

STEALING CINDERELLA

HOW I BECAME AN
INTERNATIONAL FUGITIVE FOR LOVE

MARK D. DIEHL

PREVIEW 20

Jennifer and I were standing in the lobby with Kate, one of the 105s who were going to lunch. Kate liked my suggestion of bringing Jennifer along so that there would be more English conversation. Hopefully the others would, too. My offer to buy lunch for the whole class rendered moot their feelings about it, though, at least from my perspective, which was why I'd offered.

The lobby was crowded since classes had just let out for the afternoon break. We weren't far from the spot by the reception desk that Korean Lurch preferred, directly under the photo of Moon Seung Nam. He stood there now, at the Lurch perch, with his hands behind his back, watching the students flowing in and out. He even tried to speak English at these times. All I could figure was that he was trying to impress the receptionists, who spoke even less English than he did.

STEALING CINDERELLA

Korean Lurch was staring at Kate's sandals. When he saw the three of us looking back at him, he spoke, in halting English at maybe the 102 level: "My friend saw girl wear this kind of shoe, with red polish on toes. He put his foot down hard on her toes to correct her."

Jennifer didn't miss a beat. "Is he your hero?" she asked.

"Yes," Korean Lurch said. "My superior."

"And you want to be just like him, so you threaten our school's students?"

He scowled at her and returned to surveilling the crowd. "This student does not have red polish so it is okay."

"Hey, Mr. Shin," I said. "Is that an SNM Academy pin on your lapel?"

"Of course."

"Because you work for SNM."

"Of course because I work for SNM."

"I work for SNM, too," I said. "Why don't I get a pin? I bet people would treat me better at bus stops if I had a pin showing I work for a Korean company."

"I work for SNM," Korean Lurch said. "I am employee. You are ... product." He gave up the Lurch Perch and headed down to his office.

Jennifer and Kate were talking in Korean. "We think everyone who's coming is here, now," Jennifer said.

The group headed out. It took some maneuvering on the street before I was walking next to Jennifer. "Nice job handling Mr. Shin back there," I said.

"Thanks. You, too."

At the restaurant, we all settled on woven mats around a long, low table. There was a brief discussion, then a male student called Cassette ordered for everyone. Cassette had

STEALING CINDERELLA

been the one who'd said he wanted North Korea to have nukes, and also the one who had suggested coming here. He was sitting directly across from me at the center, next to Kate, who was next to Jennifer. "Mark," he said. "We ordered special soup, because this place has the best, like we told you."

"And this soup is only available in Taegu?" I asked.

"No, it's Korean soup. You can get it everywhere," Cassette said. "In other cities, they put the rice into the soup. In Taegu, we keep rice alone. We call this *ttarogukbap*. It means *separate, soup, rice*. People from Taegu have soup this way."

"Ah!" I said. "I had Japanese roommates and spent some time in Japan. They keep rice separate there, too. Taegu has that in common with Japan."

Cassette and two of the other male students reacted with grimaces and low, growling comments in Korean. "We Koreans don't like Japan," Cassette said.

"I've heard that before," I said. "Please tell me more about that, class. Why do Koreans dislike Japan?"

Pharaoh, one of the other two young men who had expressed disdain, spoke up. "They ... invade? Invaded?"

"Hm," I said. "It depends on how you mean it. Do you mean it is their habit to invade Korea, and they still do it now? If you mean it's a habit that continues now, you should say 'they invade.' If it's something they did in the past, but they don't do it now, say 'they invaded.'"

There was a brief discussion in Korean, and then Pharaoh continued. "Korea is too strong now to invade. In the second world war, Japan invaded Korea. Look at our mountains. Right now, Korean mountains have little trees. For a long time, there were no trees. Japanese cut them all down and

STEALING CINDERELLA

took wood to Japan. And do you know about *comfort women*?”

“Comfort women?” I asked. “What are comfort women?”

“Japanese soldiers caught Korean women and kept them for sex.” Pharaoh said. “They were slaves of the Japanese army. It took them to follow the soldiers. Even when the war ended, the women’s lives were still ruined.”

“We Koreans never forgive Japan for this,” Cassette said.

Jennifer had been listening to the conversation. I was tempted to single her out, to call on her to share her perspective, but it wasn’t my place to do so. This was a lunch, not a classroom, and she was not my student.

“I had not heard of the comfort women,” I said, mostly to Jennifer. I didn’t have to call on her to show her I was interested in what she thought about the issue. “That is truly a horrible thing to have happened.”

“It is,” Jennifer said. “What Japan did ruined their lives during the war. But Japan didn’t decide that those women’s families wouldn’t take them back after the war ended. Japan didn’t say they could never have normal jobs and support themselves, so that they just had to keep on being prostitutes or starve. Even now in Korea, young girls are kidnapped on the street, raped, and sold as prostitutes. I was almost kidnapped once because I came out of my high school a little later than everyone else. Someone held a knife at my neck and tried to pull me into a van, and a teacher saw them and shouted. The kidnapper froze for a little bit and I struggled, and he let go. If they had taken me, even if I’d been kept right next door to my parents’ house, I couldn’t ever go to them because my parents would have rejected me. I would’ve brought shame and been a lifetime burden. Japan did an awful thing to those comfort women, but it was Koreans who treated them terribly

STEALING CINDERELLA

for 40 more years, and Koreans still behave the same way.”

The soup came, with beef and radish, spicy with red pepper and laden with garlic, enveloping the whole table in steam and warmth. I kept the rice separate, as Taegu people did. Everybody talked, mostly in Korean, as they ate.

The third time Jennifer caught me staring at her, she stared back. “What?” she said.

“I want to know you better.”

Kindle | Nook