts are for the little boy,” Groundhog said.

“Oh,” I said. “Have you been here before?”

“No. I heard about this from a different English class at SNM, last year.”

“Should we have brought some gift like that?”

“We can just pay money,” Groundhog said.

“Oh, well, since this field trip is for me,” I said, reaching for my wallet.

“We already paid for you,” Paul said.

“Oh, thank you.”

The fortune-teller was seated on the floor in the corner of the room. We all approached and sat down around her. Her gaze panned slowly across the group until it settled onto Groundhog. Her soft smile hid her teeth but did not touch her eyes. She spoke to Groundhog and his face went slack. Strawberry asked him something in Korean and he responded, his voice flat.

STEALING CINDERELLA

“What’s happening?” I whispered to Groundhog.

“She said to me, ‘you have three grandmothers.’ I do.”

The woman asked the group a few questions, and the group gestured to me, explaining. She nodded and bowed her head. Her voice deepened and her body rocked, but I had no idea whether she was speaking, chanting, or merely moaning.

When she looked up—

How had she done this? I didn’t speak the same language, so it was unlikely that I would have been hypnotized. From their expressions, it was clear that the class saw the difference, too.

It was as if I’d been watching a movie and someone had stood up between the projector and the screen, so that my attention was drawn more to the person standing than to the film that continued to play. When the woman raised her eyes, there was a little kid there, with what seemed like a movie of the old woman playing over him. The boy stared at me, apparently amused by my uniqueness. Groundhog translated as he spoke.

“You have nowhere to go. Your boss will go away and you will finish your contract. You cannot, you must not leave Korea yet. There is something very important you must do here first.”

Kindle | Nook