

# Year of Impossible Goodbyes

"POWERFUL AND MOVING... OFFERS A GLIMPSE INTO A YOUNG GIRL'S MIND AND INTO A NATION'S HEART..."  
—*The New York Times Book Review*



Sook Nyul Choi

# Chapter One



*Spring 1945*

Small clusters of pale green needles emerged from the old weathered pine tree in our front yard. The high mounds of snow in the corner of our yard had begun to melt, the water flowing gently into the furrow of dark earth Grandfather had dug around the base of the tree like a moat. Grandfather's tree stood alone in the far corner of the yard, its dark green-needled branches emanating harmoniously from the trunk, reaching out like a large umbrella. It was a magic tree, holding in the shade of its branches the peace and harmony Grandfather so often talked about.

Despite the warmth of the sun, the air in Kirimni, Pyongyang was dark and heavy, filled with the sound of gunfire and with the menacing glint of drawn swords. For the people in Kirimni, this day was no different from the bitter gray days of winter. The warmth of the spring sun and the thawing of the icy snow brought no respite from the oppressiveness that engulfed us.

Grandfather, hoping the Korean people might experience the exhilaration and beauty of spring again, had made sure my mother included the word *chun*, or spring, in the names of each of my brothers. My oldest brother's name was Hanchun, meaning "Korean spring"; my second brother, Jaechun, was called "spring again"; my third brother, Hyunchun, the "wise spring"; and my youngest brother, Inchun, the "benevolent spring." Inchun was now almost seven, and a benevolent spring still had not come to our village.

I saw Grandfather peer out at the yard from his room, and look at the delicate branches of the pine tree playing against the hazy, pale blue sky. He cleared his throat and called out to Mother. "Hyunsuk, today I will do my morning meditation under the tree."

"But, Father, I've already prepared your place inside," I heard my mother reply in a troubled voice. "Besides," she added, "it isn't warm enough for you yet. Why outside all of a sudden?"

"It is not all of a sudden. Not a single day has gone by that I haven't thought of it. It has been thirty-six years since I have meditated in the warmth of a spring sun. Today, the Japanese soldiers will not keep me inside. I am too old and too tired to be afraid anymore."

Although Mother let out a heavy sigh, she did not protest. Reluctantly, she brought out a clean straw mat and unrolled it beneath the pine tree, placing the thick cushion in the center of the shade. Grandfather emerged from his room and became part of the peaceful scene.

The gentle rays of the April sun flitting through the pine branches played upon his face like dancing fairies.

Excited to see Grandfather meditate beneath his tree, I slid my rice-paper door open a crack and watched. I crossed my legs, resting my hands on my lap with the palms facing up, just as he did. Though his eyes were closed, I kept mine open to watch him. He sat tall and still, like a statue. He looked peaceful as he prayed, yet there was an intensity, an anticipation, in his expression, as though he were waiting for something special to happen. His wrinkles were deep, and I wished that I could run my fingers along the creases in his forehead as he sat motionless in prayer. I wondered what he had to tell the Buddha this morning.

He was still for so long. I began to worry that my Grandfather had been filled with the spirit of the Buddha and had been turned into a statue. I tiptoed outside, quietly crept up toward him, and put my finger under his nose. I felt his faint breath and he coughed gently to reassure me. I sat next to him and watched, happy to be near him. The smell of the pine permeated the atmosphere, and I breathed deeply.

The sun grew stronger as I watched Grandfather, whose shirt of worn gray cloth hung comfortably from his bony shoulders. His crossed legs looked like two bent chopsticks. His handsome face was sad, peaceful, intent, but always dignified.

The women in town called him "Patriot Grandfather" or "Scholar Grandfather." Sometimes they brought

**I**t is 1945, and the Japanese military has taken over Korea. Under the cruel occupation, ten-year-old Sookan's world is torn apart. Her father leaves to fight with the resistance movement in Manchuria, and her older brothers are sent away to labor camps. Her mother is forced to supervise a sock factory. Sookan herself must wear a uniform and attend a Japanese school.

When the war finally ends, out come the colorful Korean silks and bags of white rice in celebration. But soon North Korea is taken over again, this time by Communist Russia. Sookan and her family know that their only hope of liberty lies in a dangerous escape to American-controlled South Korea.

Here is the incredible story of one family's love for each other and their determination to risk everything to find freedom.

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