

Sonju

A novel

by Wondra Chang

MADVILLE
P U B L I S H I N G

Lake Dallas, Texas

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and she told Mother-in-Law about her pregnancy. Every clan woman came to congratulate Mother-in-Law. The early morning prayers didn't stop as Sonju hoped.

Second Sister was miserable with nausea and vomiting. Sonju pleaded with Second Sister to stay in her room and let her and First Sister take care of the kitchen, but Second Sister declined and said, "I'll get looks from Mother-in-Law. You don't become a lady of leisure until both parents-in-law die."

The day after First Sister made her fifth trip to the market with the chaperone, Sonju was on her way to visit Big House Lady when she saw First Sister's chaperone in the outer courtyard chatting and giggling with another village woman. They were pointing at Second House. The village woman saw Sonju and nudged the chaperone. Their conversation abruptly stopped, and with a stilted smile, they greeted Sonju. They must have been talking about First Sister. Sonju cut her visit short.

Second Sister was at the well and saw Sonju. "That was quick," she said.

"Yes. I have something to take care of." Sonju didn't see First Sister in the kitchen. There was only one other place she could be. In the corner of her room, First Sister was stacking neatly folded clothes. She was startled to see Sonju walking in. Sonju sat, and not wanting to alarm First Sister, spoke in a steady voice, "First Sister, on the way to the Big House, I came across your chaperone talking to another village woman. From the way they acted, I was sure they were gossiping about you. Do you know why they might do that?"

With fear in her widened eyes, First Sister regarded Sonju briefly and gave her a small nod before she said in a trembling voice that she met a man at the market and they made plans to elope. Her face contorted, she began to cry, rocking, trying to stop her torrential sobs with the back of her hand. After she gained her composure, she looked up at Sonju. "I have to take this chance. It's a chance to leave, you see?" She covered her face in her hands and sobbed again. Then she gazed down and said in a resigned voice, "I must have been evil ... in my previous life ...

to deserve this miserable life. Yes, I must have. I was living only because I didn't die."

First Sister's last words pierced Sonju's bosom with immeasurable sadness. She covered her face and quietly cried along with First Sister. She must help First Sister make this desperate escape, she decided, and wiped her face on her sleeve. "Where is your man and where would you settle?"

"Umm, if I can still elope ..." First Sister rocked again. "He is staying at a lodging near the market. We planned to settle in a small fishing village in Jeolla Province."

"I'll try to help you," Sonju said, leaving First Sister who started crying again, and went directly to Father-in-Law.

When Sonju told him about First Sister, he stared at Sonju speechless. She said, "Father-in-Law, this man may show up to take her, and things may get messy if you try to stop him. It will taint the family's reputation. The chaperone has already started gossiping. Please let her go before she elopes."

Father-in-Law looked away. Neither son was home. He thanked her for telling him, then said, "Keep her in her room until her departure tonight."

As Sonju left the men's quarters, she heard Father-in-Law calling for the old servant. She returned to First Sister's room and told her to be ready to leave that night and remain in her room until someone came to get her. First Sister covered her mouth, and through her liquid eyes, smiled gratefully at Sonju. Returning her gaze, Sonju said, "Have a good life to make up for the lost years."

When Sonju entered the kitchen, Second Sister asked, "I saw you go to First Sister's room and then to the men's quarters. What's that all about?"

When Sonju told her, Second Sister gasped in shock. "She found a man to elope with? It's so ... I don't know what I'm trying to say." Looking at the bowl she was holding, she mumbled, "... so out of character for her."

"First Sister will remain in her room until she leaves," Sonju said. "No one other than Jinwon will be allowed in that room. We'll have a maid take First Sister's dinner to her room."