



Korean Tiger

D BARRACLOUGH

*Book 1 of the
Three Kingdoms Trilogy*

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Korean Tiger

Book One of the Three Kingdoms Trilogy

Chapter ONE

I accelerated hard as I turned off expressway one, onto the twenty-five, and eased the car into the fast lane. I pulled away from the other traffic. As the needle rose past seventy, eighty then settled at ninety, I felt myself forced back into my seat. The speed was exhilarating after the stop-go of Seoul's city traffic, it wasn't often I got the chance to test my skills at speed, and it felt good. As I headed ever southward the traffic soon thinned and my concentration relaxed. It wasn't long before I started to mull over the problem of Park Song-yong once again.

It was over twelve years since I had first met Song-yong when we were mechanical engineering students at Yeungnam University, rushing out at the end of lectures to head into the bars of Daegu. Song-yong always drank single or double whiskies, according to the state of his finances at the time, but always the genuine article, whilst I had to be content with the local beer.

It quickly became obvious that Hyundai Heavy Industries was not a very appropriate setting for the charm and happy-go-lucky nature of Park Song-yong. I was not surprised to hear him announce one evening that he was joining the international ship financing company Dansk Skibskredit, where he hoped to find a bit more excitement travelling the world. He had lasted at Hyundai only a few months.

Song-yong was obviously much more at home in the world of high finance, and I was soon hearing reports of his rapid promotion. In a couple of years he had achieved a junior directorship. So I was a little surprised, a year later, to meet him by chance when walking along Cheonggyecheon stream in the centre of Seoul, and to see him rather casually dressed. Song-yong was the type who enjoyed wearing a smart suit at every opportunity, especially when he was in town.

He seemed highly delighted to see me again and insisted on standing me several drinks at the Blue bar in the Koreana Hotel. It was at least ten minutes before he admitted that he was no longer in finance; it appeared there had been some sort of 'misunderstanding' about the accounts for one of his deals. But he laughed it off quite convincingly, declaring that he was not one for sitting behind a desk staring at a computer screen.

Under the influence of several glasses of Song-yong's favourite Johnnie Walker Black, the drinks, combined with Song-yong's sunny charm, led me foolishly to tell him that I had just inherited the family's small ship repair yard at Incheon following the death of an elderly cousin. His eyes lit up at once, and he seemed full of sympathetic interest. In vain I tried to assure him that the firm was overdrawn to its limit, that the plant was out of date, and the entire staff consisted of eight workmen, two labourers, and a secretary.

There was no deterring Song-yong.

‘You’ve got the potential there’, he kept assuring me. ‘All you have to do is bring the place up to date, get some new equipment, and then branch into some of the more modern boats that require specialist repairs to their plastic hulls. I was talking to a bloke only yesterday, who was looking for somebody to fit-out a two billion won luxury cruiser for a chaebol’.

Song-yong always knew somebody who was looking for something or other. Anyhow, before the bar closed Song-yong had persuaded me to take him into partnership. He was supposed to put in three hundred and fifty million won, but that never materialised, although he airily assured me that he would have no difficulty in raising it.

Strangely enough, the partnership was quite a success for a time. Between us we managed to inject a considerable amount of new life into the old yard. Song-yong saw the bank manager and using his financial expertise persuaded him to extend our overdraft so that we could buy several new machines. It was Song-yong who landed us orders for new jobs that showed a good profit. It was Song-yong who went abroad and explored the field over there, bringing back a couple of orders from Germany that kept us busy for over six months.

Sometimes it was by no means easy to fulfil some of the orders that Song-yong accepted, but that was my headache, and we usually managed to deliver on time. At the end of eighteen months we had doubled our staff and floor space and reduced our overdraft to a mere nine million won. Outwardly, the picture was pretty rosy, but I had already begun to entertain certain qualms on Song-yong’s account.

Unfortunately, Song-yong never seemed to be happy unless he was living beyond his income, and in no time he was playing the part of the business executive, complete with expense account and a Hyundai Genesis Coupe. He began making more trips abroad, and once or twice I discovered that he had been visiting Jeju island when he was supposed to be in Busan. Back in Seoul, he spent far too much time in nightclubs. In one of them he caught Kim Joo-young, the soap actress and former teen idol, on the rebound from her divorce. They had only known each other for a couple of hectic weeks when they announced their engagement.

I did my best to restrict Song-yong’s expense account, but it was by no means easy, and the accounting side of our business was the least efficient. I had too much on my hands in the works to spend much time in the office, and had to leave most of it to an elderly part-time cashier who was terrified of offending Song-yong.

However, as the orders continued to flow into our books I was content to concentrate upon practical matters, and Song-yong went his own sweet way, giving the impression to most of our customers, I learned later, that he was the MD of the yard. It was not until the end of our third year together that the company’s accountant took me aside one morning and showed me half a dozen cheques that had obviously been giving him cause for concern. They were for quite large amounts, and had been cashed by Song-yong at various banks. They bore both his own signature and mine as usual, and were apparently in order, but I had no recollection of signing them. It was not until I examined them closely that I realised my signature had been forged. It was a very good forgery.

Naturally, I had to have a showdown with Park Song-Yong. He began by denying it, as I expected, but when confronted with the question of what goods or value had been received for the cheques he eventually broke down and admitted that he had drawn them to pay off a few urgent debts. I guessed that they were not unconnected with gambling, but he was inclined to treat the whole affair quite airily.

‘It’s purely temporary, Han-sang. I’ll pay it all back in a month or two’.

‘Now look here, Song-yong’, I protested, ‘this isn’t just a question of a few won from the petty cash. It comes to nearly seven million won. What’s more, you’ve never paid the three hundred and fifty million won you promised into the partnership’.

He nodded solemnly. ‘To be fair you’re right’. He looked me square in the eye. ‘Let’s call it a level four hundred million, shall we? Of course, Joo-young would let me have the money this minute, but I’ve got a big private deal on hand that should bring in five hundred million during the next few weeks’

‘Private deal?’ I queried suspiciously.

‘Nothing to do with the business’, he assured me hastily. ‘Just a little side-line I’m putting through for a friend of mine’. Should be enough to clear my debt to you and then some.

He walked out of the office and I did not see him again for three days. Meanwhile, the bank was beginning to agitate about our overdraft, which was now running pretty high, and on top of that two of our biggest creditors began to press for payment. One thing led to another, and at the end of the month we were facing liquidation. Park Song-yong had been no help at all just when I really needed his financial know-how, to mention connections. He had been away for several two and three day spells, offering no explanations for his absences. I spent a lot of time trying to explain matters to creditors, but suppliers won’t wait for money nowadays, and two of our cheques had been bounced by the bank.

The day after our liquidation had been announced I had a note from Song-yong, scrawled on a half sheet of blue notepaper. It read:

Dear Han-sang, Our troubles are over. Meet me at the Dokgo hotel, Sinjang-ri, tomorrow evening. Will explain everything then, Yours Song-yong.

I left the Cheonan-Nonsan Expressway at Gwangju and headed south-west on route twelve. The weather had turned foul, rather matching my mood I thought.

Chapter two

The Sat Nav showed me that Sinjang-Ri sits on one of the tiny islands that can be found off the south-west coast of Korea, to which it is connected by the Mokpo bridge. It boasts no amenities save for a single family owned hotel come bar. I racked my brains trying to think why Song-yong should want to meet me there but found no sort of solution.

Like most Seoulites I knew little about the south-east islands, and was sure that Song-yong knew even less. By-passing Muan I asked myself for the hundredth time why Song-yong should be in Sinjang-Ri, which I imagined to be a remote fishing village. Any fishing that Song-yong had done in the past had been for the fair sex, over a table for two, glass of wine in hand.

I took the Seohaen Expressway to Mokpo and then approached the bridge to Sinjang-Ri. A chilling wind was blowing in from the West Sea, and warning lights flashed as I approached the crossing. A limit of just ten miles an hour had been imposed and I shifted down into second gear to allow the car to creep across the bridge. I was thankful that the car had a heater as the rain lashed at the windows. I switched on the radio for the six o'clock news, just as the announcer was giving out an item about a Cuban ship that had foundered in the West Sea during the previous night, a few miles from Sinjang-Ri. 'Two of the crew are known drowned', said the bulletin, 'but the remainder were picked up and are now being brought ashore'. I pricked up my ears at this; apparently Sinjang-Ri was on the map at last, but I was no nearer to discovering what Park Song-yong was doing there.

I suppose that in the summer months Sinjang-Ri may lay some claim to being picturesque. As far as I could see at first sight it was a permanent target for the West Sea, which was battering at the harbour as if it hated every man, woman and child in the village. The wind was howling in from the sea: the sort of wind that bangs every unsecured door and sets window frames rattling. It was too dark to see any ships in the little harbour, but I imagined that they must be bouncing about like corks.

There only seemed to be one street, a mean and monotonous thoroughfare of unvarying two-storeyed houses. I soon found the Dokgo Hotel: it stands at the top of the street, near the small war memorial commemorating the recapture of the island during the Korean War, and at first sight seems almost too good for Sinjang-Ri. From the look of it outside I should have thought it merited at least a couple of stars in the hotel guide. That, at least, was a pointer to Song-yong; he had always liked his comfort.

I parked my car in the stone courtyard behind the hotel, and staggered towards the front door. The wind almost lifted me off my feet, and I noticed it was tearing at the small bonsai garden set in front of the building as if it were hell bent on wrenching them from the planters.

The restaurant come bar was deserted, but it looked pleasant enough, I had certainly been in worse in Incheon. There was a cosy atmosphere, with a bright fire in an old-fashioned grate. The wooden beams, bench tables and chairs looked both solid and tasteful. I began to feel a little happier about things.

There was a genial, well-built man behind the bar. He looked up as I came in and said cheerfully: 'Good evening, sir'.

I returned his bow: 'Good evening. Are you the landlord?'

'That's me', he said, 'Kwon Oh-young, at your service, sir. What can I do for you?'

'I'm looking for a friend of mine who's here. His name's Park Song-yong'.

'Staying here you mean, sir?'

'I imagine so'.

The landlord looked bewildered. 'There's no one of that name in my register', he said.

I stared at him. 'But there must be. I had a letter from him, saying he was here'.

He shook his head. 'Must be some mistake, sir'.

'Is there any other bar in Sinjang-Ri?' I asked.

Kwon wrinkled his nose disapprovingly. 'There's not, you'd have to drive on to Aphae-Eup to find another bar', he said, 'but they haven't got any letting rooms'.

A sudden weak feeling of rage swept over me. I'd driven for most of the day in answer to a letter from Song-yong, only to find that he wasn't there. To hell with Park Song-yong, I thought.

I parked myself at a table. I said: 'Well, that's damned odd. A friend of mine wrote to me, asking me to meet him here'.

'Best thing you can do is have a drink, sir', suggested Kwon sympathetically.

'You've got a point there', I agreed. 'Get me some soju please'.

I felt a bit better after the drink, ordered another, and picked up the menu, suddenly feeling hungry. 'Can I order some food?'

'Certainly, sir', said Kwon. 'My daughter'll be along in a minute. She'll take your order'.

Outside, the wind continued to howl unabatedly. Hae-jin bent over to clear away my plates, her tight-fitting top pulled taught around her soft breasts as she leant forward. I caught her glance at me. 'You seem to have been having a bit of excitement round here', I remarked. 'I heard about it on my car radio'.

'Ah, you mean the Cuban ship', she said shaking the fringe out of her eyes. 'Shocking affair. As a matter of fact, we've just heard one of the blokes off the ship is on his way here now. They've had to close the bridge due to the high winds, and he's in a pretty bad way'.

I nodded 'Well I'm sure the thought of being nursed by you will soon cheer him up'. I said teasingly.

Her pale-skin slightly reddened. 'Hmm I'm sure I can think of someone else I'd rather nurse', she retorted with a cheeky smile.

I laughed. My stay at the Dokgo hotel seemed to have promise after all.

'Was everything ok?' asked Kwon appearing from the direction of the staircase.

'Yes, thank you, very good'. I replied.

‘I’ve got you booked in, but don’t have a note of how many nights you plan on staying?’

I shrugged. ‘Two nights, possibly three. Will that be all right?’

‘Yes’, said Kwon. ‘Got a lot of luggage?’

I indicated my cabin case. ‘That’s all’.

Kwon glanced over at the small case I’d left at the far side of the table. ‘Do you need a hand taking it upstairs?’

‘No, I’ll be fine’. I replied.

‘In that case you are in room six, up the stairs, and along the corridor. Your room is at the end, on the right. It’s normally nice and quiet there, although I can’t take responsibility for the howling wind tonight’. He handed me a small key on a large bamboo fob, as we both laughed.

At that moment a Hae-jin came back into the bar. I couldn’t help reflect that she was slim and *very* pretty. She carried a basin of water and a towel on her arm.

Kwon said: ‘How is he?’

She shook her head dubiously and emptied the basin into the sink under the bar. She noticed me and turned her reddening face away. ‘Dr Lee doesn’t hold out much hope for him, I’m afraid’, she said.

Kwon turned to me. ‘That’s a Cuban sailor that’s been brought in’, he explained. ‘The *Caballo Negro*, floundered on the rocks, and he was found drowning. He’s in a bad way, with terrible hypothermia. The doctor says he’s lucky to be alive’. Turning to Hae-jin he asked, ‘Is the doctor still with him?’

‘Yes, but he seems to doubt whether he’ll last the night’.

Kwon made a clicking noise with his tongue. ‘As bad as that eh?’ he said to Hae-jin. ‘Poor sod. He should be in hospital, but they had to close the bridge due to the weather and it’s impossible to land a helicopter in this wind’, he said looking at me.

I nodded, ‘Hae-jin was just telling me about it a few minutes ago’, I said giving me an excuse to return her gaze. ‘The Dark Horse’, she looked blank. ‘It’s the translation of the Spanish *Caballo Negro*’. I explained. She nodded approvingly.

‘It’s a black storm, that’s for sure’. Replied Kwon. ‘Hasn’t he come round yet?’

Hae-jin shook her head. ‘Not since he arrived. I think I’d better sit with him tonight, in case he gets any worse’.

I had another drink of soju. Selfishly perhaps, I did not give a great deal of thought to the Cuban sailor; I had enough troubles of my own wondering what had happened to Park. At ten o’clock there was still no sign of him, and so I went up to my room. I suddenly realised that after my lengthy drive I was extraordinarily tired. The problem of Park Song-yong, wherever he might be, would have to wait until the morning. By half past ten I was fast asleep.

It must have been close on midnight when I heard the persistent knocking. I roused myself out of a deep sleep, sat up, and with a jerk realised that the knocking was on my room door. I stumbled across the floorboards and opened it. Outside, Hae-jin, wrapped in a silk dressing-gown, eyed me fearfully.

‘I’m so sorry to disturb you, Mr Moon’, she said making a low bow, ‘but I need your help. Could you come with me for a minute?’

I said blearily: ‘Hae-jin. What’s the problem?’

‘It’s the Cuban sailor. He’s gone down hill and I am worrying about him. He also keeps muttering something in Spanish’.

‘What’s the matter with him?’ my irritation offset by the cute way that Hae-jin’s wide eyes pleaded with me.

‘He seems to be delirious. I thought he was sleeping, but he suddenly opened his eyes and started talking. He got all upset, and I didn’t know what to do. I thought you might be able to help as you seem to understand Spanish, so I knocked you up’.

‘OK Hae-jin’, I said, ‘I’ll come and see if I can help you’.

She led me along the corridor to a room at the other end, near the top of the stairs.

The man in the bed was far-gone. He was writhing in what seemed to be pain, and was mumbling to himself deliriously. He looked quite young, I noticed, and his matted black hair hung over his forehead in a damp mass. His hands clutched at the duvet convulsively and there was a frightening fixed stare in his eyes.

I had picked up a smattering of Spanish in Spain just after school when I had travelled round Europe, and I bent my head to try to catch what he was saying. Most of it sounded absolute gibberish to me, but I caught the words ‘sea’ and ‘captain’. Then suddenly he sat up and very distinctively said: ‘Seung-li! Seung-li!’

‘Easy there’ I said and eased him back on to the pillows and said: ‘What’s that you’re saying?’ He started mumbling again and I didn’t understand one word in ten.

‘He seems to be calling out someone’s name’, said Hae-jin, ‘but I can’t quite make out anything else’.

She leaned over and gently wiped the sweat from his forehead. He seized her hand and shouted out: ‘Seung-li, Seung-li ...’

‘I’m not sure what to make of that’, I added. ‘He’s clearly confused’.

Poor Hae-jin looked terrified as he continued to grip her and shout. I helped free her hand with difficulty, and we got him back on the pillows again. Gradually his muttering stopped and his breathing grew easier. Then, quite suddenly, he slipped into unconsciousness, with a rapidity that seemed far from normal.

I said to Hae-jin: ‘We’d better leave him now, I think. There doesn’t seem to be anything more we can do’.

Hae-jin nodded wearily. ‘Thanks Mr Moon’.

‘No problem, and please call me Han-Sang’. I said looking into her deep eyes ‘You look like you could do with a drink’.

She nodded, and I saw a small tear in the corner of her eye ‘I’m not a nurse, I don’t really know what I should do to help him’. She sobbed.

‘Well, you seem to be doing a great job to me, but now I think the doctor’s orders are that you should have a little something to calm your nerves’.

I put a calming arm round her shoulder and led her to the door. I looked back at the Cuban again; he moaned once and I thought he repeated ‘Seung-li’, but I wasn’t sure. We crept out quietly and headed back toward my room. I opened up my case and drew out a small bottle of whisky, ‘Just a little something I carry, for medicinal reasons’ I winked and she managed a

weak smile. She nursed the drink while I dabbed the tears from her cheek. Her dark mascara had started to run down her ivory skin. I raised my free hand to steady her face and carefully wiped away the streaks of inky black make-up. 'There you go, good-as-new'.

Hae-jin leant over and kissed me on the cheek, 'thank you' she breathed.

I turned my head and kissed her tenderly on the lips, she responded passionately, and our tongues met...

I woke at eight and lay in bed listening to the insistent howling of the gale outside. The space next to me was crumpled but empty. I went down to breakfast hoping to bump in to Hae-jin, but she was nowhere to be seen. Feeling the need for a breath of fresh air I decided to brave the storm and go out. Fortunately the wind had dropped somewhat, although it was still bitterly cold. The lowering black skies told me that the storm had not entirely abated. As I walked down the narrow street towards the harbour I decided to give Song-yong another day, just in case he had met with some accident, and so that I could see some more of Hae-jin.

I was still feeling increasingly grumpy about the way things had gone with Park. If, as seemed highly probable, he didn't turn up, I was faced with half a days hard driving back to Seoul: in all a day of motoring, two nights in a dreary little fishing village in the middle of nowhere, and not a damned thing to show for it – well except that is for my dalliance with Hae-jin. As I turned back from the salt marsh, with the wind whistling round my ears, I cursed Park Song-yong once again.

That evening I sat in the restaurant come bar, deserted except for four fishermen playing cards in the corner. The wind had got up again and was howling with renewed fury. I drained my glass and handed it to Kwon Oh-young for a refill.

'Wind hasn't dropped, then', he remarked.

'It certainly hasn't', I said, 'although it wasn't too bad out this morning. I thought the storm was blowing over'.

'Aha', said Kwon knowingly, 'they don't go over that easy'. A window rattled and the landlord glared at it balefully. 'Bloody thing', he said to no one in particular.

The door of the bar opened, bringing with it a gust of wind. A man came in and stood for a moment, breathing heavily. He did not cut an impressive figure. He was about fifty, with a receding chin and an untidy moustache. Drops of rain dripped from his hat, and his shabby raincoat gave him the appearance of a rather badly tied brown paper parcel. He took off his hat, displaying thinning and wispy hair, the same colour as his moustache but plentifully streaked with grey. His luggage – a battered suitcase and briefcase with one strap broken – completed the bedraggled picture. He looked tired and oddly pathetic.

'God Almighty!' he gasped. 'What weather!' His voice was high-pitched, ultra-refined, and catarrh.

Kwon leaned over the bar, wearing an expression of professional welcome. 'Good evening, sir'.

'Don't know what's good about it', said the man morosely. 'You the landlord?'

'That's right, sir. Kwon's the name. And what can I do for you?'

The man undid the top buttons of his raincoat, revealing a disarranged tie. 'I'd like a room, old man', he said. He peered round the bar. 'That is, if you've got any rooms'.

'Just for one night?' asked Kwon.

'Yes. Possibly two, but I hope not'. He gave a phlegmy cough and extended his hands to the fire. 'Had a bit of a bust-up with the car, y'know'.

‘Reckon we can fix you up, sir’, said Kwon genially.

The man took off his raincoat and advanced on the bar. The warmth of the room had restored some of his self-assurance and his voice was appreciably louder. ‘Now, all I need is a good stiff drink – better give me a bottle of Chun Kook.

Kwon poured the drink. ‘Anything with it, sir?’

‘Not likely’. He picked up the glass and swallowed the Chun Kook in a single gulp. ‘That’s better’. The chrysanthemum wine was working on him already and a slight flush suffused his veined cheeks. I sat watching him without enthusiasm: it was going to be a long evening and in my present somewhat jaundiced mood he did not strike me as being the ideal drinking companion.

He took a sip at his second glass and smacked his lips appreciatively.

‘Nothing like a drop of wine’. He turned to me, pointing at the bottle. ‘Would you care to join me?’

‘Thanks’, I replied rather shortly. ‘I’ll have a small glass’.

He looked at me for a moment, sizing me up. He’s wondering, I thought sourly, if I look the type who’ll sit up half the night to provide an audience.

The man turned to Hae-jin who had quietly slipped into the room: ‘By the way, have you got a phone I could use? I can’t get a signal on mine’, waving his Samsung Galaxy in her direction.

Hae-jin nodded towards the telephone behind the bar. ‘Well, we would have normally, sir, but it’s out of order at the moment. The storm blew the lines down’.

‘Oh, damn!’ said the man. ‘That’s all I need!’ he drank some more wine and tugged at his moustache with a petulant gesture.

Hae-jin walked over towards me, as if to clear the tables. She had curled her hair so that it bounced on her shoulders as she moved.

‘There’s a call box just down the road’, she suggested. ‘But I expect their lines are also down, but it might be worth a try’.

She brushed past me and stood over my shoulder.

‘No, I’ll leave it’, he decided. ‘Not important-it can wait in this weather’. He looked round, obviously enjoying a captive audience, then turned back to Kwon Oh-young. ‘Now, what do I owe you, old man?’

‘A bottle of Chun Kook, twenty-seven thousand won’, said Kwon.

‘My god!’ said the man. ‘Still, never mind-it’s on the firm’. He threw thirty thousand won on the bar and raised his glass. ‘Well, cheers, folks. I must say, you get some pretty rough weather in these parts’.

‘It’s an improvement on last week’, said Kwon.

The man laughed. ‘What did you have last week, a typhoon?’

‘It certainly felt like it’, said Kwon feelingly.

While our new arrival and Kwon were occupied in banter Hae-jin leant over and gathered my empty dinner plates, surreptitiously pressing a tightly folded piece of paper into my hand as she did. As she carried the dishes back to kitchen I dropped my hands beneath the table and unfolded the note: ‘I’ll be at your room at 11, mwah’. I looked up and saw Hae-jin hovering behind the bar, I shot her a smile and nodded. She nodded back and slipped back into the kitchen.

My ears tuned back into the conversation between Kwon and the newcomer. 'Didn't you read about the Cuban's?' he was asking.

The man halted the passage of his glass to his lips. 'Cubans?' he repeated. 'They're always in the headlines. What have they been up to in these parts?'

'One of their ships got wrecked the other night', said Kwon with a note of reproof in his voice.

'Oh, yes, I heard something about it. So that was here, was it?'

'Just outside the harbour', nodded Kwon, 'almost on our doorstep. Those coastguard boys did a wonderful job'. He shook his head portentously. 'Worst storm I remember in thirty years'.

'It's always thirty years', said the man with weighty condescension.

'You ought to have had a basinful of this one, that's all', said Kwon. He sounded almost possessive about the storm.

'Today's little lot will do me', said the man turning to me for support. I nodded in agreement.

'Did they get the men off all right?'

'They rescued most of the crew', said Kwon, 'but two were drowned – swept away'.

'If you ask me, it's a miracle any of 'em were saved', I added.

'Where are the ones that were rescued?' asked the man.

'In Gwangju Hospital', replied Kwon. 'Although we've got one of 'em here'. He pointed towards the stairs.

'Really? How did that happen?'

'They had to bring one of them here as by the time he was rescued the weather had closed in so much that they couldn't fly the helicopter and the bridge had been closed', explained Kwon.

'Then this morning the doctor decided Arsenio was too ill to move. I wasn't very happy to have him here but the doctor wouldn't here of moving him, so here he has stayed. Poor chap, it's touch and go whether he lives'.

'He was in the water for hours', supplied Hae-jin, walking back into the room.

'Poor devil', said the man. 'What a shocking experience'. He passed a hand over his untidy hair and fingered his collar. With drink inside him he suddenly seemed to have increased in physical stature; clearly a bar was his second home. 'Personally, I like to keep both feet on dry land' – he turned to me – 'don't you agree?'

'In this sort of weather, certainly', I said.

The man patted his stomach ruefully. 'Feeling a bit peckish', he announced. 'Haven't eaten anything since lunch. Think you could rustle me up some food, m'dear?' he favoured Hae-jin with his idea of a winning smile.

'Of course, sir', said Hae-jin politely. 'What about bibimbap?'

'Just the job. Make it a large bowl, there's a dear'. He turned to me again. 'My name's Jo Yun-je', he said extending a hand.

'Moon Han-sang', I said, accepting the moist palm.

'I'm from Busan', went on Jo, 'nets and ropes'.

'Nets and ropes?' I enquired.

'Fishing nets and ropes'.

'Oh, I see', I said. 'You are here to see the fishermen?'

The man was obviously determined to make conversation and it seemed unfriendly to discourage him.

Jo made a grimace. 'Yes. But I wouldn't normally stay here five minutes if I could help it' – he looked sorrowfully at Hae-jin – 'all due respect to your village, of course. No, the fact of the

matter is, I had a bit of a prang with the car in this bloody storm. Upset all my plans’.

‘Where did this happen?’ I asked.

‘Few miles back, on the main road. Took the corner too sharp and – whoosh, hit a pond of water and aquaplaned – slap into the side of a wall.

‘You’re lucky to be here at all’, I remarked.

‘You’re telling me, mate. Wrecked the off-side, though. My worry is I don’t know how I’m going to get to get over to Muan tomorrow-got a lot of calls to make there’.

I ordered fresh drinks. ‘Isn’t there a train?’ I asked.

‘No, but there is a bus’, put in Kwon.

Jo shuddered delicately. ‘No, thanks. It’ll stop at every street corner and take all ruddy day, I shouldn’t wonder’. He raised a glass to me. ‘Well, bottoms up. This is a hell of a place to get stuck in, but as long as the wine doesn’t run out I might as well make the best of a bad job’. He leaned forward. ‘What’s your line of business, if you don’t mind my asking?’ he inquired.

‘Marine engineering’, I replied briefly, I really did mind him asking. I didn’t see much point in telling this character that I’d recently gone out of business.

‘Marine engineering, eh?’ said Jo. ‘A lot of work in that line here’. I nodded, but said nothing to encourage any further questions. Fortunately I was saved by Hae-jin who appeared carrying a tray with his steaming Bibimbap. Her tight jeans stretched taught over her bottom as she bent over to place the dish on the table. With obvious enjoyment Jo looked over and ogled Hae-jin, I felt my blood rise in indignation. ‘This bibimbap is a bit of all right’, he announced, tipping me the wink, unaware of my proprietorial interest in Hae-jin.

Not unaware of what was going on she tossed her head. ‘Nothing stingy about me’, she said.

‘I’ll bet’, said Jo.

I reflected that another hour of Jo’s company would be about as much as I could take.

‘As a matter of fact’, I said, because I did not want to discuss engineering, ‘I’m feeling pretty fed up. I drove all the way from Seoul to meet a friend of mine here, and he hasn’t turned up’.

‘That’s a bit much’, said Jo with heavy sympathy. ‘You must be really pissed off’.

‘Hmm. Park Song-yong never was considerate’, I said testily.

Jo fastened on the name with glee. You’ve only got to mention someone’s name to this type of man and he thinks he knows him. He mentioned two Park’s, a Pahk, and a Pak in quick succession.

The voice of Hae-jin providentially cut across these reminiscences. ‘Here’s Dr Lee Chung-kyu’, she announced. ‘I wonder how our patient is’.

We all looked up as the doctor came down the stairs. Lee was about fifty, short and baldish; he wore the worried expression peculiar to overworked general practitioners in outlying districts.

The doctor looked at us all in turn, as if fervently hoping that we were all in sound physical condition, and sank wearily into a chair.

‘Any news. Doctor?’ asked Kwon.

‘Nothing new, I’m afraid’, said Lee wearily. ‘It’s only a question of time now; I’ll be surprised if he lasts the night’.

Hae-jin said: ‘Oh, Doctor, isn’t there anything we can do?’

I could see she was genuinely upset.

‘We’ve done all we can’, said Lee in a defeated voice.

‘Hasn’t he come round at all?’ asked Kwon.

‘No. I’ve given him an injection and – well, quite frankly, I hope he doesn’t come round. He’s really better off as he is’.

Kwon nodded understandingly. ‘I expect you could do with a drink, Doctor’, he said.

‘I certainly could’, said Lee. ‘I’d like a Bokbunja ju, please’.

Kwon produced a small bottle and Lee’s glass steadily turned deep with the colour of oxblood as it filled with the blackberry wine. ‘I’m only sorry it had to happen here’, went on Lee. He favoured Hae-jin with an avuncular smile. ‘Although I could scarcely have had a more professional assistant, even at the hospital’.

Hae-jin looked at me quickly. ‘I wasn’t very professional last night’, she said apologetically, ‘I had to knock up Mr Moon here’.

Dr Lee looked at me inquiringly. I said: ‘I’m afraid I couldn’t do very much. Hae-jin woke me up last night and asked me to go and see Arsenio. She was a bit upset about it, I think. Thought he might get violent’.

‘It was silly, really’, said Hae-jin, ‘but I’d been sitting with him all the evening and then suddenly he opened his eyes and started talking’.

‘He can speak Korean?’ queried Lee.

‘No, no, it was Spanish’, said Hae-jin, ‘though it might have been double-dutch for all I know. Anyway, I couldn’t make head nor tail of it, and he was getting sort of frantic, so I knocked up Mr Moon’.

‘I see’, said the doctor. He turned a very shrewd and penetrating pair of eyes on me. ‘Could you make out what he was talking about?’

‘He didn’t say anything intelligible’, I said. ‘He was delirious and not making a lot of sense’.

Lee looked surprised. ‘So you speak Spanish?’

‘Yes, a little anyway’, I said. ‘I can understand it better than I can speak it. The only thing that did make sense was that Arsenio kept on calling out “Seung-li”’.

‘Seung-li?’ said Lee.

‘Yes, someone’s name I presume’.

‘And that’s all?’

‘I’m afraid that’s all I could understand’, I said. ‘The rest was just nonsense – absolute gibberish. Could have been some Spanish dialect, of course’.

‘Well, thank you, Mr Moon’, said Lee. ‘I was anxious to hear your version of it because both the captain and the first mate keep asking me about Arsenio’.

‘How are the sailors in hospital?’ inquired Hae-jin.

‘Well, two of them died, as you know’, said Lee. ‘The rest are doing well – most of them are only suffering from shock. The first mate and some of the others are being discharged tomorrow’.

‘And what happens to them then?’ asked Kwon.

Lee shrugged. ‘They’ll be whisked straight off to Seoul, I imagine. We’ve had the Cuban Embassy on the phone, they are sending people up here as soon as the weather allows. They are already in Gwangju, fussing round them in hospital like sheepdogs and generally making a nuisance of themselves. The men are very friendly enough though – when they’re given the chance!’

Kwon nodded agreement. ‘They struck me as being hardworking and decent. Plenty of guts, too’.

Lee finished his drink and rose to his feet. He turned to me with a courteous bow. 'Thank you for telling me what happened, Mr Moon', he said. 'I'll notify the captain. And now, if you'll excuse me, I'll just take another look at the patient'.

As the doctor left the room the telephone at the end of the bar rang. Kwon answered it, and then turned to Jo. 'There you go, the landlines working at least', he said, 'if you still want to make a call'.

'Good', said Jo, 'I'll get on to the garage and see how they're getting on with my car'.

Jo went to the telephone and I sat in the bar for a while. I had a sudden unaccountable feeling that something strange was afoot in this little village. There and then I made up my mind to give Park Song-yong one more day. I made the necessary arrangements with the landlord, then I saw Jo coming back to the bar and hastily went up to my bedroom, took a shower, and poured two drinks ...

Chapter three

The storm raged all that night, but by the next morning the wind had dropped. It was still bitterly cold, but the sun was struggling to find a way through the lowering grey sky.

There was an atmosphere of gloom about the Dokgo hotel: Arsenio died at eight in the morning. ‘A terrible thing’, said Kwon Oh-young, sadly shaking his head. ‘First time it ever happened in my house to a foreigner’. Hae-jin, near to tears, seemed worried that the Cuban’s death was a reflection on her nursing abilities. She had gone into his room early in the morning and found him, in her own words, ‘horribly feverish and writhing in agony’. Dr Lee had been called, but there was nothing he could do. Now, accompanied by Officer Shin, Sinjang-Ri’s solitary police officer, they carried out the banal formalities that follow death.

For want of something better to do, I checked over Arsenio’s belongings with Shin. They seemed pathetically few and were all stained and crumpled by the sea: a wallet, a wrist watch, a comb, a tie pin, a notebook, a cigarette lighter, and a packet of cigarettes. Looking oddly domestic without his uniform, Shin sat opposite me at a table in the saloon.

Breathing heavily and writing laboriously, he was listing the articles in his official notebook as I read them out to him.

‘One pair of packet of cigarettes’, I announced.

‘One pair of cigarettes’, intoned Shin, licking his pencil.

I picked up the next article. ‘One comb, black; one wallet; one cigarette lighter’.

Shin wrote busily and then closed his notebook. ‘That the lot?’

I nodded.

‘Not much, is it?’

‘What happens to these things?’ I asked.

‘I dunno, sir’, said Shin. ‘The captain’s coming down later. I suppose we hand’em over to him for this bloke’s next of kin’.

Jo Yun-je came down the stairs. He looked pretty rough I thought. Although he was freshly shaved, which I could tell as his chin had a deep razor cut across it, his suit was very crumpled, to the point that I could have sworn he had slept in it. His hair had been combed, but somehow managed to look as if it hadn’t.

'Hello there', he said in greeting. 'Don't suppose you know if the garage have rung do you?'

'Not that I know of', I replied.

'I hope they have', said Jo moodily. 'They promised they'd call here to let me know what was happening with the car'. He blinked his bloodshot eyes and lit a cigarette. 'These garages are all the same: promise to do a job and then sit on it for a week'.

'Is the car supposed to be ready?' I asked.

'Well, they said they'd patch it up well enough for me to get to Muan'.

'Why not give them a ring?' I suggested.

'Think I will', said Jo. His eyes alighted on the articles on the table. 'Hello, what's all this lot? The Commies?'

Shin seemed to be wearing an expression of guarded disapproval. 'That's right, sir', he said.

Jo shuddered. 'Fancy dying in a dump like this. Bad enough living here, I should think. Seen the landlord anywhere?'

'He's gone to the mainland to meet the Seoul train', I told him.

'Mrs Kwon's been visiting her married sister in Seoul', supplied Shin.

'What about the daughter?'

'Out shopping', said Shin. 'Said she'd be back in about an hour'.

'Oh, hell!' said Jo petulantly. He drew a smoky breath and turned to the policeman. 'Well, since you seem to be the expert on local information, officer, perhaps you could tell me what I do about paying my bill'. His manner seemed to me to be unnecessarily aggressive and unpleasant. I felt a mounting sense of irritation.

But presumably Shin had met so many men like Jo that they no longer annoyed him. He said affably: 'Certainly, sir. Mr Kwon left it on the bar, in case you wanted to settle up'.

Jo glanced at Shin, as if scenting impertinence. He opened his mouth to say something, changed his mind, and picked up an envelope from the bar. He slit open the envelope and looked at the bill with a jaundiced eye. 'Stone me!' he exclaimed, 'anyone'd think I'd had the bloody bridal suite'.

A car stopped outside, doors slammed, and Dr Lee came into the bar. He looked, I thought, tired and depressed. He was accompanied by a large, tall man wearing a somewhat crumpled blue uniform. In spite of this, and the fact that he walked awkwardly with the aid of a walking stick, there was about him an indefinable air of distinction and tough, nautical competence.

Lee smiled wanly at me and then turned to the policeman. 'This is Captain Martinez, Shin. He's come to collect Arsenio's belongings'.

'Got 'em all here, sir', nodded Shin. 'Mr Moon an' me made out a list; all the captain's got to do is sign for 'em'.

'Thank you, yes', said Martinez, eyeing the policeman shrewdly.

Shin produced a ballpoint pen. 'If you wouldn't mind signing for them, sir'.

Martinez scribbled his signature at the bottom of the sheet of paper. Shin collected the things together and handed them to the captain. As he did so, a large ticket fell on to the floor. I picked it up and looked at it.

'This can't be Arsenio's', I said.

'What is it, sir?' asked Shin.

‘A garage ticket’, I told him.

‘A garage ticket?’ queried Martinez in a puzzled tone.

‘It’s a kind of receipt’, I explained. ‘You get one when you leave your car at a garage’. I looked at the ticket again. ‘This one comes from the Namdaemun Garage in Seoul’.

Captain Martinez shook his head vehemently. ‘Arsenio’s never been to Seoul’, he said emphatically.

‘No, he couldn’t have been’, said Lee slowly.

‘Well, it came out of his room’, said Shin positively. ‘Brought it down myself’.

‘Most extraordinary’, murmured Lee. ‘What on earth would Arsenio be doing with a Seoul garage ticket?’

‘Quite obviously’, I said, ‘it wasn’t his at all. Either it was Kwon’s or it was left behind by someone who stayed in the same room. Anyway, I’ll give it to Kwon when he comes in’. I took the ticket from Shin and put it in my wallet. Then I turned to Martinez. ‘Captain, the night before Arsenio died he was conscious for a few minutes. I don’t know if the doctor has told you this?’

‘I haven’t’, said Lee. ‘But go ahead Moon. Tell him what happened’.

Martinez eyed me, wearing an expression of polite expectancy.

‘I went into Arsenio and he spoke a few words’, I said. ‘All I could make out was that he was calling out ‘Seung-li’. That’s all, I’m afraid. I just thought his family might like to know that’.

‘Seung-li, said Martinez thoughtfully.

‘Yes, it’s a Korean name’ I added.

‘I see’, he replied, ‘a woman’s name?’

‘Yes’.

‘It is perhaps the name of his woman friend’ continued Martinez.

‘Quite likely’, I said.

Martinez nodded his head vehemently. ‘He was seeing a woman from Busan. Seung-li is perhaps her name’.

‘I expect that’s it’, said Dr Lee.

Martinez said: ‘Arsenio was a good lad. It is a tragedy to die so young – so very young’.

‘We’re all very sorry, Captain’, said Lee.

Martinez inclined his head. He sighed and shrugged his shoulders. ‘There is nothing we can do’, he said sadly. ‘It is too late’.

‘Dr Lee did everything he could, Captain’, said Shin.

‘Si, si’ Martinez interrupted him. ‘The doctor has been most kind. Everyone has been so helpful’ – he bowed with an awkward, jerky movement – ‘I wish to thank all of you for your kindness. You have been very good to us – all of you’.

He shook hands with Lee, Shin, Jo, and myself. He had a long, bony hand. Then Lee took him gently by the elbow and they went out together.

Jo ruefully flexed his fingers, temporarily numbed by the force of Martinez’s handshake.

‘Extraordinary blokes, these foreigners’, he said. ‘It’s a wonder he didn’t get the Cuban rum out while he was about it ...’

Chapter FOUR

I was not in the best frame of mind when I sat down to dinner. Obviously Park Song-yong wasn't in Sinjang-ri. Probably, I thought angrily, I'd find another postcard waiting for me in Seoul apartment, informing me that he'd just left Tokyo and would I meet him for dinner in Shanghai.

My thoughts turned to Kim Joo-young. I had seen her just before I left for Sinjang-ri and under her assumed air of flippancy I could see that she was badly worried. I'm afraid I didn't feel as sympathetic towards her as I should have: any woman who agreed to marry Park Song-yong should have her head examined.

It was at least some comfort to savour Hae-jin's beautifully cooked spicy pork bulgogi, it was almost worth travelling all that way just to taste it. Song-yong, I told myself for the thousandth time, was a dead loss and when I next saw him I'd probably give him a damned good hiding. Even this line of thought proved unsatisfactory – I wasn't entirely sure that Song-yong, a taekwondo player of some ability in his youth, might not end up thrashing me ...

I decided to send Joo-young a text: almost certainly she'd be worried herself sick by now. I started to tap out a short message on my iPhone, only to sense someone watching me. I looked up to find Kwon Oh-young standing by my table.

'Did your friend get off all right, Mr Moon?' inquired Kwon.

'My friend?' I said, momentarily bewildered. 'Oh, you mean Jo. I wouldn't exactly describe him as a friend of mine. Yes, he left just before lunch. I'm off tomorrow myself, by the way'.

'I'm sorry to hear that', said Kwon. 'We were just getting to know you'.

'I'm sorry about it myself', I said, not altogether disingenuously. 'I was just thinking how much I have enjoyed your daughter's – er – cooking'.

He smiled proudly, 'Very kind of you to say so. Would you like some tea to follow?'

'Actually I'd like a coffee'.

'No problem, I'll get Hae-jin to do it', said Kwon. He called Hae-jin, who was fixing her make-up in the mirror behind the bar. 'Leave the war paint for a minute and fetch Mr Moon a cup of coffee'.

Hae-jin turned round, and looked more stunning than ever with her wide eyes and doll-like complexion. I struggled to keep my eyes off her as she poured a coffee from the large pot warming on the side and brought it over to me.

‘There you go Han-sang’, making a point of using my familiar name proprietorially. I smiled to myself. ‘What you up to there with your phone?’ she asked looking over my shoulder. I drank in her sweet perfume, then sensed her stiffen as she read my text.

‘*Miss Kim Joo-young, Seoul National Theatre*’, she read out aloud, then broke off.

‘A friend of yours?’ she asked suspiciously.

‘Yes’, I replied looking into her eyes, ‘she is *engaged* to a good friend’. Hae-jin’s face relaxed, and I made sure to brush my hand across hers reassuringly as I reached for my coffee.

‘Kim Joo-young at the Seoul National Theatre’ she repeated slowly.

‘O-o-oh! Is that *the* Kim Joo-young, Mr Moon?’

‘The very same’, I nodded.

Hae-jin looked at me with something like awe; I had clearly gone up in her estimation. ‘Oh-my-god!’ she said, almost with reverence. ‘D’you remember, Dad? We saw her in that movie when we went to Gwangju last month’.

‘Oh, aye’, said Kwon, who obviously was no film fan and didn’t remember at all.

‘She was amazing’, went on Hae-jin dreamily. ‘Ever so glamorous’. She looked at me almost accusingly. ‘You never mentioned you had such famous friends, Han-sang!’

‘Well, I never thought of her as famous, she’s just engaged to a friend of mine’. I almost added, ‘God help her!’ but refrained just in time.

‘Now, let Mr Moon drink his coffee in peace and mind your own business’, admonished Kwon sternly. He turned despairingly to me.

‘It’s ok Hae-jin’, I said, letting my hand rest momentarily on her thigh beneath the table. ‘How could I mind someone with your talents asking?’

‘Yes, she’s an excellent cook’, said Kwon.

‘The best’, I agreed, ‘and I’m sure cooking’s not her only one’.

Hae-jin shot me a knowing look, ‘well a girl does her best to please. That right, Mr Moon?’

‘Too true’, I smiled.

When Hae-jin had gone Kwon said: ‘Well, I’m sorry your pal didn’t turn up’.

‘Can’t be helped’, I shrugged.

‘Still, there’s one thing’, said Kwon, ‘you’ve had a bit of excitement, what with one thing and another’.

‘Indeed I have’. Wondering what Kwon would say if he was aware of the ‘other’. Then I remembered the garage ticket in my wallet. ‘Oh, by the way – there was a garage ticket mixed up with those things of Arsenio’s’.

‘Garage ticket?’

‘Yes. But it obviously couldn’t have been his, it was from a Seoul garage. I assumed that it was either yours or that it had been left behind by whoever had the room before him’.

I felt in the inside pocket of my jacket.

It was then that I discovered my wallet was missing...

Chapter five

I drove back to Seoul seething with anger. The loss of my wallet, which had contained two hundred thousand won in notes, had been the last straw. Kwon Oh-young, of course, had been full of sympathy and had accepted a cheque in settlement of my hotel bill and cashed another for my travelling expenses: having regard to the state of my finances at the time, he was taking a bigger chance than he realised. Shin had been instantly informed, had taken full particulars, and assured me that he would investigate the matter at once. It would plainly take priority over out-of-date dog licences, cattle straying on the high road, and minor parking offences; they would all be contemptuously brushed aside until Mr Moon's wallet was recovered. As a result of this theft every Sinjang-ri inhabitant would become a suspected criminal.

In more serious mood I considered my own unenviable position. I had been had for a sucker all along the line. I was out of business and pretty nearly broke. In the words of a popular song, I was bewitched, bothered and bewildered.

As I took the main road to Muan I considered my tangible assets: one was the Hyundai Starex SVX which purred so contentedly under my hand towards Gwangju – that should fetch at least three million won and would be the first thing to go. My comfortable riverside apartment would give place to a bedsitter in Guro. I would have to draw in my horns until they were invisible. Alternatively, I could emulate Park Song-yong and find a tame sucker for myself.

It was in this unpromising humour that, five hundred miles and many drinks later, I reached Seoul.

I lost no time in becoming solvent again and sold the Starex people carrier for three million four hundred thousand won. The dealer had offered me three million, but I stuck out for four hundred thousand. Eventually we agreed to split the difference after thirty minutes of pointless and high pressure chatter. I then took a taxi to my flat.

Mrs Gim, my daily woman, was busy with her chores. She was a plump and motherly person who served me with an almost maternal devotion. I suspected that she thought it high time that I found myself a wife and settled down – sometimes I even thought so myself.

I noticed that the living-room was spotlessly clean and that Mrs Gim had got in some fresh flowers. She paused in a determined onslaught with a duster on the mantelpiece and said: 'Good evening, Mr Moon. Welcome home'.

'Hello, Mrs Gim', I said. 'You're a bit late, aren't you?'

'I thought I'd pop in with a few flowers, sir', she said. 'They do help to brighten the place up a bit'.

I looked round the room. 'Well, you certainly seem to have done that', I conceded. 'How did you know I was coming back today?'

'I was here this morning when Miss Kim Joo-young telephoned', explained Mrs Gim. 'She said she'd had a text from you'.

I nodded automatically and picked up a pile of post, most of which seemed to be unsolicited advertising. 'It's very kind of you to make so much effort, Mrs Gim', I murmured.

Always a garrulous woman, she seemed determined to hang about.

'I've made you some green tea', she continued. 'I think you should be all right now, sir'.

'I'm sure I'll be fine', I replied. 'Have there been any messages for me?'

'Yes', she said, screwing-up her forehead as she struggled to recall them. 'A Mr Na Sang-wha telephoned three times. The last call was only half an hour before you came in'.

'Na Sang-wha?' I queried. 'Hmm, it's not a name I know. You're sure you got the name right?'

'Hmm!' Mrs Gim raised her eyebrows. 'Mr Moon', she said testily, 'have you ever known me to get a name wrong?'

'Never', I replied honestly. 'So, did he say who he is and what he wanted? I hope he isn't trying to sell me something'.

'No; he just said he'd phone back later'.

I was just about to say what I'd like to do if he did call again when the doorbell rang. 'I bet that's Miss Kim Joo-young', Mrs Gim predicted. 'She said she'd probably drop by on her way to the theatre'.

Kim Joo-young came into the room and Mrs Gim made a discreet withdrawal. Joo-young looked tired and worried; she was pale and there were dark circles under her expressive eyes. Even her black hair lacked its customary lustre. She said in an oddly flat and expressionless voice: 'Well, Han-sang – how are you?'

'I'm all right', I said. 'Would you like a drink?'

She took off her coat and threw it carelessly on to a chair. Then she held out her hands to the fire. 'I'd better not before the show', she decided.

I moved towards the drinks table. 'Mind if I do?'

I poured a soju. Joo-young watched me for a moment, without speaking. Then she said dejectedly: 'So he didn't turn up'.

'No', I said.

She sighed. 'I'm sorry, Han-sang'.

I drank some soju. 'There's nothing for you to be sorry about', I told her.

She gestured impatiently. 'But I feel responsible for the whole thing. Every won you had was in that wretched firm'.

I shrugged. 'That's a slight exaggeration. Anyway, just because you're engaged to a man it doesn't make you responsible for all his actions'.

She shook her head decisively. 'Darling, I'm serious. How much did you lose? Seven hundred million? Eight?'

'Nothing like that'. I put my drink down on the table and moved a little closer to her. 'Joo-young, there's no point in going over this again. I've really got no one to blame but myself, you know. When Song-yong started going off on these trips of his and neglecting the business I should have had it out with him'.

'But you did have it out with him!' she said vehemently. 'For God's sake don't come the injured martyr with me. You had a showdown with him and all you got was a lot of smooth talk'. Her voice assumed a bitter note. 'No one knows that smooth line of Song-yong's better than I do. Look at that letter he wrote you'.

'Which one d'you mean, Joo-young?'

'You know damned well which one', she said heatedly. 'The one that said *Meet me in Sinjang-ri – all our troubles are over*. If you ask me, they're just beginning. I knew perfectly well he wouldn't turn up, and even if he had he'd have produced some crazy scheme to make you forget the money you'd already lost'. She turned back to the fire again and tapped one foot impatiently on the carpet.

'You seem to forget', I said mildly, 'that the firm was doing very well until –'

She wheeled round to face me again. 'Until Song-yong messed the whole thing up – like he always does. The pair of you make me tired, with your old pals act and 'we must stick together' routine. Park Song-yong's had you for a sucker and you damned well know it'.

'Poor Joo-young', I said inadequately.

She gave me a mirthless little laugh. 'Poor Joo-young, nothing! Poor Han-sang!'

'You know', I said in the same mild voice, 'you've been far more upset about this than I have'.

Joo-young made a move. 'I suppose I have. But – well, you haven't discovered your fiancé is just a 'con' man'.

'You're still engaged to him?'

'Yes, God help me, I still am. Kim Joo-young makes a fool of herself over a penniless, no-good, useless layabout like Park Song-yong'. She laughed bitterly. 'My publicist would have kittens if he knew about this'.

I looked at her for a moment. Then, without speaking, I poured a large soju into a glass and passed it over. 'I think you'd better have that drink after all', I said.

Joo-young seemed to relax a little and took the glass. She said listlessly: 'I think you're right'.

'I suppose you haven't heard from him?' I said.

'Not a word – not even a postcard. But he'll turn up. I know Song-yong – it's all happened before. One of these days', she added darkly, 'its going to happen once too often. Have you got a cigarette?'

I pointed to the box on the table. 'Help yourself'.

She lit a cigarette and smoked in silence for a moment. Presently she said: 'Han-sang, what are you going to do now? Have you thought of starting up again on your own?'

I shrugged rather helplessly. 'I don't know. I'm not sure yet'.

'Well, if you do, I might –' she hesitated and then went on: 'Well, I wouldn't mind putting up some of the money. After all, I've done pretty well lately, and I know it would be a good investment'.

I held up a hand. 'No, Joo-young. We don't do it like that'.

'Why not? What d'you mean?'

‘You know perfectly well what I mean. I’m not letting you repay Park Song-yong’s debts – not under any pretext’. I rested my hand on her shoulder for a moment. ‘Don’t think I don’t appreciate the offer, but I’m not thinking of starting up anything on my own. I’ve learned my lesson –’

‘Learned it the hard way’, interposed Joo-young sadly.

‘Well, never mind about that. I’m not sunk yet. I may even go abroad’.

‘You shouldn’t have much difficulty getting a job’, she said.

I was relieved when the telephone interrupted the conversation.

The voice on the other end was crisp and cultured. ‘Mr Moon Han-sang?’

‘Yes’, I said.

‘Good evening to you’, continued the voice. ‘My name’s Na Sang-wha. Sorry if I’ve disturbed you’.

‘You haven’t. What can I do for you?’

The pleasant voice said: ‘I hope you won’t think it’s an impertinence on my part, Mr Moon, but I heard about your company going into liquidation, and I wondered if you’d make any particular plans for the future’.

I pricked up my ears at that. ‘Well, no’, I admitted. ‘I did have some vague idea about going abroad’.

‘I see. Well, if you should happen to change your mind perhaps you’d care to get in touch with me. I could use a man with your qualifications’.

Somewhat taken aback, I said: ‘Thank you very much. Perhaps you’d tell me the name of your firm and give me your telephone number’.

There was a brief pause. Presently the voice said: ‘I think it might be better if you called in to see me here. I’d be delighted to meet you. Would tomorrow afternoon be convenient?’

‘Certainly. Shall we say three o’clock?’

‘That suits me’.

‘The address 40 Sejong-daero’.

‘I’ll be there’, I promised. ‘Thank you, Mr Na’.

‘Thank you, Mr Moon. Three o’clock tomorrow, then ...’

Joo-young looked at me expectantly as I replaced the receiver.

‘Good news?’ she asked.

‘There’s no such thing’, I told her.

Chapter SIX

Promptly at three the following afternoon I found myself in a large modern room, furnished in sleek teak and chrome. There were no fewer than three flat screens arranged precisely on his desk, as well as two telephones on the designer desk, which matched the modern feel of the room. Behind the desk were a number of roller maps, which could be displayed in the same manner as one would pull down a blind.

Na Sang-wha rose from the desk, and bowed. As I returned the complement I studied him cautiously. At first glance he appeared very ordinary, if not nondescript. He could have been anything: a bank manager, a tax inspector, a lawyer, or a stockbroker. He wore a sober and well-cut formal city suit, and was indistinguishable from a thousand other men in their early fifties who commuted daily to Seoul.

‘How nice of you to come, Mr Moon’, he said cordially. ‘Do sit down and have a cigarette’.

I said, ‘Thank you’, and took a seat in a comfortable leather chair. Na pushed a cigarette box towards me, then took a cigarette himself. As he lit it he regarded me thoughtfully through the smoke, and I found his very direct stare vaguely disquieting.

‘I was sorry to hear about your company’, he said at length. ‘You must have had some very bad luck’.

‘We certainly had our share’, I replied non-committally.

Na exhaled smoke towards the ceiling and leaned back in his chair. ‘I’ve got a proposition to put to you, Mr Moon’, he announced. ‘It’s rather an unusual one, but I think you’ll find it interesting’. He waited for me to speak.

‘I’d like to hear it’, I said.

‘Perhaps I’d better explain myself a little more fully’, went on Na. ‘I’m in charge of a department –’

I interrupted him. ‘A Government department?’

‘Yes’.

So that was it. The civil servants wanted some know-how on the cheap. ‘I’m afraid I’m not really interested in working for the Government’, I said, trying to sound polite.

Beyond a very slight elevation of his eyebrows Na's face registered no reaction. 'Really?' he murmured. 'May I know why?'

'They don't pay enough', I said bluntly. There was no point in wasting time.

Na examined his fingernails and eyed me with that faintly disconcerting stare of his. 'In general, I agree with you', he conceded. 'Civil Service emoluments on the whole are far from princely. But there are exceptions to that rule. My department is one of them'.

I leaned forward. 'Exactly what is your department?'

Na did not answer at once. He drew on his cigarette and expelled a long stream of smoke.

Faintly irritated, I persisted: 'Well, Mr Na – what is it? Don't tell me that you're the Secret Service!'

'That's a rather melodramatic description', said Na, 'never the less, I suppose it's as good as any. Given our situation we need to keep one jump ahead of our friends in the North. Their intelligence has been good at times, but we like to think that ours is rather better. Unfortunately, we still have our enemies: we're trying to keep one jump ahead of them. Perhaps our business could best be described as being nobody's business'. Na's smile was more friendly now, and he regarded me almost benignly.

'Are you *Angibu*' I asked, my curiosity now aroused.

'Not exactly'.

'National Intelligence Agency?' I pressed.

'No. I told you. We're a Government department. That description may not appear to be very illuminating, but we do have access to – er – certain funds that the taxpayer knows nothing about. We also have very broad – er – powers. Have I explained myself to your satisfaction?'

'No', I said rather rudely. 'How do I know all this is true?'

Na sighed gently. 'On this desk you can see two telephones. Perhaps you'd care to pick up the second one from the right and ask for the Chief of Police. It's a direct line'.

Feeling slightly foolish I picked up the receiver.

'Go on', encouraged Na, 'ask for Commander Lee Young-suk'.

I shot a look at Na, but his expression registered only sincere goodwill. I said into the mouthpiece: 'Commander Lee Young-suk, please'.

A man's voice said: 'Just a moment please, Mr Na'.

Presently another voice came on the line: 'Hello, Sang-wha. What's up?'

Na took the receiver out of my hand. 'How's the new grandson, Young-suk?' he said, and held the instrument so that I could hear the reply.

'Is that all you're ringing up about?' the voice on the other end inquired.

'That's all for now, Young-suk', said Na.

'Well, bugger off', was the discouraging reply. 'I've got work to do, even if you haven't'. The Colonel rang off with a truculent click.

Na placed his fingertips together and looked at me inquiringly. 'Does that satisfy you, Mr Moon?'

'Yes', I said weakly. 'What exactly do you want to see me about?'

Na leaned back in his chair. 'Mr Moon, you were recently in partnership with a man called Park Song-yong. Apart from your business arrangement, I understand that Park borrowed money from you from time to time'.

'As a matter of fact he did', I said. 'How did you know that?'

He flicked open the file on his desk and went on: 'If my information is correct, you lost four hundred million won in this business. Apart from that, Park owes you – personally, not your firm – three hundred and fifty million won'. He closed the file and regarded me with perfect equanimity.

'Correct', I said, 'but while you're about it you might add another two-hundred thousand won to that total'.

It was Na's turn to look surprised. 'Another two-hundred thousand won?'

'Yes', I said. 'Some days ago I had a letter from Park Song-yong, asking me to meet him at a place called Sinjang-ri – its on the east coast. The letter implied that our business worries were over and that I was going to get all my money back'. I shrugged. 'He didn't turn up, and to crown it all I had my wallet stolen. There were two-hundred thousand won in it. I doubt if Song-yong stole it himself, but I thought I might as well put it on his bill'.

Na was smiling again. 'Why not, indeed? I see what you mean'.

'I'm delighted to hear it', I said with scarcely veiled irony. 'Incidentally, it was a very nice wallet'.

'Quite so', said Na casually. 'I've been admiring it'.

To my utter amazement Na took my wallet from his inside pocket and pushed it towards me. 'I think you'll find everything quite in order', he murmured.

I picked up the wallet and checked through the contents. Everything was there. But there were still a lot of things that I had to know, even if Na did have a direct telephone line to the Chief of Police. 'I'm still a bit bewildered', I said. 'What exactly is this job you're offering me?'

A new voice, with a familiar ring, spoke from the doorway. 'We want you to find Park Song-yong for us'.

I swung round. Standing just inside the door was a man I identified with some difficulty as Jo Yun-je.

At first I thought I must be mistaken, for this was an entirely different Jo. Gone was the seedy, facetious, and shabbily dressed fishing gear salesman that I remembered. This new Jo had immaculately kept hands in place of the nicotine stained fingers and somewhat grimy nails that I had seen in the Dokgo hotel. The straggly moustache had been clipped with military precision. The ultra-refined and catarrhal voice was now crisp and incisive; the voice of a man accustomed to command. Jo Yun-je, I subsequently learned, had won the National Security Order of Merit in a skirmish in the demilitarised zone and spent the rest of his career in one of the less orthodox branches of Military Intelligence.

I looked from Jo to Na in blank-faced astonishment.

'I think you know Jo Yun-je', said Na. 'he's a colleague of mine'.

I blinked. 'A colleague of yours?'

'Yes. We work together in this department'.

I stared at Jo, who grinned at me.

'I know I said I was supplying fishing gear, my man', he said, and once again I heard the nasal, snuffling voice of Jo Yun-je of Busan. Then Jo smiled pleasantly. 'I expect you must have thought I was pretty ghastly. Incidentally, I'm sorry I had to take your wallet. I hope it didn't inconvenience you'.

In spite of myself, I summoned up a wry smile. 'Like hell it didn't', I said. I turned to Na. 'Are all your employees expert pick-pockets?'

'Some are better than others', said Na lightly. 'But Jo is by the way of being our star turn in that direction'. He went on more seriously: 'I expect you think we're being unnecessarily mysterious, Mr Moon'.

'I must confess to being a little confused', I said. 'Exactly why did you get me here this afternoon?'

'We've told you why', said Na quietly. 'We want you to find Park Song-yong for us'.

'But Song-yong hasn't disappeared!' I exclaimed.

Na raised his eyebrows. 'Really?' he said. 'Everything seems to indicate that he has'. He looked at me with faintly frigid amusement.

'Well', I said lamely, 'what I mean is, he's just gone off somewhere. Of course, you don't know Park Song-yong like I do. This sort of thing happened all the time when we were in business together. I never knew where he was from one day to another. He'll turn up sooner or later'.

'We don't want him sooner or later', said Na soberly. 'We want him now'.

'Have you tried to find him?' I asked.

'No'.

'But why not?'

After a momentary hesitation, Na said: 'Because we have no wish to arouse curiosity in – er – certain quarters'.

'But surely', I pointed out, 'my inquiries will arouse a certain amount of curiosity somewhere'.

Na shook his head. 'I don't see why they should. After all, you have a perfectly legitimate reason for wanting to find him: he was the direct cause of your business going bust and he owes you money'.

'Which makes you the ideal man, from our point of view', interposed Jo. 'Besides, you know Park Song-yong. You know his haunts, his habits, his friends – everything about him'.

'I'm beginning to wonder just how much I do know about Song-yong', I said thoughtfully.

Na leaned forward across the desk. 'Do you want the job or don't you?' There was a new note of challenge in his tone.

'Aren't you taking a bit of a chance?' I said. 'After all, you know practically nothing about me'.

Na produced a cold little smile. 'Don't we, Mr Moon?' He opened a drawer in his desk and took out a manila folder. 'On the contrary, we know a great deal about you. Otherwise you wouldn't be here'. He put the file down on the corner of the desk, in front of me. 'There's your dossier', he said quietly. 'Read it'.

I read it. It was my dossier all right. After I'd finished reading I put the file down on the desk and said, with what I hoped was a touch of sarcasm. 'This is my Life, Moon Han-sang'.

'We try to be thorough', said Na easily. Then he leaned forward and his voice became more incisive. 'If you decide to accept this assignment we'll pay you double your previous salary and expenses. Well?'

I looked from Na to Jo in bewilderment. I could see that Jo was smiling.

'I must have your decision now, Mr Moon', Na said, 'one way or the other'.

I made up my mind quickly. 'All right'. I said. 'I'll find Park Song-yong for you'.

'Good', said Na.

With a slight feeling of irritation I came to the conclusion that there wasn't much chance to be got out of this mysterious couple; they knew damned well I was going to say 'yes' because they knew exactly how broke I was.

Then a sudden thought struck me. 'You must tell me one thing', I insisted.

'Well?' said Na.

'Why are you so interested in Park Song-yong? Why are you so anxious to find him?'

I saw Na and Jo exchange a quick look. Then Na said: 'Park had an appointment with someone in Sinjang-ri'.

'Certainly he did', I said dryly, 'with me'.

'Not primarily with you, Mr Moon', corrected Na smoothly. 'You were invited to Sinjang-ri merely as a cover for Park's meeting with someone else'.

'Who was this someone else?' I demanded.

'A man called Arsenio', said Na.

'You mean the Cuban sailor that died?'

Na nodded. 'Exactly. We think that Arsenio was meant to be put ashore at Sinjang-ri, but the shipwreck upset the plan and the rendezvous didn't come off'.

'But I don't understand', I said. 'Why should Park Song-yong want to get in touch with Arsenio? It doesn't make any sense to me'.

'We can't tell you that at the moment', said Na. 'However, find Park for us and then we'll tell you'.

'We have one clue, Moon', said Jo. 'We think it's an important one. It's in your wallet'.

I took out the wallet and looked through it. Then I held out the garage ticket. 'You mean this?' I said.

'That's it', said Na.

I turned to face Jo. 'So that's why you took my wallet'.

Jo nodded. 'I've checked with the garage and found out that that ticket is for Park's car'.

I remembered Song-yong's car well: it was a Hyundai Genesis Coupe. Song-yong had wanted to trade it in for an Equus and put it down against expenses for income tax purposes, but I had managed to dissuade him.

'It is a Hyundai Genesis Coupe 200?' I asked.

'That's right', said Jo. 'It was left at the garage with the key just over a week ago. It was originally left for only one night; then the owner telephoned the garage to say it wouldn't be picked up for another week or so. They don't know Park at the garage, they simply go by the ticket. You've got one half – the other's in the car'.

I looked at the ticket. 'I see', I said slowly.

'Our theory is that Arsenio had the ticket, just in case something went wrong and Park didn't show up at Sinjang-ri'.

'In other words', explained Na, 'we think that Arsenio had an arrangement with Park whereby if Park didn't turn up Arsenio was to come up to Seoul and pick up the car'.

'And the car would lead him to Song-yong?' I hazarded.

'Exactly', said Jo.

'But we could be wrong, of course', added Na. This admission surprised me a little: they had been right about everything so far.

'It certainly seems to explain why Arsenio had the ticket', I observed. I took another look at it.

'The Namdaemun Garage' – that's the large one near the market, isn't it?'

'That's right', said Jo.

'Well, I've got the ticket', I said, 'so I'd better start by picking up the car'.

Jo led me down a long corridor to a small room where an elderly, bespectacled and clerky man sat at a desk, surrounded by filing cabinets.

‘Evening, Heon-ik’, said Jo. ‘This is Mr Moon Han-sang. Add him to the system and give him two million won to be going on with. He’s with us, with effect from today’.

The man called Heon-ik nodded and went to a safe. From it he produced a bundle of notes and counted out two million won. He then turned to his computer and entered my name, address, telephone number and date of birth.

‘Just look into the camera would you?’ he asked pointing a pocket camera at me. The world turned white for a fraction of a second, and then my face appeared on his screen.

‘Great, that’s the paperwork sorted out’, he said.

I left the office in Sejong-daero feeling happier than I had for a long time. It struck me that Na Sang-wha ran a very efficient organisation.

Chapter SEVEN

I pushed open the swing door of the garage and went up to the reception desk. The man behind it looked at the ticket, stamped it, and took an ignition key from a peg behind him. He pointed to a door just beyond the showroom. ‘You’ll find the car through there, sir’, he said. Ten minutes later I was driving Song-yong’s car in the direction of City Hall ...

I turned into a side street off Saemunan-ro and parked. I thought it might be a good idea to make a through search of the car, in the hope of finding something else to work on.

The side pocket yielded nothing except a tatty old A to Z and a yellowing evening paper. I opened the glove compartment and rummaged through its contents and found half a packet of chewing gum, a dirty duster, a pair of sunglasses, and a spectacle case. I popped open the case to find a conventional pair of horn-rimmed spectacles, and on the inside of the lid a small label with a name and address on it:

*Mrs Choi Ji-hye,
Cherry Blossom Cottage
Pocheon*

I sat frowning at the label for a few seconds. It could, of course, belong to one of Park Song-yong’s girl friends: the old adage ‘Men don’t make passes at girls wearing glasses’ meant nothing to Song-yong – he’d make a pass at anything under fifty.

It occurred to me that Kim Joo-young might know who Choi Ji-hye was. Newly engaged men, I know, sometimes rattled off a list of their previous girl friends to their fiancée – presumably with the intention of starting with a clean slate. I thought it unlikely that Song-yong would find such a precaution either necessary or desirable, but it was possible; with Song-yong anything was possible.

I stopped in a doorway, out of the noise of the city, and glanced at my watch. I calculated that Joo-young should be in her apartment. She answered almost immediately.

‘Joo-young’, I said, ‘I’m sorry to disturb you, but do you happen to know a woman called Choi Ji-hye?’

She sounded mildly surprised. ‘Choi Ji-hye? Rings no bell with me, darling. Should I know her?’

‘I wondered if she was a friend of Song-yong’s’.

‘Well, if she was, he kept very quiet about it’.

‘So you’ve never heard of her?’

‘Never. But what –?’

‘Thanks, Joo-young’. I said quickly. ‘I’ve got to go now, I’m afraid’.

‘But Han-sang, wait! I’d like to know if this woman –’

‘I’ll explain later’, I said. ‘See you soon’.

I hung up and went back to the car.

I drove out of Uijeongbu and took expressway forty-three for Pocheon. I was beginning to realise what it must be like to be a detective: the endless routine inquiries; the infuriating succession of red herrings; the patient following up of each tiny clue, however vague it seemed. Thirty minutes later found me in Pocheon. I stopped at a small general stores and inquired the way to Cherry Blossom Cottage.

‘You can’t miss it’, said the woman in the shop. ‘It’s got a pale blue gate and there’s a tall tree just behind the garage’.

It was easy enough to find. There was a small girl, about ten years old, playing with a ball in the garden. She was a rather serious-faced child with large, wistful eyes. From under her woollen cap appeared a long pigtail secured by a red ribbon. I said: ‘Hello’.

The girl stopped bouncing her ball and looked up at me, her features transformed by a sudden and oddly winning smile.

‘Hello’, she said.

‘Does Mrs Choi live here?’ I asked.

She nodded.

We walked up to the front door together, and as I pressed the bell I turned to the child, who was regarding me speculatively. Her eyes, I noticed, were of a very dark brown.

‘And what’s your name?’ I asked her.

With a strange touch of dignity, she answered: ‘My name is Seung-li...’

Chapter eight

I gazed into the large brown eyes that were studying me so curiously.

‘Did you say Sun-lee?’ I asked.

‘No, I didn’t’, replied the child with the utmost clarity, ‘I said Se-un-g-li’.

It was incredible, I thought – it couldn’t be a coincidence. I knew, Seung-li was a common enough name, but hearing the Korean name for ‘Victory’ it fell strangely on my ears after that night in the Dokgo hotel.

Before I could say any more the door was opened by a woman of about fifty. Her dark hair was tastefully styled and barely touched with grey; she was still handsome, though there was a hardness about her mouth and eyes. She looked at me in the distant manner with which housewives confront door-to-door salesmen and said: ‘Yes?’

‘Are you Mrs Choi Ji-Hye?’ I asked.

‘That’s right’, she said, still on guard.

I took the spectacle case from my pocket. ‘I’m sorry to trouble you’, I said, ‘but do these belong to you?’

Mrs Choi looked at the case for a moment. Then her manner changed. ‘Why yes’, she said. ‘I’d given them up for lost. I made inquiries all over the place with absolutely no result’. I noticed that her expression had softened appreciably. She stepped aside and held open the door. ‘Won’t you come in?’

Just before we went into the hall together Mrs Choi turned to the child. ‘Seung-li! Time for tea, dear. Wash your hands in the kitchen’.

So the child’s name really was Seung-li.

‘Come and meet my husband’, invited Mrs Choi affably.

She led me into the sitting-room. It was large, low, and comfortably furnished with soft cream coloured sofa and curtains, setting off the warm glow of the hard wood floor.

There was a predominantly military flavour about the room: there were brass shell cases of all sizes arranged under the window, two model armoured vehicles on the mantelpiece and over it hung an oil painting of a fighter jet in full flight. Each of the four walls was covered with prints

and photographs of military scenes. I had also spotted a ship's compass and an old-fashioned ship's barometer in the hallway.

Mrs Choi led me to the open door of a smaller, adjoining room. It appeared to combine the functions of office and workshop and the military atmosphere, powerful as it was in the sitting-room, seemed all-embracing.

An older, studious looking man was working on an old radio set on a rough wooden table. He wore disreputable dark grey flannel trousers, a rather shiny double-breasted jacket with scuffed elbows and a woollen cardigan, which appeared to be several sizes too big for him. I noticed that his black shoes had seen better days.

The walls were lined with bookcases on all sides packed with military reference books and piled up in one corner were pieces of old electronic equipment in varying stages of repair: there were morse systems, walkie-talkies, a Geiger counter, and several radio kits. A confused jumble of tools and spares overflowed from one of the boxes, whilst a large aeroplane propeller fastened to the wall above his workbench completed the picture of disorganised military industry.

Mr Choi blinked inquiringly at his wife and myself with mild and short-sighted eyes. Then he came towards us and into the sitting-room.

'Kyung-lee, I've got my spectacles back', announced Mrs Choi. 'This gentleman very kindly brought them'. She turned to me. 'I'm afraid I don't know your name. This is my husband'.

'Moon Han-sang', I said.

I held out a hand to Choi Kyung-lee and he shook it absent-mindedly. 'What's that you said about spectacles, my dear?' he murmured.

'You know', said Mrs Choi, 'the pair I lost in Seoul about three weeks ago'.

'Of course', said Choi, 'I remember'. It was obvious to me that he did not remember at all.

'I can't tell you how delighted I am to get them back, Mr Moon', said Mrs Choi. 'I've been completely lost without them'.

'You've got your new ones', pointed out her husband mildly.

'Oh, yes – but they've never been quite the same as these, you know'. Her look challenged him to contradict her.

'I didn't know', ventured Choi meekly, 'but I'll take your word for it'.

Mrs Choi shot a reproachful look at her husband, and turned back to me. 'Where on earth did you find them, Mr Moon? As far as I can remember, I left them in a little restaurant in Namdaemun. I telephoned the next day, but they said no one had handed them in. Of course, people these days are quite incredibly dishonest'.

'As a matter of fact', I said, 'I found them in a car'.

'In a car?' Mrs Choi's voice reached a high pitch of incredulity.

'Yes', I said deliberately. 'It was lent to me by a friend of mine – a man called Park Song-yong'.

'Park Song-yong?' repeated Choi Kyung-lee. 'I don't think we know anyone of that name, do we dear?' Looking at him, I was ready to swear that he was an absent-minded old man searching a memory that had long since proved unreliable.

Mrs Choi was no more helpful. 'I don't think so', she said. 'No, I'm sure we don't'.

'He must have picked them up in the restaurant, or where ever it was you left them', commented Choi.

'I suppose so', she agreed. 'Did he ask you to deliver the spectacles to me, Mr Moon?'

'No', I replied. 'As a matter of fact, I haven't seen Park Song-yong for quite some time – not since I borrowed the car. I came across the glasses quite by chance, and as I was on my way to Pocheon on business I thought I'd drop them in'.

'How very kind of you', said Mrs Choi effusively. She turned to Seung-li, who had just come into the room. 'Seung-li, look! These are the spectacles I lost. Mr Moon has brought them all the way from Seoul'.

'I'm afraid you've been to a great deal of trouble', said Choi Kyung-lee apologetically.

'Not at all', I assured him. 'If it had been out of my way I should have posted them to you'.

'All the same, it was extremely thoughtful of you', said Mrs Choi. 'I just can't tell you how grateful I am. My new pair is supposed to be exactly the same, but I don't think that new oculist is any good. I just can't get along with the pair he gave me'.

Seung-li spoke for the first time since she had told me her name. 'Is Mr Moon staying for tea?' she asked.

Mrs Choi laughed. 'Yes, dear, I think that's the very least we can do', she said. 'You'll stay and drink tea with us, won't you, Mr Moon?'

'Well...'

'I won't take 'no' for an answer', insisted Mrs Choi.

Choi turned his mild eyes towards me. 'That means you're staying', he said.

'Good, so that's settled'. Mrs Choi took the child by the hand. 'Come on, Seung-li. You can help me in the kitchen'.

'Charming little girl', I said when they had gone.

'Yes, isn't she?' said Choi. He looked almost wistfully, it seemed to me, in the direction of the kitchen. 'A sweet child, and we're both devoted to her. I'm afraid we couldn't bear the thought of being parted from her now'. He broke off and peered at me through his thick glasses. 'I expect you've got the wrong idea. Seung-li's not our daughter, you know'.

'Oh, really?' I said inadequately. 'I thought she must be'.

'Oh, no. We have no children of our own. Seung-li's my brother-in-law's child. He's a widower, so she spends most of her time with us'.

'I see', I said. The explanation seemed perfectly logical, but I could not rid my mind of this nagging doubt. I went on: 'Seung-li – is such a special name?'

'I suppose it is', said Choi. 'Quite honestly, I don't know how she came by it'.

'It's got a kind of military sound about it', I suggested casually. 'Victory – did her birth coincide with the commemoration of a great battle?'

'I really don't know' said Choi absently. 'Of course, I had nothing to do with her naming. I remember she used to be teased about it when she first started school. Children can be cruel little devils, you know, and any child with a different name gets pounced on at once'. He smiled reminiscently. 'I remember going to school with a small boy whose life was a perfect misery ...'

I quickly realised that further inquiries into Seung-li's antecedents would get me precisely nowhere. The mention of his school chum was an attempt to steer the conversation away from the girl. I took the hint.

I crossed to the mantelpiece and looked more closely at the model armoured vehicles. Pointing to what I judged to be a Korean War vintage car, I asked: 'This is very detailed. I presume it is to scale?'

He smiled. 'Oh yes, and all the others'.

He stepped over to me and picked it off the mantelpiece, and promptly began a detailed lesson on the various advantages of each machine. I feigned interest and asked about the other pieces filling the house.

‘I take it you are a collector?’ I said warmly. ‘You must be quite an expert’.

Choi emitted a little sigh. ‘It’s rather more than a collection now, I’m afraid’, he said ruefully.

‘So you trade in militaria them?’

‘Dear me, yes. There’s quite a good market for this sort of thing, you know – you’d be surprised. Bills must be paid, Mr Moon’, he went on diffidently, as if loath to bring up the sordid question of earning a living. ‘Spotting bargains and bringing them back to life seems to be my only professional qualification’.

‘Well, these are certainly professional’, I said.

He smiled his distant smile; then took me by the elbow.

‘Come into my den for a minute; I’ll show you some of my other pieces’.

‘I’d like that’, I said.

‘I’ve always been fascinated by war’, said Choi, when we were in his study-cum-workshop.

‘Military history – the Japanese occupation, the Korean War – all that sort of thing’.

‘Were you in the army?’ I inquired.

Choi shook his head regretfully. ‘Alas, no’, he said. ‘It was always my ambition, but they turned me down – said I had a dicky heart. Absolute nonsense, of course: I’ve never had a day’s illness in my life’. He smiled rather pathetically. ‘So instead of the real thing I have to be content with playing at soldiers. Come over here a minute’.

He led me to the other side of the table. ‘Mind you’, he went on, warming to his subject, ‘objects have their romance too, you know. Like this one, for instance’. He picked up a rather battered looking tobacco tin and handed it to me.

I fingered it for a moment and said: ‘Excuse me for sounding ignorant, but it just looks like a rusty tobacco tin’.

‘Yes’, said Choi slowly, ‘but it’s also rather more than that’.

‘Why?’ I asked. ‘It looks ordinary enough to me’.

‘Do you really think so?’ He shook his head. ‘It’s a funny thing, but this ordinary looking tobacco tin once saved a man’s life’.

Mystified, I repeated: ‘Saved a life?’

Choi gave an indulgent chuckle. ‘I’m sorry, Mr Moon. Of course, this must sound like Greek to you. Let me explain. This tin was in the breast pocket of one of the infantry soldiers at the Battle of Inchon in 1950’.

I nodded. ‘I remember learning about it at school. Wasn’t it the turning point in the war?’ I said, impressed in spite of myself.

‘Yes, it led to the recapture and liberation of Seoul’.

‘But what is the significance of the tin in all this?’ I asked.

‘You see here’, continued Choi turning the tin over in the palm of his hand. ‘This is the entry hole from a North Korean bullet’.

I looked and sure enough there was a neat hole in the base of the tin. ‘But there is no exit hole?’ I noted.

‘Exactly! You see the tin and its contents absorbed all the energy left in the bullet, saving the chaps life.’

‘He was a lucky bloke’ I exclaimed.

‘Indeed he was’, replied Choi dryly. ‘If only I could find out who it was, then the story really would be worth telling’.

‘Any chance of that?’ I asked.

‘Well it’s not impossible. I have amassed quite an archive of records and correspondence from the battle, and am always on the look out for more. Maybe one day I will turn up a letter that refers to the miracle of the little tobacco tin’.

I nodded and returned his smile.

‘So you specialise in the Battle of Inchon?’

‘Yes, it has a special place in my heart. But, one can’t make a living out of one battle, and so I deal in pretty much anything that comes my way’.

‘Ah, yes’, I said, regarding Choi with renewed interest. ‘Well the tobacco tin certainly makes for a remarkable story’, I remarked. I examined the tin again. ‘And they say smoking is bad for your health’.

Choi nodded. There was a light footstep outside and Seung-li appeared in the doorway. ‘Tea’s ready, Uncle Choi Kyung-lee’, she told him.

‘Good girl’, said Choi. He clasped my elbow. ‘Come along, Mr Moon. I’ve taken up quite enough of your valuable time. I do hope I haven’t been boring you’.

‘Far from it’, I said, with genuine feeling, and followed Choi back into the sitting room...

Chapter nine

The next morning I was making coffee when the telephone rang. A curt voice, not immediately recognisable, said: 'Moon?'

'Speaking', I said. 'Who's that?'

'This is Jo Yun-je. I believe you telephoned me'.

'Yes, I tried to get you last night. I've got something to tell you, Jo'.

'Is it important?'

'I think so', I said.

Jo hesitated for a moment, then said: 'Can you meet me at The Lounge bar at the Lotte Hotel – at twelve thirty?'

'I'll be there', I promised.

Back in the kitchen I had drunk half my coffee when the doorbell rang. I was surprised to find that the caller was Joo-young.

'Hello', I said, 'I thought you were Mrs Gim. I was just going to ask you to clean out the fridge'.

Joo-young appeared to be serene and composed. 'I'd be delighted if I had a little more time, but I'm on my way to the hairdresser and I'm late already'.

I looked at her hair, which to me seemed to defy improvement. 'Actually, I'm in a bit of a rush myself', I said, 'but we might work in a cup of coffee. I've just made some'.

'Sorry, darling', said Joo-young. 'I just looked in about the message you left last night. You want to see me about something, don't you?'

I nodded. 'I was wondering if you'd do me a favour'.

'If I can. What is it?'

I hesitated for a moment. 'This may seem rather an odd request', I said, 'but I'd like you to make out a list for me'.

Joo-young raised her eyebrows. 'A list? A list of what?'

'A list of all Park Song-yong's friends and acquaintances'.

Joo-young looked completely mystified.

‘I probably know quite a lot of them myself’, I added, ‘but I doubt if I know all of them. Will you do it?’

‘But why on earth do you want it?’

I said deliberately: ‘I’m trying to find Song-yong, that’s why’.

Joo-young laughed. ‘But, darling, why so dramatic? You talk as if Song-yong had disappeared’.

‘Well, hasn’t he?’ I said.

‘Of course he hasn’t’, she replied indulgently. ‘I wouldn’t mind betting that any day now we’ll get a picture postcard from Singapore or somewhere, saying that he’s having a whale of a time – on someone else’s money’.

‘Possibly’, I said. ‘But supposing we don’t get a postcard? I can’t afford to wait. I’ve got to find Park Song-yong’.

‘But why?’ she persisted. ‘You didn’t feel like this when you got back from Sinjang-ri. I thought you’d given him up as a bad job’.

‘Perhaps I did’, I said, ‘but I’ve changed my mind’.

‘Why? Has anything happened?’

I shrugged. ‘I’ve thought better of it, that’s all’.

‘Why this sudden concern for Song-yong?’ she demanded. ‘I thought you were simply going to cut your losses and forget him’. She came a little closer to me. ‘Han-sang, if it’s the money that’s worrying you – well, you know my feelings about that’.

‘You can put that right out of your head. You are positively not paying Song-yong’s debts for him’.

‘So it is the money’, she said accusingly.

‘The money comes into it’, I said. ‘Why the hell should Park Song-yong get away with it? Why should someone else always carry the can for him?’

‘No reason at all’, said Joo-young ruefully, ‘but he always seems to land on his feet. Are the firm’s creditors making a nuisance of themselves?’

‘No more than usual’.

‘Then why this sudden change of heart?’

‘I’ve told you’, I said.

‘You haven’t told me anything’, broke in Joo-young vehemently, ‘except that you must find Song-yong. Is there another reason why you must find him, apart from the money?’

‘No’, I said shortly.

‘Is Song-yong in any sort of trouble?’

I smiled. ‘You know Park – he’s always in some sort of trouble’.

She shook her head impatiently. ‘You know what I mean – serious trouble’.

I thought for a moment. Joo-young was no fool and it wouldn’t help matters to try and bluff her. I temporised. ‘Why should he be? Besides, even if he is, he can take care of himself’.

‘I’m not sure about that. Han-sang, as far as Song-yong’s concerned, there’s no need to hide anything from me – you know that. You’d be surprised what I’ve had to put up with since we’ve been engaged’.

‘Nothing would surprise me about Park’, I said dryly.

‘All the same, I’m under some obligation to him’, she argued. ‘If he’s in some sort of trouble I want to know about it’.

‘If I knew anything, I’d tell you’, I assured her. ‘But I’m just as much in the dark as you are’.

Obviously Joo-young was suspicious: before I’d met Na I had, in effect, shrugged my shoulders and dismissed Park Song-yong. Now, for no apparent reason that she could see, I was as

anxious to find him as she was herself.

‘I’ve heard again from the accountant, I hedged at length, ‘and I’ve got to find Park as quickly as possible. If you can let me have that list of his friends I’ll be very grateful’.

‘Is that all you’re going to tell me?’ demanded Joo-young.

‘It’s all I can tell you’.

‘All right’, she said resignedly, and I felt a quick rush of relief. ‘I’ll get started on the list straight away and drop it in sometime tomorrow, probably after the theatre’.

I smiled, in an attempt to break the tension between us. ‘Thanks for your co-operation, Helen’, I said.

She glanced at her watch. ‘I must fly. I’m late as it is’. She looked at me almost appealingly and seemed about to say something. Then she changed her mind and hurried out of the flat.

Chapter ten

Jo Yun-je fitted perfectly into the sedate and somewhat rarefied atmosphere of The Lounge bar: his tailored dark suit became him like a faultless uniform; he wore a striped silk tie; his black shoes like mirrors.

We sat together in a corner of the room by the plate glass window looking out onto the artificial forest, complete with man-made waterfalls. The place was practically deserted except for a couple of businessmen at the circular bar.

A waiter appeared with two glasses of Jack Daniels on a lacquered tray. Jo waited until the man was out of earshot before he said: 'This little girl in Pocheon – you didn't by any chance find out her surname, I suppose?'

'I'm afraid not', I said. 'Seung-li was all I heard. Choi simply said that she was his niece and that she spent most of her time with them'. I sipped my whiskey and lit a cigarette. 'I suppose the name Seung-li could be a coincidence?'

'It could be', said Jo.

'But you don't think it is?'

'Let's take a look at the facts: Seung-li was the name mentioned by Arsenio, the Cuban sailor who died. Right?'

'Right', I said. 'The chap was delirious and half out of his mind, but I heard him say the name 'Seung-li' several times'.

Jo nodded. 'And, we know that it is most likely his girlfriend. I nodded.

'Next thing: Arsenio had some sort of tie-up with Park Song-yong and was supposed to pick up his car. Instead, you picked it up and found a pair of spectacles in it. The spectacles belonged to a woman called Mrs Choi Ji-hye who, curiously enough, has a niece called Seung-li'. Jo looked at me quizzically. 'Don't you think the link is stretching the idea of coincidence a little too far?'

'I suppose it is', I said, 'but I can't help thinking of Choi Kyung-lee and his wife. They're the most harmless looking couple you could possibly imagine'.

Jo smiled indulgently. 'It's surprising how many apparently innocuous people turn up on the front pages of the newspapers. We once picked up a North Korean agent who had been a Methodist minister in a border village for three years. However, let's just run over your description of Choi Kyung-lee again, shall we? Just to see if there's anything you've missed'.

I thought for a moment. 'I should think he's about sixty to sixty-five', I said. 'About five feet seven; white hair, getting thin on top. Seemed a trifle absent-minded – the professor type. A bit on the shabby side: old trousers, jacket with worn elbows, shoes down at heel', I think that's about all.

'Anything else you can remember about him?'

'Nothing, I'm afraid. He was very taken up with his military collection, of course. Especially one called the Battle of Inchon'.

Jo thoughtfully stared into his half empty glass of JD. 'And Mrs Choi?'

'A few years younger than her husband, maybe fifty-five, sixty tops and a bit shorter', I said. 'Dark – just beginning to go grey. Short-sighted, I should imagine. Seems to wear the trousers in the family, but one can never really tell. Obviously very fond of the little girl, Seung-li'.

Jo nodded non-committally, drained his glass, and beckoned to the waiter.

When fresh drinks had been brought Jo said: 'hasn't Kim Joo-young any idea where Park might be?'

'I saw her this morning', I replied. 'She's got a theory that he's in Singapore, having a holiday at someone else's expense. I must admit that's his usual form'.

'He's not in Singapore this time', said Jo decidedly.

I leaned forward and lowered my voice. 'Just why do you want Park Song-yong?' I asked bluntly.

'You asked Na that question', remarked Jo.

'I know I did, and he didn't give me a satisfactory answer'.

'I'm afraid I can't either', said Jo composedly; 'at least, not at the moment. And even if I could, I'm not sure that I would, Moon. Believe me, in this job there are times when it's best not to know all the whys and wherefores. It's better just to do the job, avoid complications as far as possible and not get involved. In many cases, the less you know the better'. Jo sat back in his chair and regarded me almost paternally.

'That's not quite as easy as it sounds', I said with a show of impatience, 'not for me, at any rate. Park Song-yong and I were partners, don't forget. That's why Na gave me the job in the first place'.

'Well?'

I was finding Jo's unconcern faintly irritating. 'I must know something of what's going on', I said lamely.

'But you do know what's going on; we're trying to find Park Song-yong'.

'That isn't enough', I said. 'I want to know why I'm looking for Park and what's going to happen when I find him'.

'One thing at a time', said Jo placidly. 'Why should you worry about what happens to him? He's no friend of yours'.

'That's where you're wrong', I protested.

'But damn it, man', said Jo patiently, 'he wrecked your business, and he owes you a stack of

money. Hardly a basis for a beautiful friendship’.

‘That’s as maybe’, I said. ‘But I know Park better than most people and, strange as it may seem, I still have a soft spot for him’.

‘It seems strange enough’, murmured Jo.

‘I was damned annoyed when he didn’t turn up at Sinjang-ri’, I went on, ‘but I’ve cooled off a bit since then. He’s liable to do the craziest things, yet I have to admit I can’t help feeling some sympathy towards him’.

‘I see’, said Jo. ‘I know what you mean, of course. I’ve had friends like Park Song-yong, too’.

‘Well, what happens now?’ I demanded.

Jo put down his glass. ‘There’s only one thing I can tell you’, he said, obviously choosing his words with care. ‘If you really like Park Song-yong as much as you say you do’ – he broke off and rapped the wooden arm of the chair gently with his fingertips – ‘then you’ve got to find him. You’ll certainly be doing him a favour – a big favour’. He got up from his chair and compared his watch with the clock on the wall. ‘And now you’ll have to excuse me; I’ve got a lunch appointment’.

‘There’s just one thing, Jo’, I said. ‘What shall I do with Park’s car?’

‘Have you got a car of your own?’

‘Not at the moment. I had to sell it’.

‘Then I should go on using Park’s’, said Jo.

Back in my flat I tried to think detachedly about Park Song-yong: Song-yong, who, whatever his faults – and they were many – feared nothing on two legs or four; Song-yong, whose get-rich-quick schemes were the talk of a dozen clubs and cocktail bars; Song-yong, who always had a ‘red-hot one’ to beat the favourite; Song-yong, whose charm had even overwhelmed Kim Joo-young. I wondered what Jo had meant when he said I’d be doing Song-yong a favour by finding him.

My reverie was interrupted by the telephone. I walked over to it and lifted the receiver.

‘Yes’, I said. ‘Who’s that?’

‘I just seen your advert online’, said a throaty voice with a rough accent.

‘What advert?’ I demanded, slightly taken aback.

‘In AutoMart.com, mate. The Genesis Coupe. Sounds just the sorta mota I’ve been looking for’.

‘I think you must have got the wrong number’, I said. ‘I haven’t advertised any car for sale’.

‘Now, wait a minute’, said the voice.

‘Yes’.

‘ave you not got a Genesis Coupe 200 Turbo D, one owner, thirty thousand on the speedo?’

‘Yes’, I said, ‘but what –’

‘Well, what are you going on about then?’ interrupted the voice aggressively. ‘Your advert’s online in Auto-Mart. Right?’

‘Wrong’, I corrected.

‘Look, I’m a busy man, mister’, said the voice in the tone of a man whose patience is sorely tried. ‘Get yourself sorted out an’ call me back, will you? Seong’s the name, Seong Jeong-ryong. Ring me back on this number’. There was a click as he ended the call.

Obviously the man was referring to Song-yong’s car: the details were correct, even to the mileage on the speedometer.

I touched the Google icon on my phone and searched for AutoMart. I scrolled through the adverts, and there, near the bottom of the page I read: *Hyundai Genesis Coupe 200 Turbo D One owner. 30,000 miles. Offers.* And there at the end was my cell phone number.

I stared at the advertisement for a moment or two. Someone knew that I had Song-yong's car, and evidently wanted it badly. I made up my mind quickly, and hit return call.

The same voice answered: 'Yeoboseyo! Seong Jeong-ryong's Garage'.

'My name's Moon Han-sang', I said. 'You spoke to me a few minutes ago about the advertisement in AutoMart'.

'Ah!' said Seong. 'So you've recovered your memory, 'ave you?'

'Are you interested in the car?' I asked.

'Well, I wasn't phoning about your 'ealth', said Seong with weighty sarcasm. 'Bring 'er round an' let's 'ave a dekko at 'er'.

'Where are you?' I asked.

'Off the Seouloegwaksunhwan expressway at Hwon-dong. Seong Jeong-ryong's Garage – you can't miss it'.

'What time would suit you?'

'Any time, mate. I'm 'ere all day, and 'arf the ruddy night!'

Seong's Garage proved to be an unimpressive establishment. In the sales yard were three cars, their prices optimistically chalked on the windscreens, and a battered pick-up. There were two petrol pumps, and behind them a small concrete and glass structure, which I presumed did duty as an office.

Seong was filling a customer's car from one of the pumps. He was a stout and disreputable individual in his mid-forties. He wore overalls, boots, and, incongruously, a Burberry cap. Mr Seong, like his clothes, was an odd mix. He inspired in me an immediate feeling of mistrust.

When he had finished at the petrol pump, Seong walked towards me, wiping his hand on the seat of his overalls. He looked at me with little friendliness in his expression.

'My name's Moon Han-sang', I explained. 'You telephoned me about the Genesis Coupe. D'you want to have a look at it?'

'Might as well', nodded Seong, and we walked over to the car together.

He shuffled round the car, examining the bodywork. Then, breathing heavily, he inserted his bulk into the driving seat and started the engine. He listened for a moment, grunting non-committally.

'Not bad', said Seong a moment later, with his head under the bonnet, 'seen worse'. Then he faced me. 'Wotcher want for it?'

I assumed a slightly vacuous expression. 'Oh, I don't know', I replied vaguely. 'What do you think?'

Seong tilted his hat to the back of his head and regarded me with extreme disbelief. 'Stone the crows! You're a right one, you are. First you forgets about your advert, and now you don't know how much you want for the bloody car!'

'Well, I hadn't given it a lot of thought', I said airily. 'I only decided to sell it on the spur of the moment'.

'If you ain't got a price in mind', announced Seong, 'I'll make you an offer. Nine million won'. I hesitated.

'Good price for an old car like that, y'know', Seong went on. 'You wouldn't get no 'igher anywhere else – take my word for it'.

'Oh, I don't know', I said.

'I do', said Seong with certainty. 'Nine million won. What about it?'

I still hesitated. 'Is that the highest?'

Seong's eyes narrowed. 'I never said that, did I? You say you 'aven't given it much thought, so I makes you an offer. Can't say fairer than that, can I? I ain't in this business for fun, y'know'.

I pretended to ponder the matter deeply. 'I'm sorry', I said at length, 'I'm afraid nine million doesn't interest me'.

Seong's face fell. 'Oh, don't it. Well, you must 'ave some idea what you wants for it. Gimme a figure'.

'You make me another offer', I suggested, smiling at him benignly.

He scratched the back of his neck thoughtfully. 'All right, then – ten million'.

'How much?'

'A round ten million. That's top weight'.

'Ten million, eh?' I said. 'That's quite a jump'.

'Well, she's in fairish nick, I s'pose', conceded Seong graciously. 'Tyres an' everything seem okay'.

'Oh, they are', I agreed. I was beginning to enjoy myself.

'Is it a deal, then?'

I did some quick thinking. Someone wanted this car rather badly, I imagined, and it would be interesting to see just how far they were prepared to go. Seong, no doubt, was only a go-between. With a feeling of mild sadism, I decided to make him sweat a bit.

I shook my head regretfully. 'I think I can do better than that', I said.

'Not with Seong Jeong-ryong, you can't', was the indifferent reply.

I sighed and turned away. 'Well, I'm afraid I must be off'.

But Seong was having second thoughts and having them quickly. 'Ere, 'ang on a minute-'

I turned round again. 'Well?' I said blandly.

'Now look, mate', said Seong, 'I've offered you ten million won, an' a very fair price, say wot you like. What more d'you want?'

'I want nearer fifteen million', I said calmly.

Seong's face assumed a purplish hue. 'You – what?'

'I said I wanted fifteen million won'.

Seong pointed a dirty and trembling forefinger towards the Genesis. 'For that? You must be up the wall, mate', he spluttered, 'you're round the bloody bend! That coupe ain't never worth fifteen million won!'

'I didn't say it was', I grinned. 'I said that's what I wanted for it'.

He stared at me balefully. 'I'll give you twelve'.

Again I shook my head. 'Sorry, Mr Seong'.

He took a deep breath. 'Look, I'll tell you what I'll do. I wanna be fair about this; I don't wanna be difficult –'

'Of course not', I murmured.

He spoke with a sudden rush of words. 'I'll give you twelve an' a half'.

'You'll do nothing of the sort', I said firmly. 'If you want the car you'll pay what I'm asking for it. You're really very lucky to be getting it so cheap, you know'.

For a moment I thought I'd gone too far; Seong appeared to be on the point of having a seizure. 'But the bloody thing ain't worth anything like fifteen!' he blustered. 'Christ, I can get a new one for about sixteen and a half!'

I realised the time had now come to start probing a little.

'Ah', I said meaningfully, 'but you don't want a new one, do you?'

Seong's pendulous jaw stuck out. 'Wot the 'ell d'yer mean?'

'I mean', I said quietly, 'that unless I'm very much mistaken, you want this particular car. Am I right?'

Seong shuffled his feet awkwardly. 'Well, I dunno about that', he said. 'I certainly want one like it'.

'Why?' I asked bluntly.

'Cos I got a customer waiting for it, that's why'.

'Why doesn't he buy a new one?'

'God, 'ow should I know why he don't buy a new one? I never asked him'.

'Let's get this straight', I said. 'You mean that your customer wants a Hyundai Genesis Coupe 200 Turbo D with thirty thousand miles on the clock? I suppose he didn't also specify the number of the car, did he?'

Seong continued to fidget. 'All 'e said was that it 'ad to be like this one: a Genesis Coupe 200 Turbo D – same colour – same year – same mileage'.

'Very odd', I said mildly, but I now felt I might break him down at any moment. 'Well, there you are. It's yours for fifteen million won'.

'Bloody ridiculous!' snorted Seong.

'I don't think so', I said. 'Tell me, Mr Seong, who is this customer of yours?'

He looked at me almost pityingly. 'Don't be daft', he said bitterly, 'think I'm going to tell you that?'

'Why shouldn't you?' I asked innocently.

'And 'ave you go be'ind me back an' do a deal with him? Not much!'

'Strange though it may seem', I told him, 'I wasn't thinking of that'.

'Not much you weren't!' said Seong in tones of immeasurable scorn. 'Think I'm stupid or somethink?'

'Well, to prove my point', I said reasonably, 'I'll tell you what I'll do. If you tell me who this customer of yours is, you can have the car for fourteen million'.

Seong considered this proposition thoughtfully. For a moment I thought he was going to agree. Then – 'There's a catch somewhere', he decided.

I shook my head. 'No catch'.

'Must be', said Seong. 'Stands to reason'.

He thought deeply for a moment. 'I'll tell you what I'll do, mate', he said at last.

'That's more like it', I said encouragingly.

Suddenly Seong was all smiles: a state of affairs, I reflected, which hardly increased his charm. His voice too was calmer, like a river after rapids. 'I'll give you wot you're asking', he said. 'Fifteen million won'.

I swore mentally. At one moment it had almost looked as if Seong was going to come out with the information that I wanted. I said: 'No catch?'

'No catch', affirmed Seong positively.

It was obviously no use trying to pump him further at the moment. 'All right', I said, 'it's a deal'.

The level of Seong's shoulders descended visibly and his smile broadened. 'You got a damn good price', he said grudgingly. 'I 'ope it's a decent runner?'

'It is', I said feelingly.

'Well, that's settled then', said Seong. He screwed up his eyes: it looked as if he were focusing the perspective glass of reminiscence over years of shady car deals. 'I'll tell you a little story

about an Equus I pushed last week', he said. 'A lovely job it was, an' all. Well, it seemed that the geezer who wanted to flog this job was a bit windy, so –'

'Just a moment', I interrupted. 'Won't your client want to see the car before agreeing to pay my price for it?'

'You don't need to worry about that, mate', Seong assured me. 'My client trusts me, see? He knows what he's getting. He knows I wouldn't lumber 'im with a load o' shit. You just leave 'er 'ere, an' I'll make out the cheque'.

'No, Mr Seong', I said firmly. 'No cheques. Cash, if you don't mind'.

Seong's mouth fell open. 'Cash?' he said incredulously. 'Ere, you're a bit of an 'ard 'un, aint't yer? Yer don't think I've got fifteen million lying around 'ere in foldin' stuff, do yer?'

'Well, in that case, I'll bring the car down tomorrow morning', I said. 'Say about eleven o'clock – that'll give you time to get hold of the money'.

'Now, just a minute', put in Seong, 'ow would it be if you left the car 'ere now and I lent you one of mine for tonight?'

'Sorry, Mr Seong', I said, 'I'm afraid that won't do. You get the cash here at eleven o'clock and I'll be here with the car'.

Seong's expression was now openly hostile. 'Oh, all right', he said sullenly. 'See you tomorrow'.

'Have the cash ready', I warned.

Without waiting for a reply I got into the Genesis and drove away.

About three miles from Seong's Garage I pulled to the side of the road and stopped. I thought that Jo had better know about this. Possibly Na's peculiar organisation would swing into action as a result of my recent dealings with Seong Jeong-ryong.

When Jo came on the line I said: 'I think I'm on to something. I've just been offered fifteen million won for Park's car'.

'Fifteen million, eh?' said Jo. 'What's it worth?'

'About twelve, retail, so I reckon about ten to me, tops'.

'Interesting', remarked Jo. 'Who made you this offer?'

'A character called Seong – he's got a garage out at Hwon-dong. But he's just the go-between; he's obviously buying the car for someone else'.

'How d'you know he's only the go-between?' demanded Jo.

'Because he told me so'.

There was a brief pause. Then Jo asked: 'How did this man Seong get in touch with you in the first place?'

'Someone put an advertisement in AutoMart', I replied. 'It described Park's car exactly and gave my telephone number'.

'Where are you now?'

'On my way back to Town. Can we meet somewhere? I'll give you the full details then'.

'All right', said Jo. 'This Seong sounds interesting to me. I'll call at your flat in about ninety minutes. Will you be there by then?'

I stole a quick look at my watch. 'I should be if I step on it a bit. I'll give you the address – hold on a minute ...'

'I've got the address', said Jo. 'I'll see you in an hour ...'

I unlocked the front door of my flat and went in. Jo was standing facing me in the entrance hall, one hand on a small table.

He took a step towards me; I could see that all the colour had drained from his face and his mouth hung open stupidly.

‘Jo, what’s the matter?’ I exclaimed.

He swayed slightly. For a moment the idea came to me that he might be drunk. When at last he spoke he seemed to be forcing out every word with a fearful effort. ‘Moon...listen...the Battle of Inchon ...’

‘What about it?’ I asked.

Jo was catching his breath with a shuddering gasp.

‘I...want..you...to...’ His eyes glazed as he spoke and he stumbled forward into my arms. I did not need the sight of the hilt of the knife driven between his shoulder blades and the darkening patch of blood spreading over his coat to tell me that Jo was dead ...

For a moment, sheer, blind panic had me in its grip. I had not expected the assignment to be confined to an atmosphere of gentlemanly sleuthing, but I was hardly prepared to encounter violent death at this early stage.

I pulled myself together and ran into the drawing room. As I picked out my cell phone from my pocket, wondering whether to contact Ross or the police, some instinct prompted me to look towards the mantelpiece...

On it stood a battered tobacco tin ... and with a sudden spasm in the pit of my stomach I realised I was looking at the memento from the Battle of Inchon!

Chapter eleven

Eventually I decided to drive round to Na's office. I realised that what had promised to be an interesting, possibly exciting, and lucrative job had now developed into something quite different. Na was inaccessible when I arrived, but I sent in an urgent message.

He turned round rather irritably as I burst into his office.

'What is it, Moon?' he demanded testily. 'I told you to ring Jo Yun-je if anything important turned up. He can handle any immediate problems',

'Jo's dead', I said abruptly. 'He's been murdered'. Na stared at me for a moment without speaking. Not by so much as a flicker of an eyelid did he betray any emotion. He said quietly: 'What happened?'

I struggled to regain my breath. 'I arranged to meet Jo at my flat', I said. My voice sounded odd, even to myself. 'When I arrived he was already there. He had a knife in his back'.

'Did you inform the police?' demanded Na immediately.

'No, I thought I'd better see you first'.

Na nodded. 'You did quite right. Have you got your car here?'

'Yes'

Na quickly rose from the desk. 'Right! Tell me the rest of the story on the way ...'

I unlocked the door of my flat and stood aside for Na to enter, expecting some exclamation as he saw the body, but there was none.

'He was standing just there', I began – then stopped dead and gazed about me with shocked disbelief. The body had vanished. 'But I tell you, he was standing there – then he fell forward and lay there' I said, pointing to the floor. 'Damn it, I saw him with my own eyes!'

Na said nothing. He stooped slightly and examined the carpet.

I hurried to the mantelpiece in the drawing room. The tobacco tin from the Battle of Inchon had also disappeared.

'Hell', I muttered, 'am I going crazy? The tin's gone too!'

'So I see', said Na in a matter-of-fact tone.

‘But I swear it was on the mantelpiece!’ I said helplessly.

‘Moon, are you absolutely sure that Jo was dead?’

‘Quite sure’. I wheeled round to face him. ‘I could hardly make up a thing like this! They were both here twenty minutes ago; Jo was lying in the hall and the tin was on the mantelpiece. You believe me, don’t you?’

‘Let’s get this sorted out’, said Na evenly; he might have been suggesting a rubber of bridge.

‘Sit down, Moon. You say that just after lunch you had a telephone call from this man Seong Jeong ryong, who wanted to buy Park’s car from you?’

‘That’s right. He said he’d seen it advertised in AutoMart’.

Na considered this for a moment. ‘Did you place the advertisement?’

‘No, but someone did; I saw it myself’.

‘Did Seong give any special reason for wanting the car?’

‘At first, no. Later, he said it was for a customer’.

Na fingered his chin pensively. ‘So you saw Seong, completed the deal, and arranged to deliver the car tomorrow morning?’

‘He tried to talk me into leaving the car with him this afternoon. I wasn’t having any’.

‘Oh, he did, did he?’ said Na. ‘Why didn’t you leave it?’

After momentary hesitation I said: ‘Well, for two reasons: I wanted to get Jo’s reaction to the Seong incident, and I wanted another opportunity to go over the car again, just in case I’d missed anything’.

‘How did this man Seong Jeong-ryong strike you?’ asked Na.

‘Bit of a rough diamond’, I said. ‘The usual type of small-time car dealer on the make. But I was more surprised at the price he gave me more than anything else: fifteen million won was a ludicrous figure. I don’t know a lot about the second-hand car trade, but even I realised that it wasn’t worth anything like that. Obviously Seong – or the people he was acting for – wanted that car in a hell of a hurry’.

‘What about the garage?’

‘It looked genuine enough. Couple of petrol pumps, a sort of office, and a few cars for sale parked out in front – the usual sort of thing’.

‘I see’, said Na thoughtfully. ‘Well, go on. Did you telephone Jo?’

‘I rang him as soon as I got away from Seong. I told him briefly what had happened and he said he’d meet me here as soon as I got back to Town’.

‘How long did it take you?’ Na asked.

‘From the time I phoned Jo? About ninety minutes, less if anything’.

Na nodded.

‘When I arrived he was standing in the hall out there’ – I pointed through the open door. ‘At first I didn’t realise anything was wrong. I went up to him and he said something like: ‘Moon ... the Battle of Inchon ...’ Then he fell forward into my arms and I saw the knife in his back’.

‘And then?’

‘I had a pretty fair attack of the jitters’, I said frankly. ‘I came in here and was going to dial 999. Then I noticed the cigarette tin on the mantelpiece and I decided not to ring the police, but to come to you instead’.

‘I see’, said Na.

‘It all sounds rather improbable now’, I concluded apologetically, ‘but I assure you –’

‘Don’t worry’, said Na, ‘I’m used to unlikely stories and this one isn’t at all improbable. Jo’s body may have gone – in fact it has gone – but there’s blood on the carpet outside. You see, Moon, you disturbed them. They were in the flat when you got here’.

‘They?’ I queried. ‘Who the hell are ‘they’?’

Na ignored this question and picked out his phone. He dialled a number and then said crisply: 'Park Cheon-soo ... This is Na. I want you to get on to Ra Jong-yil right away. Tell him that Jo's had an accident ... Yes, a very serious one ... You understand? ... That's all. Good night'.

Na hung up and I poured two large glasses of soju. I said: 'the first time I ever saw Jo he was ordering a drink in the bar in Sinjang-ri'.

Na gazed into his glass. 'He was one of my best men – and a friend. You don't make many friends in this business; at least I never have. But Jo Yun-je was one of them'.

I was silent, realising that anything I might say would seem woefully inadequate.

But Na did not dwell on Jo for long. 'How does all this affect you?' he asked.

'In what way?'

The ghost of a smile played round Na's lips. 'You don't have to go on with this job if you don't want to', he said. 'We only asked you to help us because you know Park Song-yong well. But – well, you're not really one of us; you can drop out any time you feel like it'.

'I don't feel like it', I said.

Na raised his eyebrows. 'Aren't you frightened?'

'Certainly I am', I said. 'I'm as scared as hell'.

Na's smile broadened. 'I'm delighted to hear it, because you're no good to me unless you're scared'.

'Put your mind at rest', I said. 'I'm your man'. I held out a hand that still trembled slightly. Then I poured two more drinks and said: 'Of course, it might help a little if you satisfied my curiosity'.

'About Park Song-yong?'

'Yes'.

Na took a drink and then put his glass on the table. 'Three months ago something was stolen from a house in Gangnam', he said. 'We believe that this' – he paused for a moment – 'this – er – particular thing passed into the hands of Park Song-yong and that he intended to hand it over to Arsenio. You know what happened: the plan misfired'.

'Which means', I said, 'that Park's still got the thing you're looking for?'

'Well, we hope he has. It's our job to find him before he gets rid of it. Or has it taken from him'.

'I suppose it's no use asking you what this thing is?' I inquired tentatively.

Na shook his head. 'No use at all, I'm afraid. I've already told you a great deal more than I should have done. Find Park Song-yong and I'll tell you the rest'.

'There's just one point I'd like you to clear up', I said. 'Do you think Park Song-yong murdered Jo?'

'Your guess is as good as mine', said Na non-committally. In fact, it might even be better; you know Park – I don't'.

'I don't think he did', I said with certainty. 'In fact, I'm damned sure he didn't. It looks as if Park's up to his neck in all sorts, but he wouldn't kill anyone'.

'Well, I hope you're right', said Na. He finished his drink. 'You know, your garage friend interests me just at the moment'. He picked up his hat and coat. 'We'll go over that car tonight with a fine tooth comb', he announced. 'If we don't find anything you can go ahead and keep the appointment'.

Chapter twelve

I set off for Seong's Garage the next morning. The previous night two of Na's men had been over the Genesis with devastating thoroughness. If there had been so much as a pin in that vehicle they would have found it. But there was nothing, apart from the items that I had found when I took the car from Namdaemun Garage.

I reached Seong's Garage promptly at eleven o'clock. As I drove in I noticed a three-ton Army lorry parked directly opposite the garage. One of its rear wheels was punctured. A young conscript, his beret pushed to the back of his head, sat on the running board smoking a cigarette.

I went into the office and found Seong having a heated discussion with an Army sergeant. Seong acknowledged my presence with a sour nod.

The sergeant was a large man and his burly frame threatened to burst out of his battle dress. He wore a double row of campaign ribbons on his left breast.

'I dunno whether you blokes think this is a bloody regimental workshop', grumbled Seong. 'What's up now?'

The sergeant held a tyre lever in his hand. In his giant grasp it looked puny and ineffective. 'Got a heavier one than this, mate?' he asked.

'Be with you in a minute', Seong said to me, then turned to the sergeant again. 'What's the matter with that one?'

The sergeant made a rasping noise with his tongue. 'It's about as much use as a knife an' fork on the tyres I got'.

Seong rummaged in a tool box. 'Talk about Dad's Army', he said bitterly. 'Ain't you got any bleedin' tools of yer own? You've 'ad me jack already'.

'Don't blame me, mate', said the sergeant. 'I'm only on this thing for the ride'. He jerked his thumb towards the lorry. 'The driver they've given me's a dead loss – sits on his arse smoking fags'.

'Why don't yer put yer toe round 'is backside?' suggested Seong. 'You're a sergeant, ain't yer?'

The sergeant laughed mirthlessly. 'What, and have him write to his member of the Assembly? Not much!'

Seong handed over a set of tyre levers. 'Why ain't you got a spare?' he asked. 'Because Laughing Boy out there left it at the depot', said the sergeant sourly.

Seong wiped his nose with the back of his hand. 'Stone me!' he said. 'You're getting' some bright bastards nowadays, ain't yer?'

'You can say that again, mate', said the sergeant bitterly. He left the office and walked across the road towards the lorry.

'Right', said Seong, 'now we can get settled up. Got the paperwork?'

'Here it is', I said. 'Have you got the money?'

'I've got it, mate', said Seong. 'It's all ready for yer'.

He looked out of the window and saw that the sergeant was coming back again. 'Oh, blimey! 'ere we go again!'

'All right if I use your phone, cock?' asked the sergeant.

'What's up this time?' demanded Seong irritably.

'Need to ring the workshop', said the sergeant. He favoured me with a ponderous wink as he lifted the receiver.

'Conscripts!' exclaimed Seong with disgust. 'Bloody useless waste of the tax-payers' money, if you ask me. You goin' back to Seoul after this, Mr Moon?'

'Yes', I said.

'I'll run you to the station', offered Seong with unexpected affability.

He crossed to a ramshackle looking safe in the corner and opened it. From the telephone the sergeant's voice could be heard, raised in loud protest.

'I know all about that', he was saying testily. 'This damned dimwit's come out with no tools, no spare – sweet Fanny Adams! ... Yes, I know damn well we're late –'

Seong slipped several thick wads of notes on the table in front of me. 'It's all there', he said. 'Fifteen million smackers'.

I started to count the notes.

I glanced at the sergeant out of the corner of my eye and saw that his eyes were raised desparingly to the roof. His plaintive monologue continued: 'Well, what the 'ell am I supposed to do about it? ... Yers, they call it a garage, but'. He broke off suddenly as he saw the money on the table. 'Reckon there's some sort of racket going on here', he confided to the man on the other end. 'Lolly all over the flippin' shop'.

Seong overheard this remark and shot a look of concentrated venom at the sergeant. 'You mind yer own bloody business!' he rasped.

The sergeant waved two expressive fingers at Seong, then bawled into the telephone: 'Right-oh, Noh! See you later'. He gave Seong a mock salute and went out.

I finished counting the last bundle of notes. 'Fifteen million won it is, Mr Seong', I confirmed.

'Right', said Seong. 'I'll run you to the station'.

Chapter thirteen

I took the train and was back in Seoul by half past one. After a glass of beer and a bowl of soup I went back to my flat, wondering what Na was cooking up for me next.

I was soon to know. Na came through on the telephone at half past two. He said: 'Can you come round here right away, Moon?'

'Anything doing?' I inquired eagerly.

Na's voice was casual. 'Nothing much. I'm having a bit of a film show in my office. I think you ought to see it'.

I was becoming immune to surprises now, and if Na wanted to have a film show in his office who was I to question it?

Na's office was thick with cigarette smoke when I arrived. The blinds were drawn and a projector screen had been installed on the wall opposite Na's desk. On the desk was a digital projector, and a bored looking man in a cheap suit was plugging various cables between it and the laptop that sat next to it. Na stood by the desk with a heavily built man in an immaculate blue suit.

'Hello, Moon. I'd like you to meet Kim Han-jin', Na said.

I thought there was something vaguely familiar about the large man. We shook hands and I said uncertainly: 'Haven't we met before somewhere?'

'You saw me this morning', said Han-jin laconically.

Then I recognised him as the large and truculent Army sergeant whom I had seen at Seong's Garage that morning. Na I reflected, had his staff well trained: I remembered Jo's wickedly accurate portrayal of a seedy commercial traveller; Han-jin's beligerent sergeant had been no less perfect. Na's men, in addition to their other qualifications, were apparently all experienced actors.

'We're going to show you a video', Na explained to me, 'and you'll see what happened at the garage after you left. I want you to tell me if you recognise anyone'. He nodded to the projectionist. 'Ready to go?'

‘Ready’ he said. He went to a wall switch and turned off the lights.

Fascinated, I saw Seong’s Garage on the screen. There was Seong talking to Han-jin outside the office. Seong was clearly annoyed about something and gesticulating with his hands. Then he jerked his head in the direction of the office and Han-jin went inside, leaving Seong looking up and down the road. Presently Han-jin emerged from the office, carrying a large monkey-wrench, and walked out of vision.

‘This was all taken from inside the lorry, of course’, Han-jin told me, and I realised why it had taken so long to repair the Army lorry’s puncture.

A black Hyundai Equus came on to the screen and drew up by the petrol pumps. Seong shook hands with the passenger as he got out of the back seat. It was obviously a private hire car; a uniformed chauffeur sat in the driver’s seat.

The Equus drove away and Seong led the man towards the Hyundai Genesis parked just beyond the pumps. They stood together, apparently conversing animatedly and looking at the car. Seong’s visitor, I could see, was heavily built and wearing a belted overcoat.

Na’s voice came out of the darkness. ‘This is the important bit, Moon. Take a good look and tell us whether you’ve ever seen this man before’.

As he spoke the video resolved itself into a close-up of the two men standing by the Genesis. I recognised the man immediately. ‘Good God!’ I said with excitement. ‘That’s Martinez – the sea captain!’

Na spoke to the projectionist: ‘Right, that’ll do. Put the lights on’. Then he turned to me, and for the first time I detected a trace of excitement in his voice. ‘You’re quite certain that was Captain Martinez?’

‘Absolutely positive’, I said emphatically. ‘There’s no doubt about it; I’d know him anywhere’.

‘Did this man ever see Jo?’ asked Na.

I cast my mind back to the Dokgo hotel at Sinjang-ri. ‘Yes’, I said. ‘When we handed Arsenio’s things over to Martinez, Jo was there. I remember Martinez shaking hands with him’.

‘Why?’ Na inquired.

I shrugged. ‘He shook hands with everyone’.

I broke the ensuing silence by asking: ‘Why did Martinez want the Genesis?’

‘Presumably, because it belonged to Park Song-yong’.

‘Yes, but why?’ I persisted. ‘Last night your men went over that car from top to bottom; there’s nothing unusual about it’.

‘I bet Mr Seong doesn’t think so’, interposed Han-jin dryly.

‘What d’you mean?’ I asked.

‘He paid you fifteen million won for it, didn’t he?’

‘That’s right’, I said. ‘to be exact’.

‘And what’s it worth?’

‘Oh, twelve million at the outside’.

‘Exactly’, said Han-jin with an air of quiet triumph. ‘And what do you think Martinez paid for it?’

‘I don’t know’, I said.

‘Neither do I’, said Han-jin a trifle grimly, ‘but knowing our friend Seong you can bet your bottom dollar it was well over seventeen million. A shrewd business man, old Seong; I very much doubt if he’d have been satisfied with less than a two million won profit’. He turned to Na. ‘There must be something unusual about that car, sir’.

Na shrugged. ‘Well, if there is, Han-jin’, he said, ‘we didn’t find it. And you know Shin Heon-soo’s methods well enough – he’d find a grain of sand in a bowl of rice ...’

Chapter fourteen

I was just thinking about going to bed when my front doorbell rang. It was Kim Joo-young, who was so obviously under the weather that I poured her a drink immediately.

She subsided rather wearily into a chair. ‘God, what a day! We had a matinee this afternoon – one of those charity things’. She drained her glass, then opened her handbag. ‘I’ve made out that list of Park Song-yong’s friends for you, Han-sang’.

‘Thanks’, I said. I glanced at the list, which almost covered both sides of a sheet of notepaper. ‘I say, you’ve really gone to town. Everyone Song-yong ever knew must be here’.

‘Well, you said you wanted me to put down everybody I could think of. That’s what I’ve done – even down to his char’. She leaned forward and said seriously: ‘Han-sang, why did you want that list?’

I sat on the arm of the sofa. ‘I’m trying to find Song-yong. In fact, I’ve got to find him – it’s more necessary than ever now’.

I could see that her eyes were troubled. ‘Yes, but why? Is Song-yong in trouble? Are the police after him?’

‘No’, I said, ‘not the police’.

‘Then who is?’ When I did not answer she went on persistently: ‘And another thing – what did you mean when you said it was more necessary than ever to find him now; why now?’

I looked in the direction of the hall; I was remembering how Jo had staggered ... stumbled forward ... and died at my feet. I also recalled Jo’s terse dictum that in his peculiar profession it was often a good thing not to know too much. Joo-young naturally wanted to know everything. ‘I meant exactly what I said’, I answered at length. ‘Someone else – not the police – was looking for Song-yong. He was murdered’.

Joo-young looked shocked. ‘But I don’t understand! Do the police know about this – this murder?’

‘Yes, they know about it’.

‘Han-sang’, she appealed to me, ‘who was this person?’

‘A friend of mine’, I said. ‘He was helping me to look for Song-yong and someone stuck a knife in his back. It was as simple as that, Jo-young’.

She laughed nervously. ‘I don’t believe you. You’re joking’.

‘I wish to God I were’, I said. ‘It happened all right. I saw the man with a knife in his back, and that was no joke, believe me’.

‘When did this happen?’ she demanded.

‘Last night’.

‘But it isn’t in the papers’.

‘No’, I said, ‘and I doubt if it will be’. I moved closer to her. ‘Joo-young, please don’t think I’m being difficult about this, but –’ I broke off as I caught sight of a briefcase on the floor near the sofa. ‘Is that yours?’

‘I brought it here’, she said, ‘but it’s not mine’.

I looked at the briefcase more closely. ‘I’ve seen that before somewhere’, I said.

‘Quite possibly’, she said. ‘It’s Song-yong’s’

‘Then why did you bring it here?’

‘I went down to the cottage yesterday and found it in one of the cupboards. I was rather curious about it because –’

‘Here, just a minute’, I interrupted. ‘What’s all this about a cottage? I didn’t know you had a cottage, Joo-young’.

‘It’s in Taeanhaean National Park’, she said. ‘We’ve had it over six months now’.

I raised an eyebrow at this. ‘We?’

‘Song-yong and I. We used to go down there for the odd weekend’.

‘I never knew about this’, I said, and then regretted the remark.

She shrugged rather helplessly. ‘I wanted to tell you, but Song-yong wouldn’t hear of it. He said it was our secret retreat and he didn’t want anyone to know about it’.

‘I shouldn’t have thought I came under the heading of just anyone’, I said with a hint of self-pity.

‘Darling, I know’, said Joo-young contritely. ‘I feel awful about it, but Song-yong was adamant. He was terribly secretive and corny about the whole business’.

‘Well, let’s forget about it’. I said a trifle shortly. This cottage probably explained a lot of Song-yong’s lost working days, I thought sourly. Then I sternly relegated the misfortunes of Messrs Moon and Park to the back of my mind. I pointed to the briefcase. ‘You say this was in one of the cupboards?’

‘Yes’, said Joo-young. ‘You see, after you asked me for that list I wondered if there was any other way I could help you to find Song-yong’.

She smiled rather wanly. ‘Strange as it may seem, I want him back myself. Anyway, I knew he’d left a few clothes and things down at the cottage, so I drove there last night’.

I examined the briefcase. ‘Have you opened it?’

‘No, I can’t – it’s locked. You can try if you like’.

The lock seemed pretty strong, but not too strong to be forced with a screwdriver. I got one from the kitchen and started to force it. As I worked I said: ‘Did Song-yong ever take any business papers down to that cottage of yours?’

Joo-young produced a wry little smile. ‘Song-yong wasn’t terribly fond of work anywhere, let alone in the cottage. That’s why I was rather intrigued when I found the case. I’m pretty sure I’ve never seen it before, somehow a briefcase and Song-yong don’t seem to mix’.

'I see what you mean', I said grimly. I gave a final wrench with the screwdriver and the lock yielded. I opened the case and took out a framed picture. 'Well, I'll be damned!' I said involuntarily.

'What is it?' inquired Joo-young curiously.

'It's a photograph'.

'Well', exclaimed Joo-young, 'this gets odder every minute! What on earth would Song-yong, of all people, be doing with a picture in a briefcase?'

I did not reply. I was staring unbelievably at a picture of a tank – a tank and in front of it its crew. Beneath the photo was the inscription:

The Battle of Inchon 15 – 19 September 1950

Chapter fifteen

I motored over to Choi Kyung-lee's cottage in Pocheon the following afternoon. As far as cars were concerned I appeared to be an unqualified success as an under-cover operator; I had disposed of my own Starex SVX and Song-yong's Genesis Coupe and now had the unlimited use of a handsome Equus, provided by Na. I was beginning to see what he had meant when he told me that his department had 'wide powers' and 'access to funds that the tax-payer knows nothing about'. I grinned to myself as I took the road to Pocheon: the tax collector might well have wondered how the managing director of a recently liquidated engineering concern managed to drive about the countryside in an almost brand-new Equus.

If Choi Kyung-lee had been a small boy in receipt of an unexpected electric train set he could not have been more delighted than when I appeared bearing the photo of the tank from the Battle of Inchon. Like a master on the bridge of his ship he sat at his desk, holding the photo almost reverently. From time to time he examined the illustration in his reference book through a large magnifying glass and compared it with the photo. The battered tobacco tin, I noticed, was standing on the desk in front of him.

He regarded me with the utmost benevolence. 'I can't tell you how pleased I am about this, Mr Moon', he said, and his watery eyes blinked enthusiastically behind his thick spectacles. 'It's a great addition to the archive'.

'I'm very glad to hear it', I said.

His smile was almost beatific. 'It confirms what I'd hoped, Mr Moon'. He tapped the reference book. 'It tallies with the tank commander's records for the Battle of Inchon'.

'Yes', I agreed, 'looking at the text in his open reference book'.

Mrs Choi came into the room with a cup of tea in each hand. 'I thought you'd be needing this, Mr Moon', she said. 'I know Kyung-lee, once he starts talking about his the war – time has no meaning for him at all'.

I took the proffered cup.

'What an extraordinary coincidence, your finding that photo', she went on. 'And so soon after

talking to Kyung-lee'.

'It's quite amazing', I agreed. 'But it isn't mine, you know. It belongs to a man called Park Song-yong'.

She looked at her husband. 'That name seems familiar, doesn't it, Kyung-lee?'

'Not to me, my dear', said Choi mildly.

Mrs Choi turned to me. 'Of course, I remember now! Surely that was the name of the man you mentioned when you were here before? The man who owns the car in which you found my spectacles?'

'That's right', I said. 'You have a very good memory, Mrs Choi'.

She smiled wryly. 'Someone has to have a good memory in this house; Kyung-lee never remembers a thing if he can possibly help it. Is this Mr Park a friend of yours?'

'Yes', I said. 'He's also a business associate'.

'I see'. Mrs Choi was clearly thirsting for more information.

'Our firm came a cropper', I went on. 'Park Song-yong disappeared, owing me a lot of money. I'm still trying to find him'.

'Well, naturally', said Mrs Choi uncertainly.

'As a matter of fact, I've taken the law into my own hands', I told her. 'I've just sold his car for him'.

Choi chuckled appreciatively. 'Good for you!'

'I got a remarkably good price for it too', I murmured casually. 'I sold it to a man called Seong'.

Neither of them reacted in any way to this information; they continued to look at me with polite interest.

'Whose car did you come down in today?' inquired Mrs Choi.

'Oh, that's another one', I said casually. 'I bought it out of the proceeds'.

Mrs Choi emitted a sympathetic sigh. 'Well, I do hope you manage to find Mr Park', she said.

'Of course, I know very little about business, but it must be absolutely infuriating when that sort of thing happens'.

'I'll find him eventually', I said.

Choi tapped the picture frame on his desk with his forefinger. 'Oh dear', he mused, 'if this doesn't belong to you, Mr Moon, it makes things a little awkward'.

'Oh, why?' I inquired.

Choi hesitated, then said diffidently: 'I was – er – wondering if I could borrow it for a little while. I'd like to have time to study it more closely'.

'Why not?' I smiled. 'After all, I've already sold Park's car, so I don't suppose it could do much harm to lend you one of his old photographs'.

'That's extraordinarily kind of you', said Choi gratefully. 'I'll take very good care of it'.

'That's perfectly all right, Mr Choi', I assured him. I looked again at the photo of the Battle of Inchon and an idea came to me. 'I'll strike a bargain with you, Mr Choi', I said. 'I'll lend you the photo if you'll let me have the tobacco tin'.

'Well – er – I don't know about that', said Choi, clearly taken aback by my suggestion.

'But why not?' I persisted. 'Don't you want to sell it?'

'Well – it's not that exactly, but –'

'Then what is it?' I persisted.

Choi hesitated for a moment, then said: 'Frankly, Mr Moon, I feel a little bit guilty about saying this after all the trouble you've been to on my account, but – well, there's an awful lot of value in this type of object, you know'. He smiled diffidently. 'It's worth rather a lot of money'.

'That's all right', I assured him. 'I'll pay the market price for it'.

'Kyung-lee, you can't possibly accept that,' broke in Mrs Choi adamantly. 'After all, Mr Moon's been extremely kind to us: first, bringing my glasses back, and then coming all this way with the picture'.

'Yes, of course, my dear, I realise that', said Choi apologetically. He turned to face me. 'Mr Moon, the market price for this tin to a collector of militaria would be about one million won. I should be more than happy to take a hundred thousand for it'.

'A hundred thousand?' I said. 'But that's absurd! Let me pay you at least –'

Choi held up a hand. 'No, I insist', he interrupted firmly. 'I positively insist. One hundred thousand; otherwise you can't have it'.

I looked first at Choi and then at his wife. 'Well, thank you very much', I said at length. 'It really is most kind of you, but it seems much too little'.

'That's settled then', said Mrs Choi briskly. 'I'll just pop it into a box for you, Mr Moon'. She picked up the tin carefully and took it out with her.

I counted out the money from my wallet. 'This is really very good of you', I said. 'But I feel I should be paying you much more'.

Nonsense, my dear fellow', said Choi. 'I'd be delighted to let you have it for nothing'. He spread his hands in an expressive gesture. 'But there is so much demand for this sort of thing, you know, and this is almost my sole means of livelihood nowadays'.

'I'm perfectly happy about it if you are', I said. 'It's just what I need as a talking point'.

'Splendid', said Choi. 'Then we're both happy'. He pushed the notes into a drawer without counting them.

'I had something similar a little while ago', I said deliberately, 'but it disappeared. That's why I need one to replace it'.

I watched Choi closely, but there was nothing more than polite wonderment in his expression.

'Really?' he said. 'Do you mean it was stolen?'

'Yes, I think it was'.

Mrs Choi bustled into the room, carrying a cardboard box. 'This should do', she said. 'As it's not going through the post I haven't put all the usual packing in it'.

'That's fine', I said. 'I must be getting back to Seoul now. You've been most kind about this. I do hope we'll meet again some time'.

Mrs Choi Ji-hye was all smiles. 'I hope so too, Mr Moon'.

I got into the Equus, placing the box on the front passenger seat. Seung-li joined Choi and his wife at the front door and they all waved to me as I drove away. I couldn't help reflecting that it would be difficult to imagine a happier and more normal family: the absent-minded, short-sighted old man with his passion for militaria; his brisk and efficient wife who appeared to treat him like a mischievous, untidy small boy; and a little girl called Seung-li...

In the living room of my flat I took the tobacco tin from the Battle of Inchon from its box and examined it carefully. Then I put the tin on the mantelpiece and stood looking at it for a full minute. I found myself wondering what sinister secret was hidden in this tin; more specifically I wondered how it could possibly concern Park Song-yong. I could connect Song-yong with a

speedboat, a luxury sports car, or a private jet, but Song-yong and this tobacco tin from half a century ago were poles apart. Military history and Song-yong just didn't mix.

I continued to frown at the tin for a moment or two longer, then I picked up the empty box with the intention of leaving it for Mrs Gim who would be certain to find a use for it. As I did so I saw an envelope lying in the bottom; an ordinary buff-coloured envelope of the usual depressing kind that inevitably contains a bill. I slit it open and took out a piece of cheap notepaper.

Written in block capitals with a blue ballpoint pen was a single written sentence:

Arsenio isn't dead.

Chapter sixteen

Na Sang-wha examined the sheet of paper with some interest, then looked up at me. ‘You say there’s no doubt that this Cuban sailor, Arsenio, died in the Dokgo hotel at Sinjang-ri?’ he asked.

‘No doubt at all. He was pretty far-gone when I saw him the night before – he’d been in the water for several hours, don’t forget. He died at breakfast time the next morning. The landlord’s daughter found him. Then the local policeman arrived, and Captain Martinez came later to collect Arsenio’s things. I tell you, Arsenio’s the dearest man Sinjang-ri will ever see’.

‘Well, this note must mean something’, said Na decisively, ‘and Mrs Choi must have put it there’.

‘I agree’, I said. ‘No one else could have. Shall I go and talk to her about it?’

‘Not at the moment’, said Na. ‘I’m more interested in Arsenio. Presumably a doctor put in an appearance at some time or another?’

‘Yes’, I said. ‘His name’s Lee Chung-kyu. I imagine he must have certified Arsenio’s death’.

‘Know anything about Lee?’

‘Not a lot. Seemed a very pleasant sort of chap; about fifty, brisk and cheerful – the usual type of country GP’.

‘You’d better go and see him’, decided Na. ‘You might dig up something...’

I drove the long journey to Sinjang-ri with my brain in a ferment of bewilderment. Travelling along the almost deserted coast road down to Gwangju I tried to review the events of the past few days and the people who had motivated them: Park Song-yong, who had disappeared without trace and was now on the wrong side of the law; Kim Joo-young, so unfortunately engaged to a man who, so far as I could see, could only bring her trouble and grief; Choi Kyung-lee and his wife, whose benign good nature could not disguise certain sinister undertones; Seong Jeong-ryong, the motor trader who inexplicably purchased a car for a ridiculous sum and had a furtive meeting with a Cuban sea captain; the seaman, Arsenio, who was allegedly dead but apparently still alive; Seung-li, the child with the elfish charm, whose

name translated into the word 'Victory' also muttered by Arsenio in delirium a few hours before he died – or did not die.

I came to the conclusion that my only course was to follow Na's instructions and keep my wits about me. I was now back in Sinjang-ri where this strange and macabre succession of incidents had had its beginning ...

Kwon Oh-young greeted me with considerable enthusiasm. Over a drink in the bar he said: 'Well, you've certainly brought better weather with you this time. Have you come up to meet that friend of yours?'

'No', I said, 'as a matter of fact, I've come to have a word with Dr Lee Chung-kyu'.

Kwon was non-committal but palpably curious. 'Oh, really?' he said.

'I telephoned him from Seoul. He should be here any time now'.

Kwon polished a glass and examined it critically. 'With all them doctors in the fancy clinics', he said, 'I shouldn't have thought you'd have to come all this way'. He looked up as Dr Lee came into the bar. 'Ah, here he is now'.

Lee greeted me effusively. 'Nice to see you again', he said.

'And you', I said. 'Sit down and have a drink'.

Lee shook his head. 'A bit early for me, thank you. Now, what's this very urgent matter you wanted to see me about?' He beamed at me with the utmost cordiality.

Lee looked so placid and amiable, so much the complete picture of a kindly country doctor, that I hesitated for a moment; until I remembered something Na had told me about some of the people who worked for him and against him. 'It's not enough just to play a part', he had said, 'you've got to be the man you're impersonating'. Having seen Jo and Kim Han-jin in action I appreciated his meaning: Jo had become so much immersed in his guise of a seedy fishing rope distributor that he probably checked through his order book every night before going to bed; Han-jin, as an Army sergeant, had almost certainly thought longingly of promotion to Company Sergeant-Major, and a pint of wallop in the sergeants' mess.

Feeling rather less of a fool now, I said: 'I've got rather an odd question to ask you, Doctor. I hope you won't be offended by it'.

'I doubt it', said Lee in high good humour. 'After twenty-five years in general practice I'm past being offended by anything'.

'You remember Arsenio, the Cuban sailor?'

Lee looked surprised. 'Very well indeed. How could I forget him. Why?'

'It's because of Arsenio that I'm here. I told you this was going to be an odd question'. I hesitated for a moment, then said bluntly: 'Did Arsenio actually die?'

Lee stared at me in amazement. 'Are you serious?'

I repeated the question.

'I heard what you said, Mr Moon', retorted Lee a trifle coolly, 'but I'm afraid I don't understand you'.

'I'm simply asking you', I said, 'if Arsenio was really dead'.

'Of course he was dead', said Lee. He looked at me with scarcely concealed suspicion.

'There's no doubt about it?'

‘None whatsoever. The wonder is that he stayed alive as long as he did. You realise you are casting a serious aspersion on my professional –’

‘What happened to the body?’ I interrupted.

Lee looked at me before replying. ‘Well, that was a little strange’, he said slowly. ‘It must have been after you left, I suppose. That Cuban captain – what was his name again?’

‘Martinez’, I supplied.

‘Well, Martinez came here at the head of a deputation of his men, and they insisted that Arsenio should be buried at sea’.

‘And was he?’ I asked.

Lee nodded. ‘Indeed he was. He was taken out to sea in a trawler and they held a burial service’.

‘Did any of the local people attend this service?’

He thought for a moment. ‘Yes; the priest and the crew of the trawler’.

I seemed to be getting nowhere, yet I had a feeling there was something terribly wrong.

Lee’s normally good-humoured face was puckered in a frown. ‘What exactly is the point of all this? Why are you so interested in Arsenio?’

‘I’m just curious’, I said.

‘Come, Mr Moon’, said Lee mildly. ‘Haven’t you made rather a long journey just out of curiosity?’

‘I was passing through Sinjang-ri anyway’, I said casually, but very much on guard.

The doctor looked unconvinced and faintly annoyed. ‘I’m sorry you don’t see your way clear to explaining your curiosity a little more fully’, he said stiffly. ‘I can assure you that I’m not in the habit of certifying a man dead when he’s still alive’. He gave a wintry smile. ‘I have a certain reputation to keep up, you know’.

I was apologetic. ‘I didn’t mean to imply –’

I was interrupted by the appearance of Kwon by my side. ‘You’re wanted on the telephone, Mr Moon’.

This surprised me. No one except Na knew that I was in Sinjang-ri. It might be Na, but I doubted it. He was, I knew, no great lover of the telephone. ‘Who is it?’ I asked.

‘I didn’t ask’, said Kwon, ‘but I will’. He went back to the telephone and I heard him make the inquiry. When he returned he said: ‘It’s a Mr Park. Mr Park Song-yong’.

‘Park Song-yong?’ I said incredulously.

‘That’s what he said’.

I went to the telephone and picked up the receiver. ‘Hello, Song-yong? This is Han-sang’.

Song-yong had not got what you would call a quiet voice, especially on the telephone. I at once recognised this voice as Song-yong’s, but it sounded tense, worried, and more than a little frightened. It said jerkily: ‘Han-sang, is that you? Look here, you’ve got to –’

I interrupted him. ‘Where the hell have you been?’ I demanded. ‘I’ve been looking all over the country for you. Where are you? Why didn’t you turn up here last week?’

He cut in with a sudden rush of words. ‘You’ve got to stop chasing round after me! You’ve got to forget I exist; do you understand?’

‘No, I don’t understand!’ I said tersely. ‘What d’you mean, ‘forget you exist’? I’ll find it a bit hard to do that. You seem to forget that you owe me a lot of money. Just in case you didn’t

know, the firm of Frazer and Denston has ceased to exist and my four hundred million won went for a Burton. What about that?’

Song-yong said hesitantly: ‘Is it the money that’s worrying you?’

‘Just a little’, I said sarcastically. ‘I’ve got to see you, Park – and soon. You and I have a lot of things to sort out’.

‘All right’, said Park at last. ‘I’ll see you next Sunday morning’.

Remembering that complete ruthlessness of purpose was the only possible way to tie Park Song-yong down to keeping an appointment I said brusquely: ‘Where?’

‘At your flat. I’ll be there at about eleven o’clock’.

I knew from long experience with Park Song-yong that ‘about eleven o’clock’ could mean anything from twelve thirty to six o’clock the following evening. ‘Not ‘about eleven o’clock’, I said sharply. ‘Eleven o’clock exactly’.

‘I’ll be there’, promised Park. He sounded listless and dispirited – not at all like the Park Song-yong I knew.

‘Can I depend on this?’

‘Yes, but listen, Han-sang. If you tell anyone about this – if you breathe a word about it – I shan’t turn up. Do you understand?’ There was a kind of desperate urgency in his voice.

There had to be a string of conditions attached to it, I thought sourly. I said: ‘All right, I understand’.

‘I’m serious’, he warned.

‘I hope we’re both being serious’, I countered coldly. ‘Eleven o’clock Sunday morning – and this time be there’.

I rang off and looked thoughtfully at the telephone. I knew that it was asking too much to expect any clarification of the situation in a telephone call from Park Song-yong: I remembered so many other telephone calls, invariably with the charges reversed, which had told me that ‘there’s been a bit of a slip up’, that ‘error has crept in’ (a favourite phrase of Song-yong’s when something had gone catastrophically and irreparably wrong). I sighed gently and went back to Dr Lee.

‘Sorry about that interruption, Doctor’, I said. ‘It was an old friend of mine who’d tracked me down here’.

Lee smiled placatingly. ‘It’s given me a chance to calm down a little’, he said. ‘I must apologise for my outburst just now’.

‘On the contrary, your comments were more than justified’, I said. ‘I shouldn’t have asked such a ridiculous question’.

Lee looked at me. ‘I wouldn’t say ridiculous, exactly. Curious, yes’.

‘Won’t you change your mind and have that drink?’ I invited.

He looked at his watch and shook his head. ‘No, thank you. I’ve still got a couple of patients to see before my surgery: both of them, alas, ladies who can smell alcohol a mile away’. He leaned back in his chair and folded his hands over his chest. ‘You know, I’ve been thinking of this idea of yours that Arsenio might not be dead. It’s really quite fantastic. Whatever put such an idea into your head?’

I thought it would be preferable to show signs of letting the matter drop. In any event, the sudden reappearance of Song-yong, if only on the telephone, had given me more than enough

to think about. I had been assigned to find Park Song-yong: the question of Arsenio's problematical death would have to wait.

'It was just a thought', I said casually. 'It occurred to me one day when I was thinking about Sinjang-ri and the storm and what happened here'.

But Lee was not to be put off so easily. 'Yes, but someone must have said something to you about Arsenio, or you must have read something about him. No one would ask a doctor a question like that without a definite reason'.

'I have a reason', I told him.

'Well, it must be a very good one', said Lee. There was still a trace of stiffness in his voice as he added: 'But you'd rather not tell me what it is?'

Feeling like a small boy being questioned about the disappearance of some chocolate, I replied: 'I'm afraid so. For the moment, at any rate'.

'Well, you've made me very curious', said Lee. He rose from his chair. 'How long are you planning to stay with us this time?'

'I'm going up to Gwangju tomorrow to see some friends', I lied glibly.

'And then back to Seoul?'

'Yes'.

'I'm treating myself to a trip to Seoul in a few days', said Lee.

'Well, drop in and see me', I suggested.

'I may take you up on that, but I expect I'll be pretty busy. I've got a lot of people to see'.

'Why not join me for dinner tonight?'

'I doubt if I'll be able to manage it', said Lee regretfully. 'I've got a surgery in a quarter of an hour and the 'flu season is in full swing'.

I sat in the bar for a little while after Lee had gone. I thought of his reaction to my query about the possibility of Arsenio not being dead: his rather aggrieved dismissal of any theory could hardly have been more genuine. It seemed impossible that anyone but Mrs Choi could have put that note in the box, but what was the possible connection between Mrs Choi, a singularly ordinary housewife, and a young Cuban sailor whose body was presumably at the bottom of the West Sea?

My thoughts went off at a sudden tangent to Park Song-yong. Obviously he was not at all anxious to see me; equally obviously he had somehow got to know that I was in Sinjang-ri. I cursed myself for not having the call traced, and then realised that in all probability Park had used a public call box.

I was released from my thoughts by the arrival of Hae-jin, pretty as ever. Her father had gone out for the evening, and so we enjoyed a rare chance to sit down to dinner together. Assuming I had travelled down especially to see her she had prepared a Korean barbeque. I decided it polite not to disillusion her. She really was a fabulous cook, not to mention the sweetest natured girl I had met in a long time.

Chapter seventeen

Sunday morning was bright and sunny. I could hear Mrs Gim busy with her vacuum cleaner as I lay back in the bath.

I got out of the bath and shaved. On my way to the bedroom I saw Mrs Gim and said: 'I'm expecting someone at eleven o'clock. Could you get everything finished by half past ten?'

She looked at me reproachfully, and in the pitying tones that women use to men when discussing household chores she said: 'All right, sir. But what about the bedroom?' 'The bedroom can wait', I said.

At exactly two minutes to eleven the front doorbell rang. This, I thought, is too good to be true: not only had Park kept an appointment but he had arrived on time. With almost a feeling of regret I realised that my assignment was almost over: I had found Park Song-yong. Now it was up to Na ...

When I opened the door, however, I found that the visitor was Kim Joo-young.

She came into the drawing-room and draped her fur stole carelessly on a chair. 'Hello, Hansang', she said in a strangely colourless voice.

I glanced at the clock. The hour hand was practically on eleven. 'I didn't expect you this morning', I said lamely.

'I know you didn't', she said composedly.

'Joo-young', I said hastily, 'I hate to appear inhospitable, but I'm expecting someone at any minute. Could you drop round a bit later?'

She turned to face me. Her eyes had dark circles under them, which told of a night with little

sleep. She said rather wearily: 'It's all right, Han-sang, I know all about it. You're expecting Park Song-yong'.

'Who told you that?'

'I've seen him', she said flatly. 'I saw him on Friday night. He asked me to tell you that he won't be coming this morning'.

I felt a sudden surge of uncontrollable anger. 'Why not?' I said sharply. 'He definitely said he would'.

She shrugged. 'I don't know. He just told me to deliver the message to you'.

I caught hold of her arm. 'Where is Park Song-yong?' I asked vehemently unable to conceal the anger in my voice.

'I don't know', she repeated in the same expressionless tone of defeat. 'I can't make it out, Han-sang. He telephoned me on Friday and asked me to meet him at a cafe near Hwon-dong. I drove over there after the show'.

'What sort of cafe?'

Joo-young wrinkled her nose in distaste. 'A fearful dump called 'Ma's Cafe' or something – one of those pull-ins for lorry drivers'.

'But why in a transport cafe, for God's sake? He can't be all that broke'.

'I don't know', she said. 'It certainly wasn't my idea, I assure you. I tried to persuade him to come to the flat, but he wouldn't'.

'Well, go on', I said. 'What happened?'

'He said he'd spoken to you and that you were livid about the money he owed you'.

'I pretended to be a great deal more annoyed than I am', I said. 'Principally because I was very anxious to see him as soon as possible'.

'I realised that', said Joo-young. 'Anyway, he said quite firmly that he wasn't going to see you and he told me to pay you back. He gave me the money'. She opened her handbag and took out a cheque. 'Here it is'.

The cheque was made out to Moon Han-sang and signed by Kim Joo-young. It was for four-hundred million won.

'But this is crazy', I said. 'This is your cheque, made out to me'.

'I know', said Joo-young. 'Song-yong gave me the money in cash'.

I scratched my head in bewilderment. 'But where would Song-yong get four-hundred million won from?'

'I've no idea', she replied edgily. 'All I can tell you is that he paid me in cash. I banked the money and made out a cheque to you. That's all there is to it'.

This didn't ring true and I told her so. 'Shall I tell you what I think, Joo-young? I think you're trying to pay Park's debts with your own money. Well, as far as I'm concerned, forget it'.

'It's not that at all, Han-sang', she protested. 'I swear it isn't! He paid me the money in cash. Obviously I wasn't going to carry that much money around with me, so I put it in the bank. Anyone would'.

'I find all this very hard to believe', I said doubtfully.

She shrugged. 'Darling, I can only tell you the truth'.

I looked at the cheque again and then at Joo-young; the thing just didn't make sense. I said:

'How could Park raise four-hundred million won – just like that?'

'I expect he borrowed it from someone – you know, borrowing from Peter to pay Paul'.

'I can't quite imagine anyone in their right senses lending Park four-hundred million', I said.

'Did you tell him that I particularly wanted to see him?'

‘Yes, I did, but I might as well have saved my breath. He doesn’t want to see you’.

This hurt a little. ‘Why shouldn’t he want to see me?’

Her reply sounded far from convincing. ‘It seems he’s just started a new business with someone’, she said, ‘and he doesn’t want his new partners to know about your firm going bust’.

This sounded a bit over the odds, even for Park. I laughed derisively. ‘The whole world knew about our firm going into liquidation. We had some very good notices in the financial press’.

‘Well’, said Joo-young lamely, ‘perhaps he feels that you’d talk about it, or interfere – or something’.

‘I ask you, is that likely?’ I expostulated. ‘In spite of everything, Park and I have always been very good friends. You know that, Joo-young’.

At that moment the front doorbell rang, heralding the appearance of the Sunday papers. Every Saturday, as regularly as clockwork, I went to the little shop on the corner and asked if I could have the Sunday papers a little earlier. Every Sunday they turned up a little later.

‘Excuse me a second’, I said to Joo-young, and went out into the hall, leaving the door open behind me. The papers were on the mat. I picked them up and glanced at the headlines, and as I straightened up I saw Joo-young’s reflection in the mirror over the mantelpiece.

She was holding a small object up to her face and at first I thought she was lighting a cigarette with my table lighter. Then I realised that it was not a lighter but her cell phone.

Hardly believing the evidence of my own eyes I watched as she pointed the camera on the phone directly at the tobacco tin. First the top, then bottom, then she prized it open and took a photo of the interior of the lid; then she quickly replaced the lid and popped the tin back. Holding the phone in her hand she slipped into the centre of the room where she was in the process of checking her text messages as I came back.

My first impulse was to have a showdown with her there and then; to get the phone from her and find out what she was doing. But I thought better of it and said casually: ‘I never asked you to have a drink, Joo-young’.

She didn’t turn a hair and I began to realise why she was such a success as an actress. She smiled with all the nonchalance in the world. ‘Too early for me, darling. I’m afraid I must be going – some dreary people coming to lunch’.

Joo-young’s little act with the camera could wait, but I had to know about the money. I flicked the cheque with my finger. ‘Joo-young, before I accept this, do you swear that Park really did give you the money?’

‘Yes, of course I do’, she said lightly. ‘D’you think I’ve got four-hundred million won to give away?’

‘You had the other day’, I reminded her.

She shook her head. ‘That’s not quite the same thing. I was prepared to lend you the money if you were thinking of starting up in business again’.

I put the cheque in my pocket. A cheque of Park’s might well be a dud, but Joo-young could have written one for three times this amount without doing herself much material damage.

‘Very well, if Park wants it this way’, I said, ‘that’s the end of a beautiful friendship. He’s entitled to run his own life, I suppose. But what about you? Are you seeing him again?’

‘I don’t know’, she said flatly.

‘You’re still engaged, aren’t you? Park wouldn’t be fool enough to give you up’.

She produced a rather wan smile. ‘I don’t know about that, either. We certainly weren’t particularly friendly when we met on Friday – not a devoted couple at all’. She looked at the clock. ‘Han-sang, I must fly! Let’s have lunch together one day soon – this week, if possible’.

‘All right’, I agreed, ‘I’ll give you a ring’.

She flashed me a smile, which in the ordinary way would have made me buckle at the knees. As it was, it just made me mad.

‘How’s the show going?’ I said as we walked to the hall.

‘We’re coming off next week’, she said. ‘didn’t you know?’

‘No’, I said. ‘I’m sorry about that’.

She made a little grimace. ‘I’m not. I’ll be glad of the rest’.

When Joo-young had gone I stood gazing at the tobacco tin from the Battle of Inchon. It gave me no sort of inspiration, I found myself thinking that I should have got tough with Joo-young and forced the truth out of her.

By now I was in a thoroughly bad temper. I went to the drinks table and mixed an outsize gin and tonic ...

Chapter eighteen

The next day I decided to make a few inquiries as 'Ma's Café'. Somehow I had to find out the reason for the furtive meeting between Park and Joo-young at such an improbable rendezvous. If Joo-young had named any one of a dozen cocktail bars it might have made some sense, but for them to meet in a transport cafe sounded too incredible.

As I drew into the vehicle park of the cafe I wondered still more. 'Ma's Cafe' was a single storey wooden hut standing just off the Seouloegwaksunhwan expressway. It looked ramshackle and depressing, and seemed to offer little in the way of welcome to the traveller. A sign above the door told me that hot meals were available at any time of the day or night, and that the proprietor's name was Mrs Park Seong-Heon. I parked the car and went in.

The interior was no more attractive. There were half a dozen old tables with rough wooden benches, and on each table stood a bottle of sauce and a cheap plastic cruet set. A tea urn and some tired looking bowls of rice under glass covers. Behind the counter, reading a newspaper, sat a large and blowsy woman whom I took to me 'Ma' Seong-Heon.

Like her establishment ma was rough and not over clean. Her hair was grey and straggled untidily about her head. She had three chins and a vast and pendulous bosom, and her piggy little eyes, screwed up against the smoke from her cigarette, were bright and watchful. She looked to me a pretty hard case and I found myself wondering once again what she could possibly have in common with Park and Joo-young.

Ma glanced up and eased her large bulk out of her chair, then wiped her hands on her liberally stained overall and pushed a wisp of hair out of her eyes. 'Yes, love?' she asked. I ordered a cup of tea and Ma busied herself at the urn. She pushed the cup towards me, with a dirty thumb in the saucer, spilling some of the contents in the process. Then she reached out a fat and mottled arm and propelled a cracked sugar bowl towards me.

I sipped the tea. It had obviously been brewing for hours. 'You're very quiet today', I remarked. 'We liven up later, love', she said. 'Be busy tonight, I shouldn't wonder'. I looked round to make sure the place was empty, then said tentatively: 'I wonder if you could help me?'

She screwed up her eyes in a grotesque parody of coquetry. 'Always happy to oblige a gentleman', she said.

'I wonder if you can remember a lady coming in here on Friday night?'

'A lady' Ma vibrated with laughter: 'We don't get many of them, love; leastways, not what you'd call a lady. Friday, you said?' She scratched her chin contemplatively. 'Now I come to think of it, a lady did come in. Very high-class bit of goods she was an' all. Nice with it, mind, but very high class'.

'Did she meet anyone?'

'Yes, now you come to mention it, she did. A gentleman – one of our regulars'.

Surprised, I queried: 'One of your regulars?'

'S'right, love. He often pops in for a cuppa and a sandwich. Surprised he ain't bin in this afternoon, s'matter of fact'.

I felt a sudden surge of excitement. 'Does he live round here?'

'Dunno where he lives, dearie', replied Ma. 'Never ask questions about your clientelly, that's my motto'.

'Of course', I agreed. I drank some more tea and watched Ma guardedly. 'You say he often drops in?'

'He was in almost every day this last week', said Ma. She leaned forward with a grunt and lifted one of the sandwich covers. 'Blimey, they're about ready for someone's chickens'.

'D'you think he might come in today?' I persisted.

Ma cocked a shrewd eye at me. 'If you were to sit down and enjoy your cuppa in peace, you'd probably see him. This is just about his time'.

'Thanks', I said. 'I'll do that'. I wandered over to one of the tables and picked up a fortnight old magazine.

Ma returned to her reading. Once or twice I noticed her glance over at me over the top of her paper, then she got up from her chair and disappeared into the rear regions of the cafe.

When she returned to the counter a few moments later I bought another cup of tea and a packet of cigarettes and sat patiently at my table. One or two customers drifted in from time to time, but there was no sign of Park Song-yong ...

Well over an hour later a young man pushed open the door and strolled towards my table. He was slim, of medium height, and moved lithely. He wore a short white raincoat, narrow trousers, and pointed Italian shoes. I could not suppress an immediate dislike and distrust.

He sat down opposite me and said in a clipped, high-pitched voice: 'You're Moon, aren't you?'

'That's right', I said coldly. 'And who are you?'

'You can call me Si', the young man said. He seemed very sure of himself.

I said: 'What can I do for you?'

Si admired his fingernails. 'In case your interested', he said, 'I'm a friend of a friend of yours'.

‘Oh?’ I said. ‘And who is this friend?’

He looked at me straight in the eye. ‘Park Song-yong’, he replied calmly.

‘What is it you want?’ I asked.

‘Well, I don’t know that I want anything in particular’, he said amiably. ‘I’d just like to give you a piece of advice, that’s all’.

I lit a cigarette with studied nonchalance. ‘Go ahead’, I said, ‘but I think I’d better warn you that I’m not very good at taking advice – particularly from strangers’.

Si’s smile seemed permanent. ‘That’s all right, Mr Moon. You don’t have to take it’.

‘Well, let’s hear this advice of yours’, I said.

The smile disappeared suddenly. ‘We want you to stop looking for Park Song-yong’.

‘Why?’ I asked bluntly.

The smile reappeared. ‘Because you’re making him very nervous. We don’t like that’.

‘And who’s “we”?’

‘Park Song-yong and me’.

‘Let’s get something straight, shall we?’ I said ‘Is it Park I’m making nervous, or you?’

‘It’s Park’, answered Si. ‘You don’t worry me, boy. It takes a lot to make me nervous’.

‘I can imagine that’, I said.

Si rose to his feet. ‘Well, that’s the advice’, he said affably. ‘I hope you’ll take it. I know I would, if I were in your shoes’.

I looked at him cautiously. ‘Would you now?’ I said.

‘I certainly would’. Si produced a comb and ran it casually through his heavily creamed hair.

‘After all, why be a sucker? Park’s paid you the money he owes you, so you’re in clover. Why should you worry?’

‘I’m not worried’, I told him. ‘I’m just curious, that’s all’.

‘Well, I’d stop being curious if I were you, chum. D’you know what I’d do?’

‘No, you tell me’.

‘I’d take a nice little trip to Jeju if I were you’.

‘It’s the wrong time of the year for Jeju, isn’t it?’ I suggested mildly,

Si’s smile broadened. ‘Not for you, it isn’t’.

‘I’ll think about it’, I said casually.

‘Well, don’t think about it too long, chum’, he said, starting to walk towards the door. ‘Hasta la vista!’

I stopped him. ‘Just a minute, Si’, I said.

He turned round. ‘Yes?’

‘You forgot to tell me something’.

‘Oh, and what’s that?’

‘What happens if I don’t go to Jeju?’

‘I should have thought you’d have known the answer to that one’, said Si smoothly.

‘Well, I don’t’.

He suddenly came close to my table and leaned across it, his face very near to mine. He said softly: ‘What happened to Jo Yun-je?’

Chapter nineteen

I came to the conclusion that the only person who could really help me was Mrs Choi. It was obvious that she had written the note saying that Arsenio wasn't dead, and that there was some connection between the child Seung-li and the fact that the Cuban sailor had muttered the name 'Seung-li' over and over again before he died. Mrs Choi – Arsenio – Seung-li: somewhere there must be a connection between them.

I had thought that Dr Lee would be able to throw some light on the mystery, but he had been no help whatsoever. Clearly he had thought me mad to suggest that Arsenio had not died; after all, Lee had attended the man during his last hours and had certified his death. On the face of it, Lee's feelings on the matter were perfectly understandable – no doctor would welcome the theory that he had caused someone to be buried alive.

I decided that Mrs Choi's message could mean only one thing: that the man who had died at Sinjang-ri was not Arsenio. But this seemed equally absurd because Captain Martinez had identified the body.

My thoughts switched to the young man who called himself Si. He obviously knew where Park Song-yong was and had done his best to throw me off his trail. Si knew who had killed Jo; indeed, he might well have done so himself. Si was working for someone who knew where Park was and they (whoever 'they' might be) were prepared to go to any lengths, including murder, to keep his whereabouts a secret. Na had given me the job of finding Park, but Park Song-yong was clearly determined not to be found.

And then there was Kim Joo-young; how did she fit into this bizarre jigsaw puzzle? Was she acting out of love, mistaken loyalty, or some more sinister motive? Why had she taken that photograph of the tobacco tin in my flat?

For a full hour I wrestled with these questions and eventually found myself back where I had

started – the note from Mrs Choi. I got into my car and drove in the direction of Pocheon.

Halfway down Pocheon's busy main street I groped in my pocket for a cigarette, but found only an empty packet. I pulled up at a kiosk and bought a packet of twenty. I was just about to drive away again when I noticed a somewhat battered Samsung N17, which had drawn up near a greengrocer's on the opposite side of the road. Choi Ji-Hye got out of the car and went into the shop.

I crossed the main street to the Samsung, looked up and down the street carefully, and then got into the front passenger seat.

I looked around inside the car. On the shelf behind the back seat was a large, stuffed toy Korean tiger, and on the back seat a square brown paper parcel, addressed and ready for posting. Obviously a methodical woman, Mrs Choi had addressed the parcel twice: once on the paper and again on a small label tied to the string. On it was written:

*Jang In-tak
61 Eunpyeong-ro 12-gil
Seoul*

I scribbled the name and address on the back of an old envelope and replaced the parcel on the back seat. As I did so I noticed Choi Ji-hye coming towards the car. Seeing me in the front seat, she stopped dead and drew in her breath sharply. I opened the door and said: 'Do get in, Mrs Choi. I'm very anxious to talk to you'.

Her attempt at nonchalance did not strike me as entirely successful. 'What are you doing in my car?' she demanded.

'Waiting for you', I replied.

She looked flustered and palpably ill at ease. 'Why on earth didn't you come to the cottage, Mr Moon? Why do we have to talk here – in my car?'

'I was on my way there; I happened to see your car and thought this would be a little less obvious', I said.

She recovered herself quickly. 'What is it you want?' Her voice was perfectly normal, but I noticed that she carelessly moistened her lips with her tongue.

'Well, first of all, thank you for the note', I said.

'I'm afraid I don't quite understand you'. Her expression was affronted and frigid.

'I was referring to the note that was with the model I bought from your husband', I explained.

She made an impatient gesture. 'I haven't the remotest idea what you're talking about, Mr Moon'.

I started to get out of the car. 'I must apologise', I said. 'I've obviously made a mistake. It must have been your husband who put the note in the box. I'll have a word with him about it'.

I had one foot in the road, but she stopped me.

'No, wait', she said urgently; 'there's no need to tell Kyung-lee about this. What exactly is it you want to know?'

'I want to know if you sent the note'.

She hesitated, apparently trying to collect herself. Then, rather reluctantly, she nodded.

'Why?'

‘I thought it might help you, that’s all’.
‘Help me? In what way?’

She looked out of the car window and said quickly: ‘We really can’t talk here’. There was a note of desperation in her voice.

‘I think we can’, I said. ‘Do you mean that the note might help me to find Park Song-yong?’

Without looking at me she said: ‘Perhaps’.

‘The note said, “Arsenio isn’t dead”, I said. ‘What did you mean by that? That the dead man wasn’t Arsenio at all?’

She looked out of the window again. ‘Yes’, she said distractedly. She turned to me with an appealing look. ‘Mr Moon, I’m sorry, but I just can’t talk to you now. I’m expecting my husband at any moment, and if he sees us together he’ll –’

‘All right’, I interrupted. ‘If I go now, will you meet me sometime tomorrow?’

She hesitated, her eyes darting up and down the street. Then she said: ‘I’ll see you at the cottage at about eleven o’clock’.

‘I’ll be there’, I nodded and started to get out of the car again. Then a sudden thought struck me. ‘Before I go, Mrs Choi, do you happen to know a Dr Lee Chung-kyu?’

She looked quite blank. ‘Dr Lee Chung-kyu? No, I don’t think so – in fact I’m sure I don’t. Why d’you ask?’

‘I just wondered’, I said vaguely. ‘It really doesn’t matter’.

‘Well, I’ve never heard of him’, she said.

I got out of the car and closed the door. Through the open window I said: ‘Till tomorrow, Mrs Choi’.

She nodded, tight lipped. Then she drove away and I crossed the street to my own car.

Chapter twenty

There seemed to be everything but the kitchen stove in Jang In-tak's shop on the Eunpyeong road. There were tank shells, jerry cans, walkie-talkies, deactivated weapons (I assumed they were deactivated), military books and just about anything else you could think of that would come off a battlefield.

I realised that going to Jang's was a pretty long shot, but having seen the address on the parcel in Mrs Choi's car I decided to follow it up. I ran my eye over the bewildering array of clutter in the shop window. Right in front were several refurbished military radios.

I began to see some daylight. Choi had told me that he the objects that he collected, and any of those radios in the shop window could have been refurbished by him: they all exhibited the same exquisite workmanship and meticulous attention to detail. I decided that it was worth trying.

The man behind the counter came towards me. 'Yes, sir?' he said. 'What can I do for you?'

'I'm rather interested in the Battle of Inchon', I said.

'Oh, yes, sir?'

'I'm looking for militaria from the battle, I said.

The man nodded and gave me a meaning smile. Then he opened a drawer under the counter and took out a small envelope, which he handed to me. 'You're bang on time', he said. 'It only arrived this morning'.

I sat in my car and tore open the envelope. Inside was a small but perfectly developed photograph. Every detail of the tobacco tin in my apartment was faithfully reproduced: the exterior front and back, and the interior.

As soon as I reached my apartment I telephoned Kim Joo-young, and told her I had to see her at once.

I met Joo-young at the front door and led her into the drawing-room.

She said casually: ‘All this sounds fearfully serious and dramatic, Han-sang. What’s it all about?’ she arranged herself to the best advantage in an armchair and very slightly elevated her eyebrows. ‘You said you’d got a surprise for me. I hope it’s a nice one’.

‘That’s for you to decide’, I said uncompromisingly. I took the photograph out of my wallet and held it out to her. ‘It’s come out rather well, hasn’t it? I must congratulate you on your photography – I never knew it was one of your accomplishments’.

Joo-young looked at the photograph and recoiled sharply. ‘Oh, Han-sang ...’ she said wretchedly.

‘Cut out the drama’, I said sourly. ‘And don’t try to tell me that you didn’t take that picture, because I saw you. I think I deserve some sort of explanation’.

‘I – I don’t know what to say’, she murmured helplessly.

‘Well, say something’, I snapped. ‘Why did you take it?’

‘I don’t know’. Her eyes were downcast and she twisted a handkerchief in her fingers.

‘I intend to find out why you took the photograph’, I said grimly. ‘Now, let’s have it’.

Joo-young looked up, I could see that her eyes were eloquent with misery. She said tremulously: ‘Park asked me to do it. He gave me the description of the tin and told me that –’ she faltered and her voice trailed away into silence.

‘Tell me the rest’, I said, ‘and make it the truth’.

She spoke with a sudden rush of words. ‘I just didn’t think, Han-sang. Park gave me the details of the tobacco tin and asked me to take a photograph of it. It seemed harmless enough’. She clutched my arm. ‘Han-sang, I’m terribly sorry; I should have told you about it. I realise that now’.

‘That’s very gratifying’, I said. ‘Did Park tell you why he wanted the photograph?’

She shook her head. ‘No’.

‘Have you any idea why he wanted it?’

‘No, of course I haven’t the slightest idea. You do believe me, Han-sang, don’t you?’

‘Frankly’, I said, ‘I don’t’

‘But it’s the truth!’

‘Now, listen to me’, I said seriously. ‘The people Park’s mixed up with aren’t playing a game, you know. If you know anything about them – anything at all – then you’d better tell me before it’s too late’.

‘What d’you mean – before it’s too late?’

‘I told you what happened to that friend of mine’, I said. ‘I found him here, in the hall, with a knife in his back. Now, what happened when you saw Park Song-yong?’

‘I’ve already told you’.

‘Tell me again’.

She said, without looking at me: ‘He said he didn’t want to see you, that he wanted you to leave him alone. He gave me the money for you and then he asked me to take the photograph. He told me to print off a copy and post it to a shop in Eunpyeong-ro’.

‘Was the shop called Jang In-tak’s?’ I asked quickly.

She turned to face me. ‘Yes, that’s right. How did you know about Jang’s?’

I ignored the question. ‘What did Park look like when you saw him?’ I asked.

‘Ghastly’, replied Joo-young readily. ‘He looked ill and frightened. He wouldn’t talk about anything. But he seemed absolutely sure about one thing – he wants you to leave him alone’.

‘Then why did he write and ask me to meet him at Sinjang-ri?’

She shrugged helplessly. 'I don't know'.

'Did he mention Sinjang-ri, or the letter?'

'No'.

'Did he tell you where he'd got all that money from?'

'He told me nothing – not a damned thing'. She lit a cigarette with a trembling hand.

The telephone rang. I looked at Joo-young, nervously puffing at her cigarette, then I picked up the call.

I instantly recognised the voice on the other end as that of Mrs Choi. She said urgently: 'My husband's catching a later train tomorrow morning, so please don't get here until after one o'clock'.

'I understand. Thanks for ringing'. I hung up and turned to Joo-young.

'D'you think I could have a drink?' she asked, her voice sounding lifeless and depressed.

I poured two soju's and handed a glass to Joo-young.

She drank some and asked: 'Han-sang, what is it that Park Song-yong's mixed up in? Do you know?'

'No, I don't', I said, 'but I'm hoping I shall by this time tomorrow ...'

Chapter twenty-one

About three miles out of Pocheon I noticed two police cars and an ambulance pulled up on the side of the road. Several cars had stopped and I put my head out of the window to see what had happened. On the left side of the road a car had overturned in the ditch.

The queue of cars eased forward and a motor-cycle policeman waved me on. Then the queue came to a halt again and I stuck my head out of the window once more. 'Are they badly hurt?' I asked the traffic policeman.

'There's only one, sir – a woman', he told me. 'Shocking mess – they're just getting her out now. I reckon she's had it'.

The policeman moved on. I watched as a stretcher was taken over to the wrecked car. From where I was I could see that the near-side door of the car was smashed inwards on to the driving seat.

Near the wreck I noticed a boy of about thirteen holding a stuffed toy Korean tiger and showing it to another boy. It immediately brought to mind a similar toy tiger I had recently ...

I went up to the boy. 'Where did you get that from, lad?' I asked him.

The boy jerked his thumb towards the wreck. 'It came out of the car what was smashed up'. He said.

I parked my car by the side of the road and walked towards a small group of people who had gathered near the wreckage.

'Have you identified the lady yet?' I asked the policeman.

He regarded me curiously. 'We haven't had a chance yet, sir'.

'I've an idea that she might be a friend of mine', I explained. 'I wonder if I could see her for a moment?'

'Come with me, sir', said the policeman.

We pushed our way through the crowd to the stretcher beside the wrecked car. A woman was lying there, swathed in blankets. The policeman lowered the blankets a little and looked at me inquiringly.

Despite the blood from two cuts on her face, I recognised the woman as Choi Ji-hye ...
'This lady's a friend of mine, Officer', I said. 'I wonder if I could go with her to the hospital?'
The policeman looked puzzled. 'You weren't involved in the accident, were you sir?'
'No, I just happened to be passing'.
The policeman indicated a man in plain clothes. 'You'd better ask the doctor, sir'.

The doctor was a youngish man with jam-jar glasses. In answer to my request he said: 'I don't see why you shouldn't come along. I can't tell until I give her a thorough examination at the hospital, but she seems pretty badly hurt'.
'D'you think she'll live?' I asked.

The doctor looked at me sharply. 'I can't tell yet', he replied shortly. He turned to one of the ambulance men. 'Come on, let's get to the hospital'.
I sat on the pull-out seat at the front end of the ambulance, looking intently at Choi Ji-hye, who lay quite still with her eyes closed. The doctor was taking instruments out of his bag, which was on the other stretcher.

Suddenly Mrs Choi emitted a quavering sigh. Her eyes flickered open and she tried to speak. I leaned forward. 'What is it, Mrs Choi?' I asked.
She forced the words out, but only with fearful effort. 'Kim ... Joo-young ...'
'Yes?' I said. 'What about her?'
She said in a whisper that I could barely hear: 'She ... didn't ... see ... Park ... Song-yong'
'She didn't see him?'

Mrs Choi moved her head very slowly from side to side. 'No ... she was lying ... She didn't ... see ... Park ...'
'Where is Park Song-yong?' I asked tensely.
Her expression went blank.
I leaned closer to her. 'Try to tell me'. I urged. 'This is very important. Where - is - Park - Song-yong?'
The doctor came towards me, holding a hyperdermic and put a hand on my arm. 'I don't think she'd better talk at the moment', he said. There was a note of gentle reproof in his voice.

But Mrs Choi's lips were moving again and I bent forward to catch what she said. 'I ... think ... Joo-young ... knows ...'
Then the doctor slid the needle into her arm and she relapsed into unconsciousness.

The doctor turned to me: 'She'll be unconscious for another twenty-four hours at least. Looks to me like a skull fracture'.

The ambulance pulled up with a gentle jerk and I climbed out. There was no point in my going into the hospital, so I managed to hop a lift in a passing van, back to my car. Then I drove to Seoul.

The time had come, I thought grimly, to start getting really tough with Kim Joo-young ...

Chapter twenty-two

Later that evening, in my apartment, I was surprised when I answered the doorbell to see Dr Lee standing there, clutching a large briefcase.

‘I remember your asking me to look you up when I was in Seoul’, he said with a genial smile. ‘I thought I’d take you up on it. I hope you don’t mind me dropping in on you like this’.

‘Not at all’, I replied. ‘Delighted to see you’.

‘I was on my way to Seoul National University Hospital’, explained Lee. ‘I thought I’d kill two birds with one stone’.

He took a business envelope from his inside pocket. ‘I was in the Dokgo hotel at Sinjang-ri yesterday, and Kwon Oh-young happened to mention that a letter had arrived for you from Seoul. He was going to send it on, but as I was coming to town I thought I might as well deliver it to you in person’.

‘That was very kind of you, Doctor’, I said.

Lee handed me the letter. I recognised the writing on the envelope as Park’s. It was only a brief note, very much to the point:

For the last time, stop chasing after me. If you know what’s good for you, you’ll forget I ever existed.

I put the letter back into the envelope and looked up at Lee. ‘It’s from that friend of mine’, I told him. ‘Park Song-yong’.

‘You mean the man you were supposed to meet at Sinjang-ri?’

I nodded. ‘But I can’t imagine why he wrote to me at the Dokgo hotel; he’s got my address’. I put the letter in my pocket. ‘What brings you to SNU Hospital, Doctor? Or is that a professional secret?’

‘Not at all’, said Lee. ‘Min-joon – that’s my brother-in-law – was in a motor accident earlier today. He got away with a broken leg, but I promised my sister that I’d look in and make sure

that they were taking good care of him’.

‘Where was the accident?’ I asked.

‘In Tongil-ro, actually. Why d’you ask?’

‘Well, it’s just a coincidence, I suppose, but a friend of mine was involved in a car smash today’.

‘I’m sorry to hear that’, said Lee. ‘Was he badly hurt?’

‘It was a woman called Choi Ji-hye. She’s still on the danger list’.

‘I say, that’s bad’, said Lee sympathetically. ‘How did the accident happen?’

‘I really don’t know’, I replied. ‘I travelled to the hospital with her in the ambulance. As a matter of fact, she’s only a casual acquaintance. I happened to find her spectacles one day and returned them to her’.

‘Well’, said Lee, ‘I hope she makes a quick recovery’.

‘I hope your brother-in-law does the same’.

Lee smiled. ‘Min-joon? Oh, he’ll be all right – constitution like an ox. All the same, I’d better go round and see what they’re doing to him, just to keep my sister happy’.

He refused my offer of refreshment and said he must be going.

I accompanied him into the hall. ‘Well, many thanks for bringing that letter along’, I said.

He smiled. ‘No trouble at all, my friend.’

When Lee had gone I read Park’s letter again, and decided that there was only one course of action.

I had to see Na immediately.

My interview with Na was disappointing in one way, but strangely gratifying in another. He said somewhat frostily: ‘I’ve given you a job to do, Moon – find Park Song-yong. Well, get on with it’.

I felt slightly foolish.

He leaned forward and I saw that a cold little smile was playing about his lips. He said: ‘Are you trying to tell me the job is a bit too tough for you?’

‘I didn’t say that’, I said, somewhat nettled. ‘As a matter-of-fact, I think I’m really getting somewhere at last’.

Na was still wearing his cold little smile. He leaned back in his chair, placed the tips of his fingers together, and said: ‘Where?’

I felt rather like a small boy before his headmaster. Then I saw that Na was no longer smiling. He said: ‘Listen to me, Moon. I’ve got a lot of experienced people working for me – people I never have to check on. I don’t ask them for progress reports; as a general rule I don’t want to see them until the job they are doing is satisfactorily completed. Others are younger and less experienced and I have to keep an eye on them in case they do something damned stupid’. He surprised me by adding: ‘You’re in the first category, Moon’.

I suddenly felt ridiculously elated. ‘I’m glad to hear it’, I said.

‘If you want anything from my department, then ask for it. You’re strictly on your own on this job – at the moment’, Na said.

‘Right, First of all, I want some information about a woman called Ma Park. She keeps a transport cafe off the Seouloegwaksunhwan expressway’.

Na scribbled a note on the pad in front of him. 'D'you want to know anything particular about her?'

'I'd like to know a little about her background'.

'Right', said Na. 'Anything else?'

'One more thing', I said. 'Can you find out if a man was involved in a motor crash in Tongil-ro yesterday and taken to SNU Hospital? The man's name is Min-joon but that's all I know about him'.

'I'll see to it', said Na. 'When I've got this information we'll meet somewhere'.

Chapter twenty-three

Soon after I returned to my apartment that morning, Choi Kyung-lee called to see me. He looked tired, worried, and dishevelled, and was carrying a large brown paper parcel.

He stood blinking at me a moment; then he said: 'I've returned the picture you lent me'. I led him into the living-room. 'You needn't have returned it just yet', I said. 'You could have posted it to me later. I really wasn't in any great hurry for it'. 'I didn't want it to get broken or anything', said Choi diffidently. 'I thought I'd better bring it along myself'.

I took the parcel and motioned Choi to a chair. 'I was terribly sorry about your wife's accident', I said. 'Have you been to the hospital this morning?' Choi nodded. 'There's still no change, I'm afraid'. He took off his spectacles and polished them on his shabby cardigan. 'It was really very good of you to take all that trouble yesterday', he said.

'It was the least I could do'.

Choi passed a hand wearily over his eyes. I thought he looked very small and pathetic. 'I'm worried, Mr Moon', he said, 'very worried indeed. I've spent most of the morning at the police station. It seems that the police aren't satisfied about the accident'.

'In what way?' I asked.

'They seem to have some doubt that it was an accident. They think that the car may have been tampered with'. He avoided my glance and gazed out of the window.

'But why should they think that?'

'I really don't know', said Choi in exasperated tones. 'The police are frightfully cagey, you know; they give very little away. Of course, I've told them that the suggestion is absurd'. He looked at me appealingly. 'Who on earth would want to tamper with Choi Ji-hye car? The whole idea's absolutely fantastic'.

'What do you think happened?' I asked.

‘It’s hard to say, I must admit’. For a moment a jagged smile lit up his ravaged face. ‘Ji-hye was never a very good driver, you know; rather slapdash. She had a distressing habit of putting on her left indicator and then turning right. But the thing that really puzzles me is, where was she going in the car? She nearly always tells me about her appointments, but I haven’t the faintest idea where she was going yesterday’. He hesitated, then murmured tentatively: ‘she didn’t say anything to you in the ambulance?’

‘I’m afraid not. You see, she was only just conscious at the time. She did mutter a few words, but I’m afraid I didn’t catch what they were’. The lie came easily. ‘Possibly the doctor could help you’.

‘No’, replied Choi miserably, ‘I’ve already spoken to him. He says that he heard nothing’.

‘I’m sorry I can’t be of more help’, I said. ‘Let me get you a drink – it’ll buck you up a bit’.

‘Er – no, thank you, Mr Moon. You see, I haven’t had any breakfast this morning’.

I had a momentary vision of Choi peering short-sightedly and despairingly around an empty kitchen. ‘Well, we can soon remedy that’, I suggested. ‘I have my limitations as a cook, but I know my way round a pan’.

‘No, really, thank you. I don’t feel much like eating’.

‘Some coffee, then?’

‘No, nothing, really ...’

I said: ‘It was a strange coincidence, my turning up at the same moment’.

‘It was indeed’, said Choi. ‘As a matter of fact, when the doctor told me about it I assumed that you were on your way to see us’ – he pointed to the parcel – ‘perhaps to collect that’.

I shook my head. ‘Actually, I was on my way to see an old girl friend of mine the other side of Pocheon’.

‘Oh, I, see’, said Choi absently, and rose, with an effort. ‘Well, I must be going now. And thank you again for your great kindness’.

‘That’s quite all right’, I said. A sudden thought struck me. ‘Does Seung-li know about your wife’s accident?’

‘I had to tell her something, of course, but she doesn’t know how serious it is’.

‘What does the hospital say? When I phoned they merely said that she was on the danger list’.

Choi’s lower lip quivered. ‘Apparently the next twenty-four hours is the critical time’, he informed me. ‘Her skull is fractured and her chest and neck are badly lacerated’.

I nodded sympathetically. ‘If there’s anything I can do, Mr Choi, please don’t hesitate to get in touch with me’.

The weak eyes blinked. ‘That’s very kind of you. We do appreciate all you’ve done – both of us’.

When Choi had gone I looked through the window of the flat. He stood forlornly in the mews, seemingly oblivious to traffic and passers-by, apparently seeing nothing at all.

As I turned away from the window the telephone rang. At the other end Na’s voice said: ‘I’ve got the information you wanted. Meet me by the statue of Admiral Yi Sun-shin in half an hour’.

Punctual to the second, a large chauffeur driven Mercedes pulled up just in front of me. I got into the back seat next to Na, who looked like any City businessman on his way to a high-level conference.

‘I’ve got the information you need on Ma Park’. He told me.

‘Any previous record?’ I queried, slipping into the jargon.

Na gave a faint smile. ‘First of all’, he said, ‘it seems that the lady has never been married, in spite of the Ma, although most people seem to call her that’.

‘She didn’t strike me as being exactly maternal’, I remarked.

‘Apparently she’s got quite a reputation’, went on Na; ‘particularly in her own neighbourhood’.

‘Good, bad, or indifferent?’

‘She seems to be a bit of a mixture. A tough egg with a heart of gold, if you know what I mean’.

‘Like Tugboat Annie?’ I suggested.

‘Quite’, said Na. ‘Apparently she manages to keep on the right side of the law’.

‘What about the cafe? What’s the business like?’

‘Not good, not bad. Plenty of long distance lorry drivers use the place and she makes a living. That’s all about Ma Park’.

‘What about that accident case at the SNU Hospital?’ I prompted.

‘We checked on that too’. Again Na produced his cold little smile. ‘A man named Gim Min-joon was admitted yesterday at four o’clock. He’d been in a car smash in Tongil-ro and he’s got a broken leg’.

Characteristically, Na had not asked me why I wanted these diverse items of information, He merely said: ‘Anything else you want to know?’

I hesitated a moment, then said: ‘You told me that I was on my own in this job. Well, that suits me. But how far will you back me if I happen to get into trouble?’

Ross raised his eyebrows. ‘What sort of trouble?’

‘Any sort’.

‘With police, you mean?’

‘Possibly’.

‘If you find Park Song-yong for us we’ll back you to the limit’, replied Na decisively.

‘The limit being what?’

Na looked at me thoughtfully. ‘The limit’s murder’, he said quietly, ‘but, of course, we’d like you to have a very good reason for committing it. Ideally, it should be in self-defence. Does that answer your question?’

‘Yes’, I said.

‘What exactly have you in mind?’ inquired Na.

‘Someone’s been taking me for a ride’, I said, ‘and I don’t like it. With any luck, I’ll find Park for you within forty-eight hours’.

Na said nothing; his face was quite expressionless – but I thought I could detect a glint of approval in the cold, pale blue eyes.

I got out of the car. Na raised a hand to me and leaned forward to speak to the chauffeur. The big car drove off along the main street ...

Chapter twenty-four

I thought it might be a good idea to let Ma Park think that I was a police officer. The more I considered this, the better I liked it: Ma would be unlikely to talk freely to a casual frequenter of her cafe, but if I were to throw a scare into her with a few threatening overtones she'd probably tell me all I wanted to know.

I went to see the old man called Nam Woo-jin and found him immersed in files in his little office just down the corridor from Na's office. Apparently he was quite used to such requests, for within ten minutes he had supplied me with a warrant card, which told me that I was Detective-Inspector Ryom Han-gyong of Seoul police. I had the feeling that if I had asked Woo-jin for a baby elephant he would not have evinced any particular surprise.

There were only two lorries parked outside 'Ma's Cafe' and one of these was revving up, preparatory to moving off. I went into the cafe and saw that there was only one other customer, who was mopping up the remnants of his meal with a piece of bread.

I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror and decided that I looked the part. I wore a raincoat and a trilby hat because all the plain-clothes men I had ever seen had always worn trilbies and raincoats, whether it was raining or not.

Ma, a cigarette dangling from her mouth, was washing up behind the counter. She served me without meeting my eyes, or making any comment.

I took my cup of tea to a table by the wall and picking up a three-month-old illustrated magazine idly flipped through the pages.

The other customer swallowed the rest of his tea and went up to the counter. Ma took his money and gave him the change. After he had gone I heard the remaining lorry in the car park

being started up.

Ma glanced idly in my direction and poured herself a cup of tea.

‘Come and have that cuppa with me, Ma’, I said. ‘I want to talk to you’.

Ma eyed me shrewdly. Then she came over to my table and put her cup on it. Easing her large bulk into the chair opposite she said off handedly: ‘I haven’t got time to sit an’ gossip, love’.

‘Who said anything about gossip?’ I snapped.

Ma’s nostrils twitched. ‘Don’t you talk to me like that, dear’. She said balefully. ‘I don’t like being ordered about, y’know. Who are you, anyway?’

‘Come off it, Ma’, I said. ‘You remember me, don’t you?’

She looked at me through narrowed eyes. ‘You bin here before?’

‘You know very well I’ve been here before’, I told her. ‘D’you know who I am?’

Ma switched on a smile. ‘No, I don’t, dear’. The smile vanished as abruptly as it had come.

‘And I couldn’t care less. You owe me four-pence for your cuppa’.

I fumbled in my trouser pocket. ‘My name’s Bok Ye-joon’, I said.

‘That’s nice’, said Ma acidly. ‘Four-pence, dearie – if you’ve got it’.

‘I expect I’ll manage it’, I said. ‘The pay at police HQ isn’t all that handsome, but it’ll run to a cup of tea now and then’.

Ma’s mouth closed in a thin line. ‘Police HQ? Who d’you think you’re kidding?’

‘Don’t you think I’m from the police?’

‘No’, she said uncompromisingly, ‘I don’t’.

I produced my warrant card. ‘Does that convince you?’

Ma looked at me with grudging respect. She said uneasily: ‘What d’you want? You ain’t got nothing on me’.

‘I’m just making a few inquiries’, I said casually. ‘It’s nothing to do with the local police – in fact, they needn’t know anything about it, unless you want them to. I think you can help me, Ma’.

‘How could I help you?’ she demanded with a show of truculence. ‘I ain’t never bin mixed up in anything’.

‘You’re lucky’, I told her. ‘Perhaps you’ve got an influential boy friend’.

‘Get on with it, love’, she said more affably. ‘I ain’t got all day, y’know, so what about getting to the point?’

‘All right’, I agreed, ‘we’ll get to the point. You remember that when I was here last I asked you about a man and a woman. You said you’d seen them’.

Ma regarded me suspiciously and then nodded.

‘You told me they’d been here the previous Friday’, I continued.

She nodded again. ‘That’s right, love’.

I took a photograph from my wallet. It was a snapshot taken by me of Kim Joo-young and Park Song-yong. I passed it over to ma. ‘Have you seen these two people before?’

She looked at the photograph and then at me. ‘never seen ’em before in me life’, she announced.

‘But that’s the girl and the man I spoke to you about’, I pointed out. ‘You said you’d seen them here’.

‘I know I did, love’, replied ma equably.

‘Then why’, I said with as much patience as I could muster, ‘did you say that you’d seen them, if it wasn’t true?’

Ma's self-assurance was slipping a little. 'Well, it's a bit difficult to explain', she said uncertainly.

'Someone told you to say it. Right?'

'Right', said Ma after suitable hesitation.

'Who?'

'Oh, just a pal of mine'.

'And how much did this pal of yours pay you?'

Her piggy little eyes glittered dangerously. 'Now, don't you start getting bloody insulting', she said with enormous menace. 'I done it as a favour, see? You don't think I'd take money from a pal, do you?'

'Not you', I said. 'How much?'

Ma looked at me, like a boxer sizing up an opponent. 'If you must know', she said sullenly, 'I made a thousand won it and that's all'. Her voice took on a wheedling note. 'Honest to Gawd, a thousand won – not a won more'.

'All right, I believe you', I said. 'But I think you'd better tell me the whole story, don't you?'

Ma said: 'Well, this bloke Seong Jeong-ryong, him at the garage down the road –'

'Seong Jeong-ryong?' I broke in.

'That's right. You know him?'

'We've met', I said. 'Go on, Ma'.

She became more verbose. 'Well, I can't say that I'm surprised you know him. Mind you Seong Jeong-ryong's not really a crook, even if his cars are crap. There was a bloke got an Equus Prestige off 'im –'

'Never mind the cars', I said. 'Tell me about Seong'.

Ma shot me a reproachful look. 'Well, he comes up here one day last week and he asks me if I'd like to pick up an easy thousand'.

'And after careful deliberation you said "Yes"', I murmured.

'Wot's that?' demanded Ma beligerently.

'Skip it', I said.

'He gave me a description of you', she went on, 'and said you might be calling in here, making inquiries about a young woman and her boy friend. I was to tell you that they'd both been here last Friday and that the gent in question was always popping in and out – one of my regulars, as you might say'. Ma paused for breath.

'Then what?'

'Then I was to get Seong on the blower and tell him you was here. And that's all I did'.

'This man, Si', I said, 'the man who came in here and spoke to me – had you ever seen him before?'

Ma shook her head emphatically. 'No, dear, never clapped eyes on him. I was very surprised when he come in; I thought it'd be Seong, seeing as how he'd arranged it all'.

'Have you seen Seong since I was here last?'

'Yes', she said. 'He come in here the same afternoon. I asked him who that fancy boy was, and he said he was another car dealer. Seong said they was trying to buy a car off you, but you wouldn't part with it'.

'And you believed him?'

Ma shrugged her fat shoulders. ‘Well, I dunno’, she said dubiously. ‘I thought it sounded a bit fishy. I thought the three of you might be mixed up in some monkey business – stolen cars or some such racket’.

‘I see’, I said, looking at her searchingly.

Ma was clearly disconcerted by my questioning. ‘I’ve told you the truth, dearie’, she insisted. ‘I don’t believe in getting the wrong side of you boys’.

‘Very wise of you’, I said. I got up and headed for the door. ‘Oh, I still haven’t paid for my tea’.

‘That’s all right, love’, said Ma, all smiles again. ‘Have it on the house ...’

I decided to go and see Seong Jeong-ryong next. Seong, I imagined was the type who would talk if I made it worth his while. On the way to his garage I reviewed the information Ma Park had given me, and decided it was reliable. No doubt about it; she had been scared.

When I sounded my horn Seong emerged and I told him to fill the Equus up. He eyed the car with undisguised admiration.

‘Nice car you got there’, he remarked as he slammed down the cap of the petrol tank.

‘Not bad, is it?’ I said. ‘Only bought it yesterday, as it happens’.

‘Hmm’, said Seong. ‘What’s on the clock?’

‘Only done about five thousand’.

‘You for real?’ Seong’s eyes widened enviously. ‘How much did you have to fork out for it?’

‘Just over sixty-five million won’.

‘Nice!’ said Seong in awestruck tones.

‘You think I got a good deal then?’ I asked naively.

‘A good deal? That was a bargain, it’s givin’ it away’.

‘I bought it off a friend of mine’, I explained. ‘Her husband’s just died. As a matter of fact she had two cars there and I reckon the other one’s a better bargain than this. But I always fancied a jag’.

‘She must be a proper mug to let that Equus sixty-five’, commented Seong.

I gave him a knowing look. ‘If you step in quickly you might get the other one cheap’.

‘What’s the other one?’ he inquired eagerly.

‘A Sonata Luxury’.

‘Aha’, Seong beamed. ‘How old?’

‘Just a year, I think. It’s in beautiful condition, anyway’.

Seong looked covetously at the Equus. ‘Well, this job’s certainly a snip. You know, I like the sound of that Sonata’.

I simulated deep thought for a moment. ‘Tell you what’, I said presently, ‘you come to my place this evening and we’ll nip round together and take a look at it. I’ll introduce you to my friend and the rest will be up to you. How about that?’

Seong looked pleased. ‘Ta very much, Mr Moon’, he said. ‘I’ll do that’.

I handed him a card. ‘That’s my address’, I said. ‘Come at about eight o’clock’.

‘I’ll be there’, he assured me, pushing the card into his pocket. He waved jauntily as I drove away.

Out of deference to me and a possible client Seong had shaved and put on a collar which was very nearly clean.

I said: 'I'm damned sorry about this, Seong. If you'd got here a bit earlier you could have had that Sonata'.

'You don't mean someone nipped in front of me?' he said.

'I'm afraid so', I said sadly. 'He got it for eighty million. He was a dealer, I gather'.

'Bloody dealers!' exclaimed Seong Jeong-ryong with disgust. 'E'll make at least ten grand on that, the bastard!'

I poured out a generous tot of soju and handed the glass to Seong. Regretfully I said: 'Well, that's the way it goes'.

He shook his head. 'Thanks, Guv'. He swallowed resentfully, then muttered: 'Bugger, an' to think I was so bloody near to makin' an easy ten thou'.

I refilled his glass. 'Of course', I said casually, 'if it's just a question of making a few thousand won, I know how you could pocket a quick two thousand – just like that!' I snapped my fingers dramatically.

Seong looked up from a morose contemplation of my carpet. 'What's the catch?' he wanted to know.

'You've only to tell me what happened to that Genesis Coupe I sold you', I said quietly.

Seong hastily finished his soju and put the glass on the table. 'Well, thanks for the drink', he muttered. 'I got to be getting back'.

I assumed a pained expression. 'Doesn't two thousand interest you?'

'Too right it does', Seong assured me. 'Any easy money interests me. But I ain't talkin' about that particular car'.

I looked at him carefully for a moment. I knew that he wasn't going to pass up two thousand won as readily as that. 'I'll make you another proposition', I said at last.

Seong looked at me guardedly. 'I'm listening'.

'I met a man called Si at Ma Park's cafe', I said. 'He came to see me in answer to a phone call that Ma made to you'.

'I dunno nothin' about that', said Seong, rather too readily. 'I dunno what you're talking about, mate'.

'I think you do', I corrected. 'But what really interests me is that it took Si over an hour to get to the cafe after Ma phoned you'.

'So what?' said Seong sullenly.

'So Si couldn't have been waiting at the garage', I said. 'Your place is only five minutes from the café'.

'I dunno what the 'ell you're taking about', said Seong.

'Don't you? Then I'll tell you. As soon as you heard from Ma Park you telephoned Si. You rang him and it took him just over an hour to get to Ma's Cafe'.

'You're nuts!' Park said offensively. 'I've never even 'eard of anyone called Si'. He started to move towards the door.

'I'll give you two thousand won, Seong, if you'll tell me the number you called', I said deliberately.

Seong stopped dead and eyed me cautiously. 'Two thousand won? Just for a phone number?'

'Yes', I said. 'Simple, isn't it?'

'Sounds a bit too bloody simple to me', he said. 'Ave yer got the two thou 'ere?'

I crossed to the desk and unlocked a drawer. I took out a bundle of notes and casually tossed them on to the table. Seong, apparently mesmerised, watched me. 'Let's get this straight', he said. 'I give you the phone number, an' you give me two thousand won. Right?'

Patiently, I repeated: 'As soon as you heard from Ma Park you phoned Si. I just want the number you called, that's all'.

Seong's eyes were glued to the pile of notes. He fought a final battle with some misplaced loyalty and lost. In a hoarse voice he blurted out: 'ere you go and waved the screen of his phone under my eyes ...'

Mercifully Seong was far too occupied in looking at the money to glance at me, for I doubt very much if I managed to keep a poker face on seeing the screen. I pointed to the money and said: 'All right, Seong. Help yourself'.

He picked up the notes, counted them deftly, and transferred them to the inside pocket of his jacket. What, I wondered, was Seong going to do with this sudden windfall? I thought of gambling dens, gargantuan alcoholic sessions, shady car deals – all things obviously dear to his heart. I suddenly felt a lot better about my assignment: up to now the enemy had had it all their own way, but at least one of them was open to financial persuasion.

Seong said tensely: 'If anyone asks you, I never give you that number, see? I never even seen you tonight. You got that?'

'I've got it', I said. 'I don't even know you. Now, get out of here'.

Seong looked aggrieved. 'Don't be like that, Guv. I got to cover myself, see? I got a business to look after', he pleaded.

I decided that I had had about enough of Seong. I pointed to the door. 'Out', I said succinctly. He shot me a look charged with venom and left.

When he had gone I paced up and down the room for a full minute. Then I picked up the telephone and dialled.

Kim Joo-young's voice answered. 'Hi there!'

'Hi, Joo-young. Nice to hear your voice. Can you drop round to see me about six tomorrow evening?'

She said: 'Of course, darling, I'd love to. Have you got some news for me?'

'Yes', I said slowly, 'I've got some news for you ...'

I hung up before she could ask if it was good news.

Chapter twenty-five

Na telephoned me early the next morning to say he had some news for me.

'I've got some for you, too', I said.

I fetched my car from the garage and drove round to Sejong-daero.

'Things are beginning to move', said Na, as soon as I was admitted to his office. 'They've killed Seong Jeong-ryong. I imagine he talked to you'.

It is always a shock to hear of the death of a person you have seen the previous day. I gripped the arm of my chair and said: 'He talked all right. How did it happen?'

'Obviously they were on to him. He must have been followed to your place last night. When he got back to his garage they were waiting for him. They put two bullets into his stomach. He died this morning'.

'No witnesses?'

Na shook his head. He seemed rather anxious to change the subject. 'What's this news you've got for me?' he asked.

'Someone else is going to talk this evening', I said a trifle grimly. 'Or I'm much mistaken'.

'Who might that be?'

'Kim Joo-yojng. She's done quite a lot of talking already, but it's all been a pack of lies. This time, I fancy, she's going to tell the truth. I think you ought to come along'.

'Right', said Na. 'What time?'

'Give me about an hour to work on her', I said. 'If you come at about seven you should catch her in the right frame of mind to put quite a lot of things straight'.

'I'll be there', he promised, and dismissed me with a curt nod as he turned to a pile of papers.

Joo-young, relaxed and happy, sat on the settee in my living-room. She made, I thought, a delightful picture. She wore a dress of blue angora wool, which showed off her superb figure to

perfection, with navy-blue kid court shoes, and exhibited a considerable amount of very shapely nylon-clad leg. I found myself wondering how a woman this beautiful, so poised, and so intelligent could make such an almighty fool of herself.

I poured gin and vermouth into a jug, added a lot of ice, stirred the mixture, and poured a generous portion of it into her glass.

She took a sip and made a wry face. 'Darling, aren't these rather strong?'

'Of course they are', I said. 'Just relax. This is in the nature of a farewell party.'

'Farewell party? Who's going away?'

'I am. I'm getting out of this country.'

She looked startled for a moment. 'But, darling, why?'

I shrugged. 'Now that I've got the money from Park, there's really nothing to keep me here any longer.'

'Well, it's all rather sad, darling', said Joo-young wistfully. Acting again, I thought.

I took a sip at my Martini. 'If Park wants to cut himself off from all his old friends, then that's his affair', I said unconcernedly. I took his last letter from my pocket and handed it to Joo-young. 'Read what he says in his letter.'

She read the note and passed it back to me. 'That sounds pretty final, doesn't it?' she said.

'It's not exactly brimming over with bonhomie', I agreed. 'But what about you? Are you included in this fond farewell?'

'I don't know', she replied thoughtfully. 'The last time I saw him I got the idea that, as far as he was concerned, I was just a suitable person to act as a go-between – a stooge. Still, he's not the only fish in the sea, I suppose.'

I looked at her appreciatively and I'm bound to say she delighted the eye. 'For you, I should say, the sea will always be full of fish. Unfortunately, you can't forget people like Park Song-yong: you can't just brush them out of your life.'

'I know', said Joo-young. She looked moodily into her glass for a moment.

I said: 'Tell me exactly what happened when you met him.'

She looked faintly embarrassed. 'I've already told you all there is to know. There's nothing more.'

'Yes, I know', I persisted, 'but the thing that puzzles me is why Park should have chosen a place like Ma Park's cafe for your meeting'. Joo-young looked at me curiously and I nodded.

'Oh, yes', I said, 'I've been there. It's a real dump, isn't it? The juke box blares away all the time and you can hardly hear yourself speak.'

'You know Park', said Joo-young evasively; 'he always did like noisy places.'

'There are various degrees of noise', I said. 'I should hardly have thought that 'Ma's Cafe' was quite Park's street.'

Joo-young glanced at her jewelled wristlet watch. She said: 'I think I ought to be going. Perhaps you'll tell me about this news –'

I interrupted her sharply. 'You're not going yet'. She looked surprised. I went on: 'I've always known you were a good actress. I've only just realised what a very accomplished liar you are.'

'What do you mean?' she demanded.

'Just this', I said. 'In the first place, there's no juke box in Ma Park's cafe; there's no music of

any kind. The most noise in that place comes from the clicking of Ma's false teeth and the clatter of cheap crockery'. I looked her full in the eyes. 'You've never been near the place, have you?'

'I don't know what you're talking about', she retorted unconvincingly.

'Oh, yes you do', I said. 'Your whole story was a pack of lies. You didn't go to the cafe and you didn't see Park. Well, how am I doing so far?'

'I don't like being called a liar', said Joo-young icily. Two angry spots of colour showed on her cheekbones.

'I may call you worse than that before I'm through', I countered. 'You spun me that tale about Park because you knew that as soon as I'd heard it I'd go straight to the cafe. Well, I went there and I met your charming little friend, Si. I must say I wouldn't have thought he was quite your type. I don't know how you fit into all this, but I'm going to find out'.

Joo-young passed a hand over her forehead. 'I've got a shocking headache', she said heavily, 'and you're talking a fearful lot of nonsense'. She started to get to her feet.

I pushed her gently back on to the settee. 'You're going to listen to me and like it. Whatever it is you're mixed up in, murder's only a small part of it'.

She looked shocked. 'Murder?'

'That's what I said. Seong's dead; he was shot in the stomach. He died this morning'.

'But I don't know anyone called Seong', said Joo-young dazedly. 'I don't know what you're talking about'.

'Oh yes, you do', I contradicted, 'and it's not the only thing you know. You've been taking me for a ride long enough. You know where Park is, and you're going to tell me'. I leaned forward and gripped her arm; it was not a gentle grip. 'I want the truth', I said, 'and I'm going to get it'.

'Please', she protested weakly, 'you're hurting my arm'.

'Where's Park?'

She said helplessly: 'I don't know where he is'. I knew that she was still lying. 'I'm not feeling at all well', she said miserably. 'I'm going home now'.

'I'm afraid you can't'. I looked at my watch. 'I've got someone coming to see me at seven o'clock. He wants to see you too'.

'Who is this person?' Joo-young asked.

'A friend of mine'.

'Is he a policeman?'

'No, not a policeman', I said.

Na lit a cigarette and looked at Joo-young thoughtfully. His manner was quiet and persuasive. 'Miss Kim', he said, 'I understand that this man Si came to see you about a fortnight ago. Is that correct?'

'About a fortnight ago', she said. 'I'm not absolutely sure of the exact date'.

Na inclined his head. 'Go on, please'.

'He called on me at the theatre', continued Joo-young. 'I'd never seen him before and I wondered what he wanted'.

'Exactly what did he want?'

Although Na was quiet and considerate I could see something of his underlying ruthlessness. Joo-young, I decided, would tell the whole tale now and be glad to do so.

‘He told me that my fiancé, Park Song-yong, was in serious trouble. He said that Song-yong had stolen something and stood a good chance of being arrested’.

‘Did he tell you what your fiancé had stolen?’ asked Na.

She shook her head. ‘He was terribly vague about the whole thing. In any case, it sounded absolute none sense to me and I didn’t believe a word of it’.

‘What finally convinced you that he was telling the truth?’

‘A telephone call from Song-yong’. She paused, then went on: ‘Si said he’d arrange for Song-yong to speak to me. He called at my flat the next day and while he was there Park Song-yong came through on the telephone. He sounded absolutely desperate. He said that if he was to come out of this alive I must do everything that Si said’.

Na sat looking at Joo-young, his face devoid of expression.

Joo-young leaned forward. ‘Well, what was I to do? Rightly or wrongly, I’m in love with Park Song-yong and I still want to marry him. I don’t care what you think of me, but – well, I was prepared to do anything to save him’. She glared with a kind of nervous defiance at Na and then at me.

‘Are you quite sure it was Park who rang up?’ I asked.

‘I’m positive’, she said emphatically. ‘It was during the call that Song-yong let slip that he was at Sinjang-ri. I’m pretty sure he didn’t mean to, and Si got absolutely livid: he said that if I told anyone where Song-yong was they’d hand him straight over to the police’.

‘What did Si want you to do?’ I asked.

‘I was to persuade you to get off Song-yong’s trail’, said Joo-young. ‘Si said that he and his friends were trying to get Song-yong out of the country. The first thing I’d to do was to pay his debts for him’.

‘I see’, I said. ‘So it was your money all the time’.

She nodded. ‘I had to do it that way. The idea was that once you had the money you’d stop bothering about Song-yong. Anyway, I agreed to do this, and I did it’. She gave me a wan smile. ‘You know all about that’.

‘So far, so good’, remarked Na. ‘What else happened?’

‘I was to tell Moon Han-sang that I’d met Song-yong at Ma Park’s cafe’, went on Joo-young. ‘Of course, I’d never been to the dump – that’s where I slipped up. Si hoped that Han Sang wouldn’t go there; in which case he’d know for certain that he’d given up looking for Song-yong’.

‘But I did go’, I explained to Na, ‘and received a nice friendly warning from friend Si. He told me that if I didn’t lay off I was going to be in trouble. He meant it, too’.

‘Si seems to be a bright boy’, observed Na, and turned to Joo-young. ‘Is he the only contact you’ve had with these people?’

‘Yes’, she said. ‘I’ve seen no one else at all’.

‘And you’ve heard no suggestions as to why they might be?’

‘None at all, I’m afraid’. She assumed a contrite expression. ‘I suppose I’ve been an awful nuisance to everybody but – well, I was simply doing what seemed to be the only possible thing to help Song-yong. You see, I know him so well: he’s just the sort of person who’d get mixed up in a business like this and then be made the scapegoat’.

I thought cynically that this was a singularly charitable viewpoint to take, but I wasn’t engaged

to Park. I said: 'Do you know just how he did get mixed up in it?'

Joo-young hesitated. 'Well, by stealing this ... thing – whatever it is'.

'And what about the model on my mantelpiece?' I asked. 'You told me it was Park who asked you to take the photo. Was that true?'

'No, it wasn't. It was Si. But I couldn't tell you that without revealing the whole story'.

'It would have been better if you had', I commented.

Na pensively massaged his chin. 'You mean', he said slowly, 'that he simply told you to take a photograph of the tobacco tin and its contents, and send the print to the shop in Eunpyeong-ro?'

'Yes', said Joo-young. 'To Jang's'.

'Why?' asked Na.

'I honestly don't know', said Joo-young; she sounded weary and dispirited. 'I know my story sounds very unlikely, and I know I've been stupid'.

'You've been very stupid indeed', said Na uncompromisingly. 'Nevertheless, I believe you'.

Joo-young shot me a reproachful look. 'Well, that's something, anyway'.

'I only wish you'd told us all this a little earlier', I said.

'I realise that now', she said. 'But I was scared stiff of Si, and I just didn't dare to think what might happen to Song-yong if I told anyone'.

Na nodded understandingly. 'I appreciate that you were in a very difficult position, Miss Kim. But you should have confided in Mr Moon'.

'I know that', said Joo-young, 'but I didn't know what Moon Han-sang was up to, or who he was working for'. She produced a wry little smile. 'I still don't, if it comes to that'.

Na smiled gently and lit another cigarette. He said: 'I understand your show comes off at the end of the week, Miss Kim?'

Joo-young nodded.

'Do you think you could get away before then? I'd like you to be out of the way for the next two or three days. Could you leave the show right away? Perhaps you could fly over to Tokyo?'

Joo-young thought for a moment. 'It wouldn't be easy', she said dubiously.

'Why not?' asked Na directly. 'Haven't you got an understudy?'

'Yes, but –'

'Give the poor girl a chance', advised Na crisply. 'She's probably been longing for something like this to happen'.

Joo-young stared at Na. 'Are you serious about this?'

'Very serious. If something goes wrong during the next few days – and it could very easily – Si might take it into his head to drop in on you. I shouldn't like that to happen, Miss Kim; I don't think you would, either'.

Joo-young went pale under her make-up. 'But what about Song-yong?' she said.

'This may sound a little brutal', answered Na, 'but I think you've given sufficient thought to your fiance for the time being. I can assure you that you won't be helping him by staying here'.

'You leave Park to me', I said. 'I'll look after him'.

'All right', said Joo-young. 'Tokyo it is. I'll be at the Hilton if you want me'.

She held out a hand to Na, who shook it gravely. Then she picked up her fur stole and left the flat casually as if she were leaving her agent's office'.

When Joo-young had gone I turned to Na. 'Well, what do you make of it?'

'She's telling the truth now', said Na decidedly. 'It's a pity she didn't before'.

I nodded in agreement. Then I said: Na, is it true that Park stole something?'

Na nodded sombrely. 'Yes, he did'. He sat on the arm of the settee. 'Have you ever heard of a man called Hong Jin-ho?'

I thought for a moment. 'The name seems familiar'.

'He's very well known in his own rather specialised field', went on Na. 'He's an aircraft designer. He's been working for years on a new drone. It became rather a joke in scientific circles, but at last he's perfected it'.

'What's so special about this drone?' I asked.

'It's completely autonomous', explained Na, 'and cheap to manufacture. It's able to fly itself without any human intervention'.

'To what extent?'

'I can only describe it in layman's language; I won't wrap it up in a lot of scientific terms, even if I could. Apparently, it has the intelligence of a nine year old child'.

'But that's fantastic!' I exclaimed.

'Quite', said Na. 'So fantastic that a great many people, not all of them responsible people, became very interested in it'.

'But how does Park Song-yong fit into all this?'

'I'm coming to that', said Na. 'Park got to know Hong and tried to borrow money from him. Hong refused and they had a blazing row about it. That, apparently, was the end of the matter'.

'Not if I know Park', I interposed dryly.

'Exactly. Anyway, a certain gentleman – let's call him 'X' for the moment – scraped up an acquaintance with Park and offered him a substantial sum of money for a copy of the design plans'.

'I'm beginning to understand', I said. 'This 'x' character traded on the fact that Park knew Hong and was still angry with him'.

'Precisely. The idea appealed to Park and he decided to have a shot at it. Well, he was lucky: he got the designs, but having got them decided –'

'– that 'x' hadn't offered him enough for them', I interrupted, 'and he was going to sell them in the open market'.

Na smiled. 'You obviously know your friend. That's exactly what did happen. However, to keep 'x' happy Park prepared a second copy with a dud info on it, and gave it to him'.

'I see', I said. 'Go on'.

'Park knew that 'x' had been in touch with a group of North Korean officials', continued Na, 'and also that he had contacted an armaments combine in the US. He was, in fact, playing one off against the other. Park decided to do the same. The North Koreans ordered Park to meet Arsenio, their Cuban intermediary, at Sinjang-ri. They told Park that Arsenio would pay the price he wanted and collect the plans, but Park wasn't taking any chances'. Na paused and contemplated the toe of his right shoe. Presently he went on: 'First of all, Park let it be known that his reason for going to Sinjang-ri was to meet you – this was in case 'x' became suspicious – and secondly, he made up his mind not to take the plans Sinjang-ri. Well, you know what happened'.

‘I don’t know what happened’, I corrected.

Na waved aside my interruption. ‘Park went to Sinjang-ri. He arrived the day before you did and stayed at the pub under the name of Ho Dae-du. Suddenly Mr Ho disappeared’ – Na snapped his fingers – ‘just like that’.

‘You mean he was kidnapped?’

‘Yes’.

‘By whom?’

Na shrugged. ‘What’s your guess, Moon?’

I thought for a moment. ‘It seems fairly obvious that he must have been grabbed by either the North Korean’s and their cronies, the Yanks, or by ‘x’, who had found out that he was being double-crossed’.

‘That’s how it struck me, too’, said Na. ‘Anyway, whoever it is, it’s quite obvious that they haven’t made him talk yet. He’s still holding out’.

‘Yes’, I said, ‘Park would’.

Na looked at me shrewdly. ‘I’m glad to hear you say that’, he said quietly.

‘You mustn’t underestimate Park’, I said. ‘he’s an irresponsible devil, and you couldn’t trust him a yard with a bearer bond or your wife. But he’s got plenty of guts’.

‘He’s going to need them’, said Na.

‘What happens now?’ I asked.

‘It’s all yours now’, he said smoothly. ‘Get up to Sinjang-ri and find Park. Don’t worry, I won’t leave you in the lurch. There’ll be some of my people there too. This business is coming to a climax and we can’t afford to let up for an instant. You keep after Park; my people will be right behind you’.

Chapter twenty-six

The Equus made short work of the journey to Sinjang-ri, and half past seven on the following evening found me parking the car in the garage of the Dokgo hotel.

I walked into the bar. Trade was brisk and among the customers I noticed Shin in civilian clothes. Kwon Oh-young and Hae-jin were busily pouring drinks and taking orders.

Hae-jin spotted me and came towards me. 'Hello, Han-sang', she said. 'I got your e-mail. It's a nice surprise, seeing you again so soon'. She beamed.

I looked round the crowded bar. 'It's nice to be back', I said. 'You look lovely as ever'. Kwon, all smiles, bustled up. 'You're in your old room', he said. 'I'll get young Baik Chul-soo to take your bag up'. 'That's fine', I said. 'I'll have a soju if I may, Hae-jin'.

She pushed a glass across the bar, and as I drank I listened to the buzz of conversation. It was being monopolised by a small, middle-aged, tough looking fisherman who stood with his back to the fireplace.

I said to Hae-jin: 'This chap can spin a tale!'

'That's Rim Ji-hoon', she said. 'He's getting properly wound up. Never stops talking except to pour beer down his throat'.

Rim Ji-hoon drank deeply and his audience waited silently for the chronicle to continue.

'We goes aboard this trawler and Owd Kim Chong-hui pushes his great 'airy face into mine', went on Rim, 'and 'e says: 'if y'don't get off my boat, I'll damn well string you up!'

'Get on with you, Rim!' said another fisherman. 'Reminds me o' the time old Pung Chang-sun

'I 'aven't finished yet', broke in the aggrieved Rim Ji-hoon.

‘And you won’t afore closing time!’ chimed in an anonymous voice from the corner. But Rim was not to be silenced. ‘He’d got a hold on me’, he went on, ‘and ’e was breathing all over me. Smelt like a ruddy brewery! Then the Skipper comes up and taps ’im on the shoulder and says: ‘You can’t treat one o’ my men like that!’ Know what Owd Kim Chong-hui does then?’

‘Slung you in the drink’, suggested the voice from the corner.

Rim ignored the interruption. ‘He comes up to the Skipper, very slow like, and he grabs ’old on ’im. “One more squeak out of you”, he says, “ ’an’ I’ll pitch you both in the hogwash!” ’

There was a roar of laughter. But an elderly fisherman standing at Rim’s elbow nodded. ‘He would, too’, he said. ‘There’s always a row coming from that boat; I always let well alone – pretend I don’t ’ear nowt’.

‘Best thing you can do, Hak Ho-bang’, said Rim Ji-hoon. ‘An’ that’s what I’ll do in future; these artist blokes are all the bloody same – daft as brushes’.

Shin said pontifically: ‘I hear he sells a lot of his pictures in Seoul’.

‘He won’t sell none round here’, said Rim in tones of bitterest contempt. ‘Folks got more sense’.

Shin spotted me in the bar and walked across. ‘How are you, Mr Moon?’ he inquired genially. ‘Fine, thanks’, I said. ‘Sounds as though you’ve been having a bit more excitement round here’. Shin jerked his thumb towards Rim. ‘You mean old Rim? No, nothing special, though there’s always something going on with that calligrapher bloke. He’s as mad as a hatter and drunk as often as not’.

‘What’s this artist’s name?’ I asked.

‘His real name’s Gwok Jung-mo. But all the blokes round here, call him Kim Chong-hui. After the famous calligrapher, see?’

A germ of an idea was taking shape at the back of my mind. ‘Does he ever come ashore?’

‘Once in a while’, said Shin. ‘He comes to collect some grub and booze. But he never gives me much trouble – does most of his drinking out to sea’.

Shin said good night to me, and to Kwon, and sauntered out. As I put my glass on the bar I looked towards the staircase.

Walking down the stairs, carrying a suitcase, was Choi Kyung-Lee ...

Choi focused his short-sighted eyes on me and said: ‘Well, this is a surprise! What on earth brings you to this part of the world?’

‘I often come here’, I explained, ‘I have a very personal reason for coming here’. I indicated in the direction of Hae-jin.

‘Ah, but this is quite extraordinary. What a small world’, said Choi. ‘When did you arrive?’

‘About twenty minutes ago’.

‘Oh dear’, said Choi regretfully, ‘and I’m just leaving. What a pity’.

The boy called Baik appeared and picked up Choi’s suitcase. ‘I’ll see if the taxi’s here, Mr Choi’, he said, and disappeared through the front door.

‘Have you been here long?’ I asked Choi.

‘I arrived last night’, he replied. ‘I had a telephone message from a customer of mine who lives here; he’s a wealthy collector. I told him I could quite easily send him a list of my stock, but he insisted on my coming here – so stupid really, and a complete waste of time, but he’s paying all my expenses’.

'Have you been here before?' I asked.

'Once, a very long time ago. It's a pleasant enough part of the country, but a little too – er – rugged for my liking'.

'How's Mrs Choi?' I inquired.

'Quite a lot better, thank goodness. The hospital seems quite pleased with her'.

'That's good news', I said. 'Give her my best wishes when you next see her'.

'I will indeed', said Choi. He glanced at the clock on the wall. 'I must get a move on or I'll miss my train'.

It was some time later when I wandered back to the bar, now almost deserted, and said to Hae-jin: 'Could I have a word with you and your father?'

'Yes, of course', she said. She called down the length of the bar: 'Dad!'

Kwon Oh-young looked over his shoulder. 'Hello?'

'Could you come over a minute?'

Kwon and Hae-jin leaned over the bar together.

I said: 'You remember the first time I was here I was due to meet a friend of mine called Park Song-yong?'

Kwon nodded. 'Aye, that's right. He never turned up'.

'I thought you were going to meet him in Seoul', put in Hae-jin.

'So I was', I said, 'but he never showed up in Seoul either'. I fumbled in the inside pocket of my jacket. 'I've got some photographs of Park Song-yong here, and I'd like you and Hae-jin to have a look at them'.

I spread several photographs on the bar: one was a head and shoulders portrait; the others were snapshots.

Hae-jin picked up the studio photograph. 'But this is Mr Ho Dae-du!' she exclaimed dramatically.

'So it is', corroborated Kwon.

'Tell me about this Mr Ho, Oh-young', I said quickly.

Kwon scratched his head thoughtfully. 'Twould be about the time of the big storm', he said. He pointed to one of the photographs. 'This man Ho Dae-du booked in here. He said he'd be staying a few days'.

'He didn't, though', supplied Hae-jin.

'He certainly didn't', said Kwon. 'Booked in on a Friday, I think it was. Next morning he'd gone. He went up to his room on the Friday night and that was the last we ever saw of him. His bed wasn't slept in nor nothing. Strangest blooming caper I've come across in a long time'.

'At first we thought he'd done a flit', explained Hae-jin, 'so as to get out of paying his bill. But next day we got a letter saying he'd had to leave sudden like. He enclosed ten thousand won'.

'Very generous of him it was, too', said Kwon, 'seeing as how bed an' breakfast is only half that and he didn't have either'.

'I suppose you wouldn't still have the letter?' I said.

'Reckon we have', said Hae-jin. 'I put it in that box under the counter'.

'Have a look, there's a love', said Kwon.

Madge hurried to the other end of the bar.

I said: 'Have you seen this Mr Ho since?'

'Not a sign of him', said Kwon. 'You say it's your friend Park, do you?'

I indicated one of the photographs. 'Well, that's certainly Park Song-yong. There's no doubt about that'.

‘It’s Mr Ho too’, said Kwon, ‘so it must be the same bloke. Funny sort of turn-up, isn’t it?’ Hae-jin came back flourishing a piece of paper. ‘Here we are’, she announced triumphantly. ‘Knew I’d kept it somewhere’.

It was typical of the hasty scrawls that represented Park Song-yong’s efforts at correspondence.

Sorry, had to leave in a hurry. Bit of urgent business cropped up. Ho Dae-du.

I was just putting the letter in my pocket when Dr Lee Chung-kyu poked his head round the door. Seeing me, he came into the bar. ‘Well, well’, he said expansively, ‘good evening to you, Mr Moon. What brings you to this part of the world?’ He sat down and gazed about him with extreme benevolence.

‘Perhaps you can shed a little light on a mystery, Doctor’, I said.

‘Mystery? What mystery? Don’t tell me Hae-jin has been watering the beer again!’ He chuckled comfortably at his own joke.

‘The very idea!’ said Hae-jin indignantly.

There was general laughter at this riposte, but I did not join in. I said to Lee Chung-kyu: ‘I’ve got a letter here from a Mr Ho who stayed here – or that er, booked a room – about three weeks ago’.

Lee looked slightly bewildered, but Kwon added: ‘You remember, Doctor; it was about the time when we had that bad storm’.

‘I remember the storm well enough’, said Lee, ‘but I can’t say that I remember a Mr Ho Dae-du’.

‘He arrived here’, I said, ‘and he was shown to his room, next morning he’d completely disappeared. Twenty-four hours later Kwon got this letter with ten thousand won’.

Lee examined the letter. ‘That was pretty generous’, he remarked. Then he looked up in mild surprise. ‘Well’, he said, ‘what’s wrong with it?’

‘Two things’, I said. ‘In the first place, this mysterious Mr Ho happens to be my ex-business partner, Park Song-yong. Oh-young and Hae-jin have both identified him from photographs’.

‘Oh?’ murmured Dr Lee non-committally.

‘In the second place’, I went on, ‘this letter wasn’t written by Park Song-yong. I know his handwriting as well as I know my own; I’m one of the very few people who can read it’.

‘Perhaps someone wrote the letter for him’, suggested Hae-jin brightly. ‘Perhaps he was too busy at the time. He must have been pretty busy to dash off like that, without saying a word to anyone’.

‘That’s possible’, I agreed. ‘Alternatively, he may not have known anything about the letter’.

‘I don’t quite follow you, Mr Moon’, Dr Lee said.

‘Look at it this way’, I said. ‘Suppose Park didn’t want to leave here but was kidnapped ...’

‘Kidnapped?’ echoed Hae-jin in an awestruck voice.

Kwon drew a heavy breath. ‘Well, God bless my soul, Mr Moon!’ he said.

Lee regarded me with indulgence. ‘Surely that’s a bit far-fetched, my dear fellow’.

‘But is it so far fetched, Doctor?’ I said. ‘I don’t think so. It fits the facts. Suddenly, in the middle of the night, this man disappears. Twenty-four hours later Oh-young receives a letter – supposedly sent by Ho Dae-du – explaining why he vanished so suddenly. Naturally, Oh-young’s perfectly satisfied – after all, ten thousand won for bed and breakfast is fair enough, particularly as he had neither bed nor breakfast. Right, Oh-young?’

‘True enough, Mr Moon’, said Kwon.

‘Why should Oh-young be curious?’ I went on. ‘He’s made ten thousand won out of it – tax free’.

‘Too right’, said Kwon with feeling.

Lee frowned in perplexity. ‘It seems logical enough’, he admitted; ‘but kidnapping! Really, Mr Moon, I can’t help feeling that you’re jumping to rather melodramatic conclusions. Unless, of course, you’ve got a specific reason for believing that your friend really was kidnapped’.

‘No’, I said, ‘I haven’t any specific reason for thinking that’.

‘All the same’, said Kwon thoughtfully, ‘it’s pretty rum, whichever way you look at it’.

Lee looked at his watch. ‘well, I’m afraid I must be off. No rest for the wicked’. He waved a hand in farewell and went out into the street.

‘You’re not very busy tonight’, I remarked, looking round the deserted bar.

‘We shall be in a few minutes’, said Kwon. ‘They’re all over at a card game at Aphae-Eup. My regulars will all be back as soon as it’s over’.

‘A nice chap, Dr Lee’, I commented.

Kwon picked up an ashtray and emptied it into the fire. ‘Oh aye’, he said, ‘very popular in the village, is the doctor. And we don’t take to strangers as a rule in these parts’.

‘But I thought he was a local man’, I said.

Kwon shook his head. ‘Hardly that. You’ve got to have been here thirty years or more before you become a local. I shouldn’t think Dr Lee’s been here much more than eighteen months. But he’s a good chap for all that: always seems to be putting himself out to help folk. Must be pretty well off, I imagine’.

Again the feeling came over me that Lee was a little too good to be true. ‘In what way does he help people?’ I queried.

‘Well, he looks after some of the old people like they was children. Then again, he’s done a lot for Gwok Jung-mo, the bloke we call Kim Chong-hui’.

‘That’s the calligrapher I was hearing about earlier?’

Kwon nodded. ‘That’s the one. Toughest looking chap I’ve ever seen; lives on an old trawler out on the saltings’.

I was silent for a moment. I was thinking of Rim Ji-hoon’s story about Kim Chong-hui – the calligrapher, drunkard, and trouble maker, who was so anxious to keep visitors away from his trawler. I wondered what strange bond of friendship existed between Dr Lee, most conventional of general practitioners, and a man like Gwok Jung-mo.

‘If it hadn’t been for the doctor’, continued Kwon with relish, ‘I reckon Kim Chong-hui would have gone inside by now. Bought some of his pictures, an’ all – just to keep him going, like. ’Twasn’t as if Kim Chong-hui’s pictures was any good, either, and I don’t mind betting he spent all the money on booze. But the doctor’s got a kind heart, see?’

Kwon’s monologue was interrupted by the appearance of the nucleus of the Dokgo hotel regulars, headed by Rim Ji-hoon, whose verbosity seemed to be totally unimpaired.

‘Now then, what about a bit o’service, Oh-young?’ he demanded. ‘Don’t want us all to go back

to Aphae-eup, do you?’

‘If you can drink the swill they call beer there’, said Kwon with a disdainful sniff, ‘you can buzz off now!’

I moved up the bar a little until I was standing next to Rim Ji-hoon. ‘How did the card game go?’ I inquired.

‘Orrible!’ said Rim disgustedly. ‘Some of the blokes wot calls ’emselves card players ’ad a job tonight. Shin-cho, ’ere, wanted a royal flush to finish, an’ wot does he do? Bloody near draws a blank’.

I laughed. ‘What about a drink?’

‘I won’t say no’, said Rim. ‘I’ll have a soju’.

‘I heard you talking about Kim Chong-hui earlier on’, I said. ‘It sounded like a good story. What happened?’

‘Weren’t a lot to it, really’, said Rim. ‘We was just coming in when we ’eard this racket going on board ’is boat. Thought ’e were ’aving a scrap wi’ someone. Seems it weren’t a fight at all, though, ’cos there were nobody there ’cept Owd Kim Chong-hui – leastways, we couldn’t see nobody. I reckon Kim Chong-hui were a bit drunker than usual and breaking up the ’appy ’ome – never ’eard such a blooming racket’.

‘This Kim Chong-hui sounds quite a character’, I remarked.

‘He is that!’ agreed Rim. ‘But I’m steering clear of ’im in future; I don’t want to get meself slung in the drink. I got washed into the West Sea once and that’s enough for me, thank you’.

I heard the telephone ringing and presently Kwon returned to the bar. ‘It’s for you, Mr Moon’, he announced.

‘From Seoul?’ I asked.

‘I don’t think so. Sounds like a local call’.

I put my glass on the bar and walked to the telephone. I said: ‘This is Moon Han-sang ...’

The voice on the other end was weak and tremulous, but I recognised it immediately. It said jerkily: ‘Han-sang, this is Song-yong, Park Song-yong, ... If you want to see me, I’ll meet you in ... about half an hour ...’

‘Where?’ I demanded. This time I was going to tie him down to a definite time and place or know the reason why.

There was a pause and I thought I could hear a vague muttering at the other end. Then a voice spoke again; it sounded like Song-yong’s, although I was not absolutely sure. The voice said: ‘At the jetty – near the lighthouse ...’ There was a buzz as the receiver was replaced.

I said desperately: ‘Song-yong, are you there?’ But there was no answer. I wondered if the call could be traced, but gave up the idea. I put down the receiver and turned to Kwon.

‘Where’s the lighthouse?’ I asked him.

He looked at me queerly for a moment. ‘That’ll be the lighthouse down at the end of the jetty’, he said.

The jetty was deserted when I arrived there. The warehouses seemed to cast huge, eerie shadows over the large open space. I drove up and stopped outside a small stone building at the end of the jetty. Prominently in front of this building was the lighthouse.

I moved over to the lighthouse. I stopped next to it: there was nothing in sight and a cold, clammy silence hung over the whole area. I shivered, not entirely from cold.

I lit a cigarette and looked at my watch in the flame of my lighter. Then I stiffened: I had noticed a very slight movement in the shadow of one of the warehouses. I heard a very faint shuffling sound, as if a man was shifting his weight from one foot to the other. I stood absolutely motionless, listening intently. Then I deliberately walked a short distance from the small building and stood with my back to the warehouse. The silence was relieved only by the sound of the wind coming in from the sea. I shivered again and admitted freely to myself that I was scared as hell ...

I looked round quickly, but saw nothing save the ghostly outline of the warehouse. Then, faintly but quite audibly, I heard a soft metallic click ...

Some instinct prompted me to lean over sideways and this undoubtedly saved my life. A man lunged at me from behind, and I felt a knife rip through the side of my raincoat. I lashed out with my right fist and connected with the man's cheekbone. He cursed horribly and I knew that voice at once – it was the man who had called himself Si. With an upward stroke he slashed at my arm, but I managed to get a grip on his wrist.

We swayed backwards and forwards and I could hear Si mouthing obscenities. He jerked his right knee up, but I anticipated the move and, catching Si's ankle, threw him sideways. He fell heavily on the cobblestones.

But he had retained his hold on the knife. This time he came at me head down and slashed at my face. I ducked in the nick of time and seized Si's knife hand, at the same time driving my other fist into his midriff. I weigh a good thirteen stone and most of it was behind that punch. I almost heard the breath going out of Si, and the knife fell to the ground with a clatter.

But he wasn't finished yet. He made a dive for the knife, and I kicked it towards the edge of the jetty. Si went after it, but I dived for his legs and tackled him to the ground before he could reach it. I hauled him to his feet and gave him a clean uppercut right on the point of the jaw.

Si let out a thin squeal like a trapped rabbit as my hands fastened on his throat. He kicked out desperately and caught me squarely on the knee-cap, but I still managed to hold on to him. Seizing him by his coat collar I swung him round and rocked him to his heels with a smashing right-hander to the mouth.

Si recoiled, but came for me again. By this time we were on the extreme edge of the jetty. Below us the sea swirled blackly. Snarling like an animal, Si wrapped both arms round my waist. I broke from his hold and seized him by the throat again; then my grip relaxed as Si bit into the back of my hand.

I knew that he was considerably younger and probably fitter than I, and my only chance was to finish him with a knock-out punch. Summoning up my last ounce of strength – and I hadn't a lot left – I drove a punch at Si's face. He suddenly threw up his arms, screamed shrilly, and vanished into the blackness below.

Breathing hard, staggering a couple of paces, and clutching my stomach, I looked down into the sea. Waves of pain and nausea swept over me. I put my hand up to my face and tasted warm blood.

I looked down at the sea again. The waves battered against the jetty. Then I kicked the knife after Si and walked unsteadily back to my car ...

Chapter twenty-seven

I slept late the next morning ignoring Hae-jin when she got up early to prepare breakfast for the guests. I was woken at about nine-thirty when she returned with a warm cup of tea, and we shared a kiss and cuddle.

I went down to the bar at ten thirty and greeted Kwon Oh-young raised his eyebrows slightly at my late arrival. I sat down quietly at a table by the window. My head ached abominably and there was a dull, throbbing pain in my knee. I had repaired most of the damage to my hand, but Si's teeth marks seemed to be leering at me. My face was unmarked, however, which was just as well: I didn't want Kwon Oh-young an insatiable seeker after knowledge, to ask too many questions at this stage.

I don't usually drink soju at ten thirty a.m., but on this particular morning it seemed the most natural thing in the world. As I drank, I tried to make some coherent plan.

Si Kyung-lee was dead and I had killed him: there did not seem much point in thinking about him in terms of flesh and blood. If and when his body was recovered Na Sang-wha would take care of that. I felt no remorse about killing Si and in any event it had been a clear case of self-defence. If Si had not gone into the sea he would very definitely have killed me.

I was, however, no nearer to finding Park Song-yong, although it was now quite clear that he was somewhere in Sinjang-ri. There remained Gwok – or Kim Chong-hui. However drunk he might be, I could hardly believe Rim Ji-hoon's story that he had been breaking up a costly trawler just for the fun of it.

I had another drink in the bar and then went out. The cold air was refreshing and my head

started to clear. A visit to Kim Chong-hui was obviously indicated. From what I had heard, he was likely to be an even tougher proposition than Si, and I didn't look forward to another free-for-all.

I remembered Na saying that some of his men would be in Sinjang-ri, and I found this knowledge as comforting as the bulge of the .32 automatic through my raincoat. To substantiate Na's promise a fisherman crossed the street and stood a few yards from me, busily rolling a cigarette.

As I came up to him I saw that he was a middle-aged man wearing a rough blue jersey and thigh-length rubber boots. He looked up and down the street and then said quietly: 'Kim Chong-hui's trawler is moored down at the quay. When you see Kim tell him that you're an art dealer on the lookout for calligraphy for your new gallery. You've seen a picture of his work and you thought it was pretty good. You've been told about Kim by Desc Han-Gyong. You'd better repeat that back to me'.

He need not have worried; I would have the sort of memory that readily assimilates such details. The fisherman nodded and then spat accurately on the cobbled street. He said: 'Good luck to you'. Then he turned abruptly on his heel and headed for Aphae-eup.

The trawler was a long, slim, powerful looking craft, obviously capable of considerable speed. I stood on the quayside, looking at it for a moment. Presently a man came up on deck and emptied a bucket over the side.

Obviously this was Kim Chong-hui. He lit a pipe and stood leaning over the rail. I wondered whether I should prove as convincing as an art dealer as I had apparently been in the guise of a detective. Na's organisation was pretty good, I thought: naturally the sensible approach to Gwok Jung-mo was either through his pictures or the offer of a bottle of whisky. I decided that I was not in the mood to stand him a drink.

I walked casually up the gangplank and stepped on to the deck. I could see that Kwon's of Kim was in no way exaggerated. He stood at five feet ten inches tall and was broad in proportion. His black hair grew in profusion on his bullet head, and most of his face was obscured by a tangled and unkempt beard. When he heard me approach he swung round abruptly and regarded me with a glare that was unmistakably hostile.

Standing at the top of the gangway, with his arms folded, he blocked my approach in no uncertain manner. 'What the hell are you after?' he rasped. 'This boat is private property'. His lips were drawn back, there was a wild look in his eyes, and the smell of whisky on his breath brought back a resurgence of my former nausea.

'Are you Mr Gwok Jung-mo?' I inquired politely.

'That's me. What the bloody hell do you want?'

'My name's Jo Jeaki', I bowed and handed him my business card. 'I'm an art dealer'.

'Jo Jeaki?' said Gwok suspiciously. 'I've never heard of you'.

'That's hardly surprising', I said casually. 'I hadn't heard of you until a fortnight ago'.

‘So what?’ said Gwok offensively.

‘I’m based in Los Angeles’, I said. ‘I’m opening a gallery of Korean art in and I’m looking for the best calligraphy. I think we may be able to do business together’.

Gwok glared at me through bloodshot eyes. ‘Who told you to come here? Who told you about me?’

‘You’re a very suspicious individual’, I said pleasantly. ‘If you’re not interested in selling your work, then just say so and I’ll go elsewhere’.

‘You haven’t answered my question’, he grated.

I raised my eyebrows. ‘What was your question?’

Gwok’s small eyes narrowed to the merest slits. ‘I asked you who told you about me?’

Very deliberately I turned my back on him. ‘Forget it, my dear fellow’, I said with dignity. ‘I can’t waste my time on temperamental painters, however brilliant they may be’.

Gwok grabbed my arm and swung me round to face him. ‘Answer my question!’ he barked.

Displaying confidence that I was very far from feeling, I said: ‘Desc Han-gyong told me about you. I saw some work of yours in his gallery. I liked it and he told me where I could find you. Does that satisfy you, Mr Gwok?’

‘What was the picture?’

‘It was two storks amidst the cherry blossom’.

Gwok Jung-mo bared his discoloured teeth in a smile. ‘I should bloody well think you did like it’, he said. ‘It’s the best picture you’ve seen in years – or are likely to’. Gwok evidently had a high opinion of his artistic ability.

‘A slight overstatement’, I said easily, ‘although I must admit that it has a certain merit’.

Gwok scowled beligerently. ‘I’ve just finished a picture that beats anything you’ve seen anywhere in America’.

‘Better than the cherry blossom?’

He spat expressively into the sea.

‘Splendid!’ I said with professional enthusiasm. ‘Supposing you let the picture speak for itself?’

But it seemed that I had not allayed all his suspicions. ‘You did say you know Desc Han-gyong, didn’t you?’

‘Of course I know him’, I said with a trace of impatience. ‘I know all the dealers. I suppose you wouldn’t like me to call back later with a letter of introduction?’

‘Don’t be a bloody fool’, said Gwok.

‘Well, then’, I said amicably, ‘I suggest you let me see some pictures. Who knows? We may be wasting my time as well as yours’.

Gwok glared at me and then turned towards the companionway. ‘I’ll fetch some’, he said shortly.

He shuffled off down the companionway and I looked round the deck. I moved cautiously towards the superstructure of the cabin. Suddenly I stopped, and looked up; a somewhat dilapidated life-belt had caught my eye. Inscribed on the this life-belt in black letters were the words:

Seung-li

At that moment everything fell into place in my mind. I remembered the dying Cuban sailor who had muttered 'Seung-li' over and over again; I recalled the shock of discovering that the little girl at Choi's cottage was also, incredibly, called 'Seung-li'. Now here was the ship 'Seung-li'. All meaning *Victory*. It was now apparent that I was on very dangerous territory.

I tiptoed round to a porthole and by bending down could see into the cabin. Gwok was rummaging among a disordered array of artwork, which were untidily piled in a corner. Standing with his back to me was a portly figure that was unmistakably Dr Lee Chung-kyu. There was a man lying on the bunk, apparently unconscious. I drew in my breath sharply and I looked at his face. It was Park Song-yong ...

A huge, purplish bruise stretched from his right cheekbone to the edge of his mouth. His upper lip was swollen to almost twice its normal size and there was an ugly cut over his right eye, which was half closed. There were traces of dried blood under his nostrils. His appearance explained the racket that Rim Ji-hoon had heard.

Lee turned round and I hastily backed away from the porthole. Then I realised that Lee was leaving the cabin to come up on deck and that it would be impossible to avoid him. When he saw me Lee smiled broadly. 'Why, Mr Moon', he said genially, 'what on earth are you doing here?'

He was still the friendly, somewhat easy-going doctor whom I had known in the Dokgo hotel, to all outward appearance. I regarded him warily and kept my right hand on the side arm in my pocket.

'What's rather more to the point, Doctor', I said grimly, 'is what you're doing here'.

Lee waved a hand towards the cabin. 'I have a patient on board', he said airily. 'He's delirious, poor chap. Very sad case altogether'.

'I'm sure it is', I said. 'Who's your patient?'

'He's a relation of Kim Chong-hui's', said Lee affably. 'Forgive me, I mean Gwok Jung-mo, of course. But you don't know him, do you? A most entertaining fellow, if a little eccentric. He's an artist, you know'.

'And you', I said dispassionately, 'are a damned liar'.

I saw Lee's eyes narrow, but his mouth fell open in perfectly feigned surprise. 'I beg your pardon, Mr Moon?'

'I said you're a damned liar', I repeated. 'Your patient, as you call him, isn't a relation of Gwok's. He's Park Song-yong'.

Lee gave a gentle sigh. 'Park Song-yong? My god, you seem to have that name on the brain'. He stepped forward to intercept me as I moved towards the companionway, then called out sharply: 'Where d'you think you're going?'

'I'll give you three guesses', I said.

'My patient can't be disturbed', protested Lee. 'I forbid you to go down there, d'you understand?'

'Your patient is Park', I said. I produced the automatic and pointed it straight at Lee's stomach.

'Now, cut the crap and tell your brainless thug to bring him up on deck'.

'Are you threatening me?'

'Yes, I'm threatening you', I said. 'Do as I say Lee. Tell Gwok to bring Park up here and look sharp about it'.

Lee seemed about to renew his protest, but I made a threatening movement with the gun. 'Fetch Park now', I repeated.

Lee shrugged his shoulders. He said: 'Don't you think you're being rather stupid about this?' 'I don't think so', I said. 'You don't imagine I'm on my own do you?'

Lee looked towards the quayside. A police car had just drawn up. Four uniformed policemen got out of the police car and stood watching the 'Seung-li' as if awaiting orders. Among the plain-clothes men I noticed the bulky figure of Kim Han-jin.

Lee looked round despairingly. I said: 'You can swim for it if you like, Lee, but I don't think you'll get far'.

Moving remarkably quickly for a man of his comfortable build Lee made a dash for the gangplank. He stepped on to the quay and sprinted towards a side street.

I was right. The men in uniform at once converged upon him.

Kim Han-jin and two other men came aboard the 'Seung-li'. To the accompaniment of some very strong language Gwok was handcuffed and led away. Kim Han-jin and I went below to the cabin.

Park Song-yong had propped himself up against the dirty pillow on the bunk. His battered lips parted in the grin that I knew so well. Whatever happened, I thought, they couldn't make Park talk. He said weakly: 'Hello, Han-sang. I'm afraid I've been a bit of a bloody nuisance'.

I smiled at him; there was nothing else I could do. It had always been the same – Park produced that infectious grin and there was no resisting it.

'You can say that again'. I said.

'The luck had to run out some time', he murmured.

Han-jin produced a hip flask and opened it. 'Have a drink, Park Song-yong', he said. 'You can talk later – you've got all the time in the world now ...'

Chapter twenty-eight

Waiting for my visitor, I tried to review the latest developments. I had just returned from the hospital where Choi Ji-hye was making a steady recovery. Unfortunately, it had been difficult to get her to talk. I had imagined she might have been able to enlighten me as to Si's importance in the scheme of things, but she insisted that she only knew of him by name, and was unacquainted with his activities.

She had, however, proved rather more helpful on the question of Dr Lee, though she claimed that he had been dragged into the affair and was not nearly as sinister as might at first appear. I told her that Lee had confessed to his full share in the recent happenings, but had maintained that he was ignorant of the identity of the man from whom he took his instructions. He tried to give the impression that it had been one of the mysterious Cubans, but I had told him quite frankly I did not believe him.

Choi Ji-hye had proved equally obstinate, and it is not easy to extract information from a woman who is only recently off the danger list. Once or twice I noticed the nurse giving me a warning look, but I had to go on. And in the end Choi Ji-hye had told me what I wanted to know.

Feeling a reaction to this experience, I had poured myself a stiff whisky, and was just finishing it when the doorbell rang. My visitor had arrived.

It was Choi Kyung-lee, shabby and diffident as always. 'Come along in, Mr Choi', I said hospitably. 'It was nice of you to call'.

I took his threadbare raincoat and hung it on a peg in the hall. We went into the living room together.

‘How’s your wife?’ I said. ‘What’s the latest news?’ though of course, I knew the answer.

Choi, apparently more relaxed than I had ever seen him, sat down. ‘She’s off the danger list now’, he said. ‘They say she should be up and about in four or five weeks’. He produced a tired smile. ‘I must say, I shall be very relieved when she comes home; a daily woman is a poor substitute’.

‘I’m delighted to hear that she’s better’, I said. I sat down opposite Choi. ‘I expect you’re wondering why I asked you to call’.

‘Well, I was a little puzzled, I must confess’, he said.

I settled myself more comfortably in my chair. ‘I want to tell you a story, Mr Choi, that I feel sure will interest you: it concerns the Battle of Inchon’. I was watching him carefully, but he registered only polite wonderment. ‘It’s not a very pretty story’, I went on, but I think you’ll be intrigued by it’.

Choi looked at his watch. ‘I’m afraid I haven’t a great deal of time’, he said apologetically.

‘You’ve time enough for this’, I said. ‘It also concerns a man called Park Song-yong who is a friend of mine’.

‘Park Song-yong?’ mused Choi. ‘I seem to have heard that name before’.

‘You have indeed’, I said. ‘You used the Battle of Inchon as a stepping-stone to get to know Park and to gain his confidence. He told you that he had inherited some military memorabilia including a photo from the Battle of Inchon. You were interested and he showed them to you’. I picked up the photo of the tank and its crew from the table. ‘This was one of them’.

‘I think there must be some mistake’, said Choi in tones of mild reproof. ‘The first time I saw this photo was when you brought it to the cottage’ – his smile was a study in confused innocence – ‘and I certainly don’t know this friend of yours – what’s his name again?’

‘Park Song-yong’.

Choi shook his head regretfully. He conveyed the impression that he was only too anxious to help. ‘I’m afraid that’s just a name to me, Mr Moon I don’t know him’.

‘I think you do’, I persisted quietly. ‘You see, I have this story on the very best authority’

‘Whose authority?’

‘Your brother-in-law, Dr Lee’, I said deliberately. ‘Seung-li’s father’.

I noticed that his eyes were no longer blinking short sightedly, but were cold and watchful. Choi said quietly: ‘go on, Mr Moon. I’m beginning to find this quite interesting’.

‘You’ll find it even more interesting in a minute’, I said. ‘When you got to know Park better, and discovered that he was in financial difficulties, you offered him money to obtain a copy of the technical design and plans of top secret drone that was under development’.

I waited for him to make some comment but he only shook his head.

‘These plans’, I went on, ‘were developed by an acquaintance of Park’s, a man called Hong Jin-ho. Park took the money and did what you wanted. But he didn’t play it straight, Mr Choi. He double-crossed you and gave you a micro-SD card containing false information’.

‘This is all very interesting, Mr Moon’, said Choi. His voice was imperturbable, but his eyes were not still for a second.

‘I’m glad you think so’, I said. ‘It gets even more intriguing’.

Choi inclined his head slightly and waited for me to continue.

‘Park then contacted a North Korean organisation and arranged to meet their Cuban representative, a man called Arsenio, at Sinjang-ri. You heard about this and immediately informed them that Park hadn’t got the plans and that you were the man to contact. Arsenio agreed to meet you on Lee’s trawler, which was named the “Seung-li” after his daughter’. I paused to allow this to sink in.

Choi shook his head sadly. ‘I can only assume, Mr Moon’, he said, ‘that the strain of your recent activities has in some way unsettled you’.

‘It’s unsettled me considerably’, I said grimly, ‘and I think what I’m going to say may unsettle you a little too. You know what happened: there was a shipwreck and Arsenio died. Before he died he mentioned the name ‘Seung-li’. We know now, of course, that he was referring to the ship the “Seung-li” and not to Lee’s daughter’.

‘These are very serious charges, Mr Moon’, remarked Choi.

‘They’re intended to be’. I stood with my back to the fireplace, never taking my eyes off Choi for an instant. ‘You kidnapped Park and tried to make him talk, but all you could get out of him was the admission that the microSD card you wanted was in the Battle of Inchon. Then you sent your friend Si Kyung-lee – the late Si, I should say – to get the tobacco tin from Park’s apartment’. I smiled reminiscently. ‘An unpleasant character, Si. I had to kill him’.

Choi looked startled. ‘You admit you killed him?’ he said involuntarily.

‘If I hadn’t’, I said, ‘he would have undoubtedly killed me. We had an argument and he – fell into the sea. I imagine that he’s still there. However, I’m straying from the point a little. When Si arrived at Park’s flat he saw Jo Yun-je leaving with the tin. Si followed Jo back here, murdered him, and took the tobacco tin when I was safely out of the way’.

‘But the film wasn’t in the tin!’ Choi blurted out.

‘No it wasn’t’, I said. ‘But when Park told you it was in the Battle of Inchon he was telling the truth. The film was in the Battle of Inchon, but not in the tobacco tin’.

Choi’s face was blank and expressionless. I looked at him quickly and then picked up the photograph again. I put it face down on the table. Then I removed the backing and there was the SD card.

‘You were so convinced that Park meant the tin’, I said, ‘That it never occurred to you to look in the photograph frame’.

Choi rose to his feet. With a quick movement he thrust his hand into his jacket pocket; when it came out it held a small, foreign-looking automatic revolver. He was breathing quickly and obviously deciding on a plan for a quick getaway.

I said: ‘it may interest you to know, Mr Choi, that we have had an audience’. I jerked my head towards the bedroom door. ‘That gun doesn’t even amuse me’.

The bedroom door then opened to reveal Kim Han-jin; his huge bulk seemed to fill the room with massive invincibility. He held a revolver in his hand.

‘This is the end of the line, Choi’, Kim said in a voice that sounded almost bored. ‘Put that gun away ...’

Chapter twenty-nine

Na Sang-wha surveyed me benevolently from behind his ornate desk. He said: ‘Well, that’s that. Everything seems to have wound up very nicely. Though I’m afraid you had rather a troublesome time’. He might have been the managing director of a big business house commiserating with an executive who had been involved in a tricky deal.

‘There were certainly some tight corners’, I agreed.

‘In this department’, said Na in measured tones, ‘we know only too well that appearances can be cruelly deceptive; things are hardly ever what they seem. That applies to people as well’. He put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it with a desk lighter. ‘Choi certainly looked the part of a meek little man whose sole interest in life was military history.

‘He had me fooled at first’, I admitted ruefully.

‘Naturally’, said Na. ‘he had studied his part for quite a long time and he deceived almost everyone. He was also indirectly responsible for the deaths of Jo Yun-je and Seong Jeong-ryong. Incidentally, did Choi find out about that note his wife sent you? Is that why he tried to kill her?’

‘No’, I said. ‘He heard her talking to me on the telephone, and thought I was doing a private deal with her over the micro SD card’.

‘I see’, said Na thoughtfully. He blew a ruminative cloud of smoke towards the ceiling. ‘Then he thought you had the plans?’

‘Yes, he jumped to the conclusion that Park might have passed it on to me. The irony of the situation is that I actually did have it when I had the photo, but I didn’t know it’.

Na nodded. ‘Obviously, Choi didn’t know which way to turn. First he thought it might be in Park Song-yong’s car; then concentrated on the tobacco tin ...’

‘That’s why they wanted the photograph so badly’, I broke in. ‘When they found that the SD card wasn’t in Park’s tin they thought there might be a clue they had missed. A photograph would have allowed Choi to check for anything they had missed, such as something hidden in

the inside of the lid’.

‘I understand you saw Mrs Choi this morning?’

‘Yes’, I said. ‘She explained about the note. Apparently two men came over from Cuba on behalf of the North Koreans’.

‘Arsenio and Martinez’, said Na. ‘Arsenio was known to be the important man on the mission and Martinez his assistant. In case of any funny business they changed names and identities. It was Martinez who died’.

‘And Arsenio?’

‘He left for Havana this morning’.

‘You mean – you let him go?’

‘Yes’.

‘Why?’

Na got up from his desk and walked over to the mantelpiece. He stood with his back to the fireplace, smoking composedly. ‘If we’d picked him up’. He said, ‘there would have been complications. We like to avoid complications as much as possible. Our job was to see that when Arsenio did leave he left empty handed. He did’.

‘And what happens to Park Song-yong?’ I asked.

‘Frankly, I don’t know about that’, said Na. ‘You see, it’s out of my hands. Park Song-yong is the Interior Minister’s headache now. I’m very much more concerned with what happens to you’.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked.

‘What are you going to do, now that this business is over?’

I shrugged. ‘I don’t know’, I said vaguely. ‘I’d half decided to go abroad – Australia or somewhere’.

Na looked at me keenly. ‘How would you like to work for me?’

‘You mean permanently? Join your department?’

‘That’s just what I mean. I’m offering you Jo Yun-je’s job’.

There was a brief silence between us. Na continued to eye me speculatively.

For the first time since I had known him Na’s voice sounded faintly hesitant. He said: ‘This is all slightly embarrassing. I’m not trying to influence you, one way or the other. But the fact remains that you’ve done a damned fine job. There’ll be other assignments; possibly easier than this one, possibly even more difficult. It’s entirely up to you’. He looked out of the window.

After a long pause I said: ‘tell me about the next job, Mr Na Sang-wha ...’

